



U.S. House Committee Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Testimony of Jennifer Akin
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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Jennifer Akin, and I am Senior Director of Policy and Social Impact Research at Blue Star Families—a national non-profit organization dedicated to supporting military and Veteran families from all ranks and services. With over 220,000 members, Blue Star Families is the nation's largest grass-roots military family support organization, and touches more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, Blue Star Families seeks to ensure that our military and Veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive, wherever their service takes them.

Blue Star Families' research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and Veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS)—developed in partnership with Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)—is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and Veteran families, and is widely regarded as the gold standard among military family surveys. Data from the aMFLS and other Blue Star Families research has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities. At Blue Star Families, we know that behind every statistic is a story, and it is my honor to share data and stories with you today.

This is not Blue Star Families' first time appearing before Congress to discuss the issues before the Committee today. In January, 2020, Denise Hollywood, Blue Star Families' Chief Community and Programs Officer, spoke as a witness before this Committee to discuss Veteran Hunger.¹ In May 2021, Kathy Roth-Douquet, our Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder testified before the House Committee on Rules to discuss military and Veteran family hunger. A few months later, in November 2021, Ms. Hollywood again spoke as a witness before the House Committee on

¹ 116th Congress. (2020, January 9). *Reviewing the Availability of Resources to Address Veteran Hunger*. [Witness List]. Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. [HHRG-116-VR10-WList-20200109-U2.pdf \(congress.gov\)](https://www.congress.gov/hrg/116/vr10/wl/20200109-u2)

Agriculture to discuss hunger among Veterans and servicemembers. I join you today to, once again, address hunger and the upstream financial challenges associated with it, among our military and Veteran families. While Blue Star Families is honored to be invited to testify to this Committee, I wish these were topics which were not so prevalent as to bear such frequent examination.

Blue Star Families' policy priorities are informed by research we conducted in the past two years and draw on recommendations from that research. They are intended to elevate innovative solutions to long-standing military life challenges and are selected with four overarching objectives in mind: (1) ensure military families are not at a disadvantage by virtue of their military service; (2) sustain the All-Volunteer Force through resilient and inclusive family policies; (3) enable and empower stronger civil-military relations at the local level; and (4) improve overall data collection, use, and understanding.

Several pieces of pending legislation being discussed today align with Blue Star Families' data-informed policy recommendations, and will be beneficial to military families during their time in service, through transition, and into Veteran life.

Background

While military service generally provides financial benefits to service members and their families when compared to their civilian counterparts², structural challenges they face as a result of military life can create tenuous economic situations for some families, which inevitably carry over into Veteran life. Debt accrued from unreimbursed out-of-pocket relocation and housing expenses from military-connected moves and a Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) that does not always reflect the true cost of housing remains with families after leaving service. Military spouse unemployment and underemployment make transitioning out more financially difficult and have long-term consequences for retirement planning, particularly for families who utilize the Blended Retirement System and/or do not receive military retirement benefits.

These are some contributing factors to why nearly half of the active-duty family respondents (48%) to our 2021 MFLS indicate that their current financial situation causes them "some" or a "great deal" of stress.³ While not a perfect comparison, 75% of U.S. adults reported they were "doing okay" or "living comfortably" leading into 2021.³

In short, in order to set the conditions for Veteran families to thrive, we must set the conditions for them to be financially resilient during their time in service. This requires comprehensive action to make structural and cultural reforms that address chronic issues, such as spouse unemployment and underemployment, while also addressing acute financial needs to support families until broader reforms are made.

² Blue Star Families. (2022). Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSE_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf

³ Federal Reserve Board of Governors. (2021). Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2020. [federalreserve.gov/publications/2021-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2020-executive-summary.htm](https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2021-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2020-executive-summary.htm)

Today I will discuss the underlying causes of financial stress among military and Veteran families, how pending legislation addresses them, and provide additional recommendations for solving these complex challenges.

Underlying Causes of Financial Stress and Insecurity

As discussed, nearly half of active-duty family respondents to the 2021 MFLS report having financial stress. They report high rates of un/underemployment among military spouses (41%), student loans (30%), out-of-pocket housing costs (25%), and excessive credit card debt (21%) as top contributors to this financial stress.

Similarly, half of Veteran family respondents also report experiencing financial stress, citing excessive credit card debt (28%), major home repairs (26%), spouse un/underemployment (26%), and out-of-pocket medical costs (24%) as top contributing factors. Nearly all of these are logical extensions of stressors identified by active-duty family respondents.

High Rates of Un/underemployment Among Military Spouses

Not only do military family respondents identify military spouse unemployment and underemployment as a major point of concern⁴, but Blue Star Families research consistently reveals that addressing it is an upstream solution to many of the future problems this Committee is tasked with solving for Veteran families. For example, gaining employment cuts poverty in half among active-duty spouse respondents⁵ and employed active-duty spouse respondents subsequently report lower financial stress⁶; having an employed spouse is associated with a more positive transition experience⁷; and food insecurity is lowest among employed active-duty spouse respondents (and highest among those who not working, but who report wanting or needing to work⁸).

Despite widespread, multi-sector acknowledgement that military spouse employment is critical to military readiness, the military spouse unemployment rate has not significantly changed since

⁴ Spouse employment has been identified as one of the top concerns for active-duty families since the first aMFLS in 2009 and remains so today. In the 2021 MFLS, nearly half (47%) of active-duty spouse respondents and a quarter (25%) of active-duty service member respondents list military spouse employment as a top issue of concern.

⁵ Blue Star Families. (2022). Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf

⁶ 68% of active-duty spouse respondents who are not currently working but are seeking employment also report their financial condition causes them “some” or a “great deal of stress”. Whereas less than half (44%) of their employed counterparts report the same level of financial stress.

⁷ Blue Star Families. (2018). 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MFLS-ComprehensiveReport17-FINAL.pdf

⁸ In the 2020 MFLS, 10% of enlisted active-duty spouse respondents who were employed were food insecure (with low or very low food security), compared to 20% of those who were not working but needed or wanted to work. The Department of Defense likewise reports slightly higher rates of food pantry usage (pre-pandemic) by military spouses who were unemployed in 2019 (7%) or not in the labor force (6%), when compared to employed military spouses (4%). Office of People Analytics, DoD (2020). 2019 Survey of Active-Duty Spouses. Unpublished email correspondence.

2012⁹ and was 3-4 times the national average^{10,11} before the COVID-19 pandemic. In our 2021 MFLS:

- 42% of active-duty spouse respondents report they are not participating in the labor force. 30% report they are not employed but need or want to work. This suggests that only 12% are fulfilled by not working.¹²
- Nearly half of active-duty military spouse respondents were employed, either full time (30%) or part time (16%), two-thirds of employed active-duty spouse respondents (63%) reported they were underemployed in some way (indicating their current employment did not match their desires, education, or experience).

The Military Spouse Licensing Relief Act of 2021 can help address military spouse unemployment and underemployment challenges. Active-duty spouses work in a diverse array of occupational and industry fields licensing and credentialing requirements are a barrier for many. While vast improvements have been made, in large part due to efforts by the Defense State Liaison Office (DSLO) and specific occupational interstate compacts, licensing and credentialing requirements continue to cause an unnecessary barrier to employment for some. For example, 8% of active-duty spouse respondents to Blue Star Families 2021 MFLS report license requirements as a top-five reason for not working. Unfortunately, some of the career fields with the biggest transferability hurdles, such as social work and certain mental health professions, are those with some of the greatest needs in the current job market.

The Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) was enacted to protect service members who “dropped their affairs to answer their country’s call.”¹³ Today, service members themselves are not the only ones dropping their affairs to answer their country’s call; over half of active-duty spouses are employed and few are able to retain employment through a PCS move. The Military Spouse Licensing Relief Act of 2021 amends the SCRA by requiring jurisdictions recognize and accept professional licenses held in good standing by military spouses following a PCS move. This policy change helps ensure that military spouses in licensed professions are not at a disadvantage compared to civilian peers by virtue of their family’s military service, reduces barriers to spouse employment, and can help address current labor shortages in critical fields.

⁹ Office of People Analytics. (2014). 2012 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf

¹⁰ Office of People Analytics. (2021). 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. militaryonesource.mil/dataresearch-and-statistics/survey-findings/2019-spouses-survey

¹¹ Blue Star Families. (2022). 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF_MFLS_Results2021_ComprehensiveReport_3_22.pdf

¹² The unemployment rate among active-duty spouse respondents was 3-4 times the rate of the national unemployment rate during the same time period as the fielding of the 2021 MFLS (20% vs. 6%).

¹³ *Le Maistre v. Leffers*, 333 U.S. 1, 6 (1948).

Out-of-Pocket Housing and Relocation Expenses

Out-of-pocket housing and relocation expenses also exacerbate financial stress among military families and have long-term consequences for Veteran family financial stability. Most active-duty family respondents in the 2021 MFLS (66%) live off-installation, in civilian housing using their BAH to rent (26%) or purchase (40%) housing.

Starting in 2015, BAH¹⁴ was incrementally reduced to 95% of local area rent,¹⁵ making it a matter of policy for military families to pay out-of-pocket for quality housing, though they rarely have full control over where they are stationed or when they move. However, most active-duty family respondents to our 2020 MFLS were paying well over the monthly out-of-pocket housing costs the Department of Defense projected they should be paying. While DoD projected expenses of \$70 to \$158, of those active-duty families who reported out-of-pocket costs, 77% paid more than \$200 out-of-pocket each month.

Active-duty family respondents to our 2020 MFLS also provided insight into how military families choose housing: they prioritized proximity to base, family safety, a desirable school district, pet acceptance, and whether BAH covered costs. Of those families who listed “a desirable school for children” as one of the important factors in their housing choice, 76% reported paying more than \$200 per month in out-of-pocket housing expenses. This figure is in line with research findings that desirable school districts often come with higher housing costs¹⁶ due to zoning restrictions that ban rentals, multifamily housing, and smaller homes like those used to determine BAH rates.¹⁷ As a result of this research, Blue Star Families has recommended that Congress act to restore BAH to 100% of local area rent¹⁸ and to explore options for improving the calculation of BAH, taking into consideration issues such as school district quality and housing availability, among other variables.¹⁹ The BAH Restoration Act (H.R. 7561²⁰) and the BAH Calculation Improvement Act (H.R. 7562²¹) reflect these recommendations and we support their eventual inclusion in the FY23 NDAA.

This legislation only solves part of the problem we are seeing in the current housing market, however. In addition to BAH shortfalls, many military families who PCSed during this year’s

¹⁴ Congressional Budget Office. (2018, December 13). *Reduce the Basic Allowance for Housing to 80 Percent of Average Housing Costs*. [cbo.gov/budget-options/2018/54767](https://www.cbo.gov/budget-options/2018/54767)

¹⁵ Guina, R. (2019, April 21). BAH Rate Cuts: 95% BAH – The New Reality & The Future of BAH. *The Military Wallet*. themilitarywallet.com/bah-rate-cuts

¹⁶ Rodrique, P. (2016). How exclusionary zoning limits poor families’ access to good schools. *Greater Greater Washington*. [ggwash.org/view/61635/the-price-of-admission-how-exclusionary-zoning-limits-poor-families-access](https://www.ggwash.org/view/61635/the-price-of-admission-how-exclusionary-zoning-limits-poor-families-access)

¹⁷ Government Accountability Office. (2021). *Actions Needed to Improve the Process for Setting Allowances for Servicemembers and Calculating Payments for Privatized Housing Projects*. [gao.gov/products/GAO-21-137](https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-21-137)

¹⁸ Blue Star Families. (2021). *2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report*. bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULL.pdf

¹⁹ Blue Star Families. (2022). *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report*. bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF_MFLS_Results2021_ComprehensiveReport_3_22.pdf

²⁰ BAH Restoration Act [H.R.7561](2022). [introduced] <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7561>

²¹ BAH Calculation Improvement Act [H.R. 7562] (2022). [introduced] <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7562>

housing crunch²² found themselves facing long military housing waitlists, scarce civilian rental availability, fast-rising home prices²³, and a competitive “seller’s market” that made it challenging to utilize benefits such as the VA Home Loan program for a variety of reasons. Although Blue Star Families will not begin collecting data about the most recent PCS season until we begin fielding our 2022 MFLS on May 23, anecdotal evidence suggests challenges range from sellers unwilling to accept offers from buyers using a VA home loan, to appraisal values that are not keeping up with housing prices, to long and unpredictable timelines that are unacceptable to both sellers and buyers.

This particular issue is one that hits close to home. My youngest brother is an Army Captain. He and his wife have a story that is all too common for military families in the current housing market. Shortly after returning home from a deployment, he, his newly-pregnant wife, and two energetic dogs PCSed on February 5th of this year. They just moved into a home a couple of weeks ago after two failed attempts to use a VA home loan. My brother recently shared his story with me. “From February 5 to April 28, I lived in a studio apartment or hotel with a pregnant wife and two cattle dogs. The hotel on post couldn’t keep us for more than ten days, so we found an AirBnB off post for short term rental. It was the best we could find and cost us nearly \$4,000. Our room was beside the entrance and we couldn’t open the windows because the smoke pit from a construction site was just outside our window and it smelled like cigarettes and weed.” After two VA appraisals were issued substantially under the contract price (one was \$35,000 under and the other \$21,000 under), an unsuccessful Reconsideration of Value Request (noting incorrectly-measured square footage), and hundreds of dollars in unreimbursed appraisal fees, they chose not to use their VA Home Loan benefit. They closed on their new home on April 28 using a conventional loan with no complications.

Veterans and service members deserve to be able to use the benefits they have earned, regardless of nationwide housing market fluctuations. By bringing regulations and appraisal processes more in line with current home buying practices, the Improving the VA Home Loan Benefit Act of 2022 will help Veterans and currently-serving families alike.

Effects of Financial Stress and Insecurity

The combination of these factors –military spouse un/underemployment, unreimbursed out-of-pocket relocation and housing expenses, and others – contribute to financial stress and food insecurity among active-duty military families. These challenges do not end when service members leave the military. Transition-related challenges such as obtaining employment exacerbate financial stress and food insecurity among Veteran families.

²² Jowers, K. (2021, July 1). Many military families, caught in a housing crunch, are suffering this PCS season. *Military Times*. [militarytimes.com/pay-benefits/mil-money/2021/07/01/military-families-caught-in-a-housing-crunch-suffer-deeply-this-pcs-season/](https://www.militarytimes.com/pay-benefits/mil-money/2021/07/01/military-families-caught-in-a-housing-crunch-suffer-deeply-this-pcs-season/)

²³ Hadley, G. (2021, July 9). Air Force Reviewing Options to Ease Housing Issue. *Air Force Magazine*. [airforcemag.com/not-a-good-situation-off-base-housing-crisis-has-usaf-scrambling](https://www.airforcemag.com/not-a-good-situation-off-base-housing-crisis-has-usaf-scrambling/)

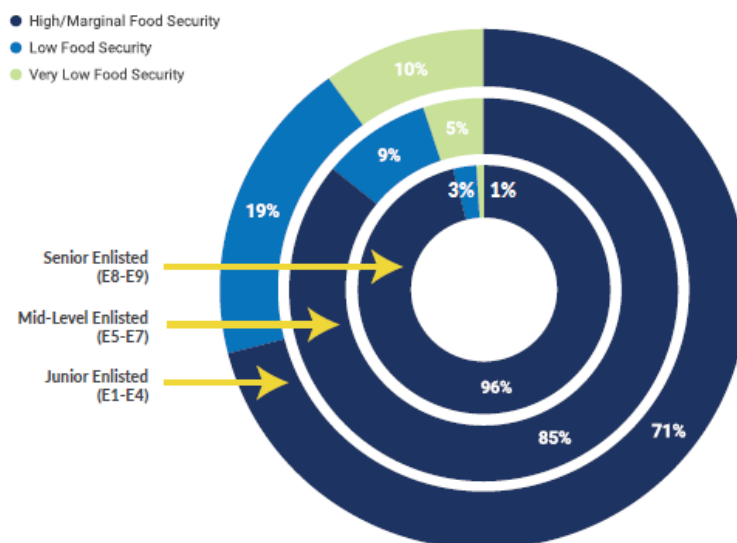
Military & Veteran Family Food Insecurity

Blue Star Families' research has revealed alarming rates of food insecurity²⁴ among military and Veteran families. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 7% of active-duty family respondents and 12% of Veteran family respondents to the 2018 MFLS answered "yes" to the question "Has anyone in your household faced food insecurity (the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food) within the past year?" Similarly, 9% of active-duty family respondents and 18% of Veteran family respondents answered "yes" to the question "Has any member of your household sought emergency food assistance through a food bank, food pantry, or charitable organization?"²⁵ Due to an oversampling of senior enlisted and officer families in the 2018 MFLS, it is likely that the actual percentage of military and Veteran families experiencing food insecurity pre-pandemic was higher than this data suggests.²⁶

Blue Star Families uses a non-scientific, convenience sampling method in our surveys. As such, we are unable to track statistically-significant changes within the same population over time. That said, we posit (on the basis of our own data and that of civilian research) that the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated military and Veteran family food insecurity in the United States. In our 2020 MFLS, one in ten (9%) active-duty family respondents reported that they had experienced food insecurity

Level of Food Security By Enlisted Rank

Active-duty Enlisted Family Respondents' Food Security Levels by Rank Grouping



²⁴ Food insecurity and hunger are distinct concepts. According to the USDA, food insecurity is defined as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Hunger is defined as an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity. [U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Definitions of Food Security," Economic Research Service, September 9, 2020, ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx.]

²⁵ Blue Star Families. (2019). *2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report*. bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf

²⁶ For example, the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) has reported that one in eight military family respondents to their survey on the subject (pre-pandemic) was food insecure. [Military Family Advisory Network, "Military Family Food Insecurity," Accessed on March 4, 2021, militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/MFAN-117-Food-Insecurity-One-Pager-pf-1.3-002_LA.pdf

(low²⁷ or very low food security²⁸) in the 12 months preceding the survey's September-October 2020 fielding. That figure rose to 14% for enlisted active-duty family respondents. While a greater proportion (29%) of junior enlisted (E1-E4) family respondents reported food insecurity, this issue was not limited to junior enlisted ranks: 16% of mid-grade enlisted (E5-E6) and 8% of senior enlisted (E8-E9) respondents reported low or very low food security. Meanwhile, 12% of Veteran family respondents in the 2020 MFLS reported that they had experienced food insecurity.

There is also reason to believe that military families of color might be struggling with food insecurity at higher rates than their white, non-Hispanic peers. In the 2020 MFLS, 14% of active-duty family respondents of color reported low or very low food security, compared to only 7% of their white, non-Hispanic counterparts.²⁹ In our recent groundbreaking needs assessment of military and Veteran families of color, "food and nutrition" was an unmet need for 46% of active-duty and 54% of Veteran family respondents of color who expressed needing that support. "Uncertainty about eligibility" and "lack of knowledge about how to access" the resources available were the top two barriers for both groups.³⁰

Transitioning out of service introduces additional opportunities for financial instability and vulnerability, a risk that is greater for post-9/11 Veteran respondents in our research who have a service-connected disability³¹, and for Black and Hispanic/Latino/a/x Veterans.³²

Among post-9/11 Veteran respondents in the 2021 MFLS, 80% report a service-connected disability³³, and the majority of those (77%) have at least a 50% disability rating. Sixty-five percent of post-9/11 Veteran respondents rate their own transition experience as "difficult" with the most commonly reported issues related to adjusting to civilian life and finding employment for themselves. Post-9/11 Veterans generally have strong financial and employment situations, compared to their non-Veteran peers or even to Veterans of other service periods. However, post-9/11 Veteran respondents with a service-connected disability include "financial struggles" as a top-five transition challenge, whereas their counterparts without a service-connected disability do not.

²⁷ "Low food security (old label=Food insecurity without hunger):reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake." [U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Definitions of Food Security," Economic Research Service, September 9, 2020, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>.]

²⁸ "Very low food security (old label=Food insecurity with hunger):reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake." [Ibid.]

²⁹ Please contact Blue Star Families for more information: survey@bluestarfam.org.

³⁰ Blue Star Families. (2022). Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf

³¹ Blue Star Families. (2022). 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF_MFLS_Results2021_ComprehensiveReport_3_22.pdf

³² Blue Star Families. (2022). Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf

³³ According to the official definition by the VA, "service-connected" means the disability is a result of disease or injury incurred or aggravated during active military service. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2019, May). Statistical Trends: Veterans with a Service-Connected Disability, 1990 to 2018. [va.gov/vetdata/docs/QuickFacts/SCD_trends_FINAL_2018.PDF](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/QuickFacts/SCD_trends_FINAL_2018.PDF)

Table 4: Top 5 Challenges to Transitioning Out of the Military
 Post-9/11 Veteran respondents by service-connected disability status

Without Service-Connected Disability (n=111)	With Service-Connected Disability (n=464)
50% Loss of Connection with Military Community	58% Loss of Connection with Military Community
45% Finding Employment for Myself	53% Loss of Sense of Purpose/Camaraderie
41% Loss of Sense of Purpose/Camaraderie	47% Finding Employment for Myself
33% Getting Socialized to Civilian Culture	45% Physical Injuries
31% Civilian Day-to-Day Life	44% Financial Struggles

Aggregated MFLS data (2016-2018) reveals that challenges also vary by race/ethnicity. At least half of Hispanic or Latino/a (56%) and Black (50%), Veteran respondents characterized their overall transition as “difficult” or “very difficult” (compared to 43% of their white/non-Hispanic peers). Additionally, 61% of Hispanic/Latino and 55% of Black Veteran respondents characterized their financial transition as “difficult” or “very difficult” compared to 48% of their white, non-Hispanic Veteran peers.³⁴

Establishing an Office of Food Insecurity within the Department of Veterans Affairs would help address these needs in a variety of ways. For example, it would provide information directly to Veterans about the availability of and eligibility for federal nutrition assistance programs, collaborate with other offices within the VA to identify Veterans experiencing or at risk for food insecurity, increase understanding of food insecurity among VA staff, and strengthen collaborative efforts with state and local offices administering SNAP benefits.

Future Action

While the legislation discussed here today will help alleviate acute challenges related to military spouse un/underemployment, unreimbursed out-of-pocket relocation and housing costs, and food insecurity, Blue Star Families will continue to advocate for solutions that also address structural and root cause barriers.

Financial stress may not be entirely preventable, but some resulting effects, such as food insecurity, are preventable. As a society, we must collectively work to destigmatize help-seeking behavior—among those seeking help and those who facilitate it. The federal government must also work to expand its data collection around military and veteran family financial challenges, so as to better inform policy responses to these issues.

We must also work to relieve financial inequity and address the underlying causes of military and Veteran family financial insecurity (outlined above). One way to do this is by implementing policies that align with what Blue Star Families conceptualizes as the Total Family Force model.³⁵ In the

³⁴ Blue Star Families. (2022). Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf

³⁵ To ensure optimal mission readiness, resilience, and retention, the military ought to adopt a “Total Family Force” model. This is an extension of the “Total Force” concept that the military pioneered in the 1970s, which was designed to break down barriers between service branches to create one “total” force with similar goals and objectives. Blue Star Families wants to build upon this

same way that the military reorganized to be a “Total Force” by removing barriers to interoperability amongst the active and Reserve components, the military must continue to make it easier to both serve one’s country and be a present supporter of one’s family.

For example, Congress could:

- Work with the Department of Defense to ensure military families have more control over their careers—including when and where they relocate. This would allow them to make decisions that support their families' financial stability, and may necessitate a reconsideration of current “up-or-out” talent management policies.³⁶
- Support a fixed period of federal student loan deferment for military spouses who leave a job in order to relocate due to military orders.³⁷
- Help military spouses return to the labor force by funding pilot programs to explore innovative approaches to address root causes (e.g., offering child care at no cost to military spouses during their job search).
- Pass the BAH Restoration Act and the BAH Calculation Improvement Act to reduce out-of-pocket housing costs for military families.³⁸
- Require all federal agencies to add military and Veteran identifiers to existing records and include this information in publicly-available datasets and reports.³⁹

In summary, no one solution will solve the myriad financial challenges military and Veteran families face, however, the legislation I’ve discussed today and these additional recommendations will help move the needle.

I would again like to thank the distinguished Members of the Committee for inviting Blue Star Families to testify today, and for their continued attention to military and Veteran family issues. I am happy to answer your questions.

concept to acknowledge the fact that military family well-being is inextricably linked to mission readiness, and that military personnel policies ought to reflect that reality.

³⁶ See, for example: Bipartisan Policy Center, “Building a F.A.S.T. Force: A Flexible Personnel System for a Modern Military, Recommendations from the Task Force on Defense Personnel,” March 2017, bipartisanpolicy.org/report/building-a-fast-force/.

³⁷ In the 116th Congress, Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY) introduced the Military Spouse Student Loan Deferment Act of 2020 (H.R.7433). This bill would have allowed certain military spouses to defer payment on their federal student loans for 90 days. Specifically, borrowers would be eligible to receive this deferment if (1) their spouse is an active duty service member of the Armed Forces, (2) they lost their employment due to a permanent change of station move, and (3) they could provide certain documentation to the Department of Education. Loan interest would not accrue during the deferment period. Blue Star Families supported this proposal. [Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Finding 13,”

³⁸ Blue Star Families included a deep dive on this recommendation in our 2020 MFLS comprehensive report. [Ibid.]

³⁹ Blue Star Families. (2022). Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf