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DON SISSON, STAFF DIRECTOR
(202) 225-9091

www.rules.house.gov



Committee on Rules
U.S. House of Representatives
H-312 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515-6269

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June 24, 2021

Dear Secretaries Austin, McDonough, and Vilsack:

Recently, the House Committee on Rules began an examination of hunger across the nation to create a roadmap to end hunger by 2030. On May 27, we heard from experts who told us that our servicemembers, veterans, and their families need more support to consistently put nutritious food on the table. We write to share those findings, present some possible solutions, and enlist your help in pushing past silos to meet the needs of our military members and their families.

Improve data collection by all departments

Since the Department of Defense (DoD) does not release systematic data on food insecurity, organizations conduct voluntary surveys to understand issues that impact military families. For example, Blue Star Families found that 14 percent of active-duty military families surveyed face food insecurity. For military spouses out of work, that number is up to 20 percent.¹ A recent study found that one in three U.S. Army soldiers surveyed at one base faced food insecurity during the pandemic, a 150 percent increase from the previous year.² Yet, without public data available at the branch of service-level, policymakers, base commanders, and advocates are left to rely on helpful but unreliable survey data regarding the extent of food insecurity across branches of service, states of residence, military bases, and demographics.

We encourage the DoD to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to include food insecurity screening questions in the DoD Status of Forces Survey and the Active Duty Spouses Survey to better understand food insecurity among adults and children in the household. It is critical the DoD ensure that collection of this data does not negatively impact a servicemember's career opportunities. Further, we encourage each department to highlight other sources of data – both administrative and survey data – that would be helpful to better understand and address food insecurity, and to work with each other and Congress to ensure this data is collected and shared across your departments.

Remove Basic Allowance for Housing from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program calculation

¹ Blue Star Families. (2020). *Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Comprehensive Infographic*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_Comp_Infographic_2020.pdf

² Rabbitt, M. P., Beymer, M. R., & Reagan, J. J. (2021). Changes in Food Insecurity and Food Access Among Active-Duty Soldiers During the Coronavirus Pandemic. Working paper.

The Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) given to servicemembers who live off-base counts as income for the purposes of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) calculation, often keeping military families from the financial support they need to feed themselves and their children. Yet, civilians receiving housing benefits such as Section 8 or public housing are exempted from counting those funds toward their monthly SNAP allotment, as are in-kind housing benefits extended to servicemembers living on-base. Further, the BAH is not considered taxable income by the Internal Revenue Service and is not counted in other federal means-tested programs like the school meal programs.

Experts have suggested that USDA has the statutory authority to change this policy administratively, and if true, we strongly encourage you to do so. However, if an act of Congress is required, we request that you explain why the department lacks the ability to make this needed change and to work with Congress on a legislative solution.

Examine how base pay increases would ease food insecurity

Base pay for enlisted servicemembers – particularly those with dependents – impacts food insecurity. For example, a military servicemember supporting a spouse and children on their E1-E4 salary alone is likely living below 130 percent of the federal poverty line.³ For other U.S. households living below 130 percent of poverty, 33 percent experienced food insecurity.⁴

We ask DoD, in consultation with USDA, to determine and report back to Congress how base pay increases may improve food insecurity, as well as strategies and policies to avoid inadvertently pushing these families to face the so-called “benefits cliff,” leaving a family with fewer dollars and less support than before. Further, we ask the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to consider and report back to Congress how economic stability attained from higher wages while serving could improve the economic outlook for veterans after returning to civilian life.

Reform Basic Allowance for Subsistence for servicemembers and families

Currently, servicemembers receive Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS) to offset the costs for meals and, according to DoD, the allowance is not intended to cover meals for family members. In Fiscal Year 2021, the BAS rate is \$266.18 a month for officers and \$386.50 a month for enlisted service members. According to the USDA, in April 2021, the moderate-cost plan for groceries for a family of four with children is \$1,120.90 a month. For junior service members like an E-1 with less than four months of service, this means over 80 percent of net income each month is spent on groceries (not including BAS or BAH).

We ask DoD to consider reforming BAS to cover family members and increase the allotment per month specifically for junior enlisted servicemembers with dependents. We believe this reform would directly address military hunger issues for families with dependents.

Examine how a short-term SNAP guarantee could smooth transition into civilian life.

³ Leibman, A. J., & Protas, J. (2021). Hungry in the Military. <https://www.mazon.org/wp-content/uploads/MAZON-Military-Hunger-Report-April-2021.pdf>

⁴ Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory, C. A., & Singh, A. (2020). Household food security in the United States in 2019, ERR-275. *US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.*

Separating from the military and reentering civilian life is fraught, particularly for those separating at younger ages or with a disability, leaving too many new veterans facing food insecurity. We need new strategies to improve this transition for servicemembers and their families. To ease this transition while preventing food insecurity, one expert suggested a guaranteed, short-term SNAP allotment for every separating family of a servicemember at the rank of E-6 and below.

We ask each department to evaluate how this idea could ease the transition to civilian life while curbing food insecurity and report those findings to Congress. Additionally, we ask for your ideas to ease this transition and better support the economic stability of new veterans and their families.

Create and expand on-site pantries and diet-related programs at VA medical centers

We heard from Mountaineer Food Bank in West Virginia about their partnership with the area VA hospital to supply food boxes to vets facing food insecurity. While Mountaineer reaches 900 vets per month, there are at least 1,300 vets known to need help in Mountaineer's service area. Before the food box initiative, Mountaineer and the hospital considered an on-site food pantry approach similar to programs run in civilian hospitals like the Boston Medical Center to address food insecurity and better impact diet-related diseases. Obstacles surrounding space, allergies, and general feasibility sidelined the effort.

We ask the VA, in consultation with USDA, to determine and report back to Congress how on-site food pantries may improve food security and combat diet-related diseases, identify obstacles to adding pantries to VA medical facilities serving food-insecure veterans, and work to close the hunger gap for veterans through these facilities.

Work with congressional partners to better combat veteran homelessness

While there have been great strides over the last decade to better connect veterans to stable housing, nearly 40,000 vets are homeless and another 25,000 are unstably housed. Veteran homelessness creates barriers to accessing other needed services and benefits these vets qualify for, such as SNAP. We ask each of your departments to think critically about the challenges homeless vets face in securing nutritious, regular meals, and to ensure they are not blocked from receiving the important services they need.

Our military families and veterans deserve nothing less than our nation's ongoing commitment to them and their children. And that commitment must include the promise that no one who served – nor their family members – goes without the food they need to live a healthy life. If we work together across your department's jurisdictions to find new solutions, we can keep this promise.

Thank you for your attention to these important matters. We stand ready to work with each of you on behalf of those who served.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress
Chair, House Committee on
Rules



Guy Reschenthaler
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



Mary Gay Scanlon
Member of Congress



Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress



Deborah K. Ross
Member of Congress