

September 14, 2023

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman, Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman, Armed Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member, Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member, Armed Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairmen, Ranking Members, and Members of the Armed Service Committees:

As you and your colleagues work to reconcile the House and Senate proposals for the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (FY24 NDAA), the undersigned national organizations call on you to prioritize a meaningful, adequate, and effective response to the problem of food insecurity among military families. **We specifically urge you to incorporate the House provision to exclude the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as counted income for the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) so that the program operates effectively as intended and reaches all military families in need.**

The problem of food insecurity among our service members and military families has persisted for far too long, negatively impacting mission readiness, retention, and recruitment for our Armed Forces. Food insecurity not only poses a threat to national security, but it undermines the health, well-being, and stability of our military's greatest strength and most valuable asset – our service members and their families.

Common-sense, actionable policy reforms to address this problem are within reach, but Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Administration must demonstrate committed leadership and take necessary actions to enact and implement them. While it remains incomprehensible to many that military families suffer from food insecurity, the evidence speaks for itself. Food pantries are located on or near virtually every military installation. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense's own data show that 24% of active duty service members reported experiencing food insecurity in 2020, and of those surveyed, 10% reported experiencing very low food security. In its report from earlier this year commissioned by the Department of Defense, the RAND Corporation identified that a staggering 86% of those classified as food insecure in 2018 did not report making use of food assistance from government programs or the charitable sector in the previous year. This highlights that most military families who struggle with food insecurity are not receiving the help that they desperately need and deserve. This unconscionable situation must be addressed.

Ultimately, Congress must do more to address overall servicemember compensation to ensure military families do not face food insecurity challenges. But Congress took an important first step toward an intermediate toward addressing the problem of food insecurity among military families by authorizing a Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) in the FY 22 NDAA. This targeted allowance, as updated in the FY 23 NDAA, now provides relief to those military families whose incomes and household sizes place them below 150% of federal poverty guidelines. However, because the BNA includes the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as counted income when determining eligibility

except in areas designated as high cost of living by the Department of Defense, the vast majority of vulnerable military families continue to fall through the cracks and find themselves ineligible to receive this needed assistance.

To ensure our military families do not needlessly struggle with food insecurity, we urge you to prioritize basic policy reforms that have enjoyed bipartisan support as part of the final FY24 National Defense Authorization Act:

- Fully exclude the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as part of a service member's income for determining eligibility and benefits for the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) currently being implemented per DoD Instruction 134.15.
- Exclude government food assistance as part of a member's Gross Household Income (GHI) for purposes of BNA eligibility.
- Streamline and simplify the notification and application process for the BNA to remove barriers and eliminate stigma that might prevent service members from seeking needed assistance.
- Require the Department of Defense to increase transparency about who is eligible for an receiving the BNA and coordinate efforts and work closely with USDA to identify service members at risk of food insecurity, provide education on the BNA and other nutrition assistance programs available, and maximize program participation and utilization of available supports.

We hope that we can count on your leadership to prioritize these achievable policy solutions in this year's NDAA legislation. The BNA, in its current form is an ineffective solution to the problem of food insecurity among military families. It is simply unacceptable to allow this preventable problem to persist. Failure to secure meaningful and lasting solutions will tragically allow vulnerable military families to needlessly struggle with hunger, with a great personal toll on those impacted and at significant cost to our nation. Even one military family struggling with hunger is too many.

The least we owe the men and women who are sacrificing to serve our country – or hope to do so in the future -- is the ability to ensure their families are fed. Thank you for your consideration and support for this critical issue.

Sincerely,

America's Warrior Partnership
Armed Services Arts Partnership
Armed Services YMCA
Association of Military Banks of America
Blue Star Families
Cohen Veterans Network
Hope For The Warriors
Jewish War Veterans
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
Military Child Education Coalition
Military Family Advisory Network

Military Officers Association of America
Military Women's Memorial Foundation
National Military Family Association
Operation Homefront
Partners in PROMISE
Psycharmor
RallyPoint
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors
Tricare for Kids Coalition