February 28, 2020

Hon. Jim Inhofe, Chair
Hon. Jack Reed, Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Adam Smith, Chair
Hon. Mac Thornberry, Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Food Insecure Military Families and the NDAA

Dear Chairmen Inhofe and Smith, and Ranking Members Reed and Thornberry:

We write to urge you to prioritize the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in the Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This bipartisan proposal would address a longstanding shortcoming in military compensation policy that has left thousands of military families—primarily lower ranking enlisted service members with multiple dependents—to endure the painful reality of food insecurity. A slightly modified version of this provision was included in the mark for the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel with unanimous approval and in the FY20 NDAA passed by the U.S. House of Representatives with overwhelming support from both sides of the aisle. Despite this, the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance provision was omitted from the final NDAA.

Across the country, service members and military spouses turn to food pantries, discreetly looking for help in feeding their families. This is neither an isolated problem, nor a novel one. Military families are being served by food pantries and distribution programs on or near every single military base in the United States. Furthermore, recent Pentagon records show that during the 2018-19 school year, one third of military children at DoD-run schools in the U.S. were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.¹

While many emergency food providers have responded to this issue by developing specific and innovative programs to provide limited short-term assistance to food-insecure military families, most of these organizations are strapped by increasing demands for services in general and have limited capacity to address this population. We conducted an exhaustive search for

accurate data from the Department of Defense (DoD), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Congress, and direct service providers. We found that food insecurity is often triggered by a number of circumstances, rooted in broad-based systemic challenges. These include low pay among lower ranking enlistees, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among military spouses, frequent moves, limited availability and high costs of childcare, challenges around activation and deployment, and unexpected financial emergencies.

A 2016 report by the Government Accountability Office provides further evidence that thousands of currently serving military families experience food insecurity. This report examines how the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is counted as income in determining eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) while it is not counted as income for federal income taxes and for determining eligibility for most federal assistance programs. Including the BAH as “income” penalizes our troops in a discriminatory way, treating service members differently than the civilian population. For civilians, the value of federal housing assistance subsidies and benefits are not counted as income in the determination of eligibility for SNAP. Current policy for SNAP eligibility establishes an unnecessary and harmful barrier to nutrition assistance for struggling military families.

While the data from DoD revealed strong anecdotal insights, DoD has yet to provide comprehensive and accurate data on the number of military families struggling with food insecurity, nor details on their circumstances. The Blue Star Families annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey provides additional important, highly credible insight into this issue. They report that in 2018, seven percent of active duty family survey respondents indicated that someone in their household faced food insecurity within the past year. Furthermore, almost 10% of active duty family respondents indicated that a member of their household sought emergency assistance through a food bank, food pantry, or charitable organization.

There can be no denying that food insecurity among military families remains a real and painful reality and that government safety net programs are not

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adequately meeting the needs of those who serve our country. For nearly a
decade, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger has made it a priority to address
this issue in partnership with military service organizations, and today we have
an innovative, bipartisan solution.

The Military Family Basic Needs Allowance would revive in a more functional
form DoD’s Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance (FSSA), which was
sunsetted domestically in 2016. This new allowance would be administered in a
streamlined and efficient manner to eliminate barriers to participation including
shame, stigma, and fear of retribution. The Pentagon’s Defense Finance and
Accounting Services (DFAS) would automatically notify service members of
potential eligibility if their basic pay is at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty
Level based on the total number of dependents. To complete program
enrollment, service members would be required to verify pertinent household
information and provide required documentation to certify their eligibility and
allowance amount, such as additional household income. The allowance
amount would equal the difference between current gross household income
and 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, based on the total number of
dependents. At the same time as receiving notification about potential
eligibility, service members would receive materials and resources about
financial management and other federal assistance programs that aim to help
navigate the stresses, stigmas, and challenges of living on a tight family budget,
particularly while serving in the military.

The Military Family Basic Needs Allowance will help service members like Erika
Tebbens, who testified on this issue before the House Committee on Agriculture
in 2015.4 She shared “while I never expected to be flush with cash as a military
spouse, I always assumed, and perhaps naively, that when my husband joined,
that we would at least have our basic needs met. I quickly found out, when I
became pregnant with our son, that that was not the case.” Even with a college
education, Erika was unable to find work when her husband was stationed to
Seattle, and she learned from a civilian coworker about her family’s potential
eligibility for federal nutrition benefits. “When I reluctantly applied for SNAP, I
was incredibly embarrassed that I was even having to apply and then when they
told me that I didn’t qualify because they were counting our housing allowance
as part of earned income, all I remember next was just sobbing. I don’t even
remember leaving the office because I had been turned down from something

4 Statement of Erika Tebbens before the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on
that I felt I didn't even want to be asking for in the first place, it was the very last-ditch effort for us even asking for it.”

Military hunger and troop readiness go hand in hand. The Military Family Basic Needs Allowance supports optimal mission readiness for our military. It would ensure that service members are able to provide the basic needs for their family members, eliminate significant stress and anxiety, and by providing support for household food purchases, lead to better nutrition and improved health outcomes. This, in turn, will minimize the costs for treatment of chronic diet-related health conditions. Improved diet and health outcomes for children of military families will contribute to the goal of more future enlistees physically fit to serve, given that these children are more likely to serve in the armed forces in the future than their counterparts in non-military families.5

We implore you to prioritize inclusion of the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in the FY21 NDAA. Those who make significant sacrifices for our country should never struggle to meet their family’s basic needs.

Sincerely,

Abby J. Leibman
President & CEO