

September 29, 2020

Hon. Thom Tillis, Chair  
Subcommittee on Personnel  
Senate Armed Services Committee  
310 New Bern Avenue, Suite 122  
Raleigh, NC 27601

Dear Senator Tillis:

We — the undersigned faith leaders representing hundreds of thousands of people of faith across North Carolina — are united in our commitment to end hunger in the U.S. Our diverse traditions compel us to honor the dignity of every person, especially those who are vulnerable. No matter a person's circumstance, no one deserves to be hungry. It is a shocking and shameful reality that military families are among those who struggle with hunger, including military families who serve here in North Carolina.

**We call on you, as Chair of the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to use your position of leadership to remove the needless barrier to assistance and ensure that struggling military families are able to get the help that they need and to which they are entitled.** We urge you not to ignore the needless suffering of service members and their families who experience hardship and prioritize the inclusion of the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in the final Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) negotiated by the Conference Committee. 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.

This provision, which has been championed by National Military Family Association and MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, was included in the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel mark with unanimous bipartisan support and in the FY21 NDAA passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. Despite overwhelming support for its common-sense and targeted approach, the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance was omitted last year from the final FY20 NDAA. We call on you to demonstrate your leadership with the Senate Armed Service Committee to address the long-overlooked problem of food insecurity for military families and prioritize inclusion of the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in the FY21 NDAA.

Across the country, service members and military spouses regularly turn to food pantries, discreetly looking for help in feeding their families because they can't qualify for needed federal nutrition assistance due to a technical barrier. 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. In a 2019 survey conducted by the Military Family Advisory Network, one

in eight military family respondents reported being food insecure.<sup>1</sup> 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 school meals.<sup>2</sup> 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 adequately meeting the needs of those who serve our country.

**This problem exists right here in North Carolina as well.** Service members and their families at Fort Bragg have come to rely on the Armed Services YMCA Food Pantry. This pantry provides thousands of pounds of food each week to the military families at Fort Bragg. 81% of the recipients utilizing the pantry are Rank E6 or below and 88% of recipients have at least one child.

The scope and severity of food insecurity for military families have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic is not only a national health emergency, but also a time of urgent concern for those who are most vulnerable in our country. This includes our service members and their families who were already struggling. The Fort Bragg Food Pantry has seen a 38% increase in need in the wake of COVID. The COVID-19 Military Support Initiative Pain Points Poll results have revealed concerning rates of hardship experienced by military families due to the pandemic, including eight percent of respondents unable to afford more than a week's worth of food, and eighteen percent of total respondents indicating that they or their spouse have lost a job or are unable to work as a result of the ongoing crisis.<sup>3</sup> This moment has also highlighted the significant racial inequities that exist throughout our society, including within our Armed Forces. With service members of color overrepresented among low-income junior enlisted ranks (and underrepresented among officers and military leadership), the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance would help to correct a longstanding injustice by providing needed assistance to struggling military families, who are disproportionately people of color. The unique challenges and expanded awareness of this moment make action in support of this provision even more pressing.

The Military Family Basic Needs Allowance is smart policy that supports key goals of mission readiness, troop retention, and future recruitment. We implore you to prioritize inclusion of this provision in the final FY21 NDAA. Those who make significant sacrifices for our country should never struggle to meet their family's basic needs. We appreciate your continued commitment to those who serve our nation and all of our military families. We stand ready to work with you to ensure that those who make significant sacrifices for our country never struggle to put food on the table.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Wolff Alterman Asheville, NC  
Reverend Kathy Beach Blowing Rock, NC  
The Rev. Dr. Jennifer Copeland Raleigh, NC

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<sup>1</sup> Military Family Advisory Network, 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey Results: <https://militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/MFAN2019SurveyResults.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Why Are Many of America's Military Families Going Hungry?" NBC News. Jul 12, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/why-are-many-america-s-military-families-going-hungry-1028886>.

<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 Military Support Initiative Pain Points Poll: <https://bluestarfam.org/pain-pts/>

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