September 6, 2019

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

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

We write to express support for the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance, a provision that was included in the Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) bill that unanimously passed the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel and passed the U.S. House of Representatives on July 12, 2019. It is imperative that you keep this provision in the FY2020 NDAA Conference Report to support military families who struggle with food insecurity.

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger believes that those who make great sacrifices for our country should not struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals to their families. We first became alarmed by this issue in 2012, when our colleagues from the emergency food network shared concerns about an ever-increasing number of military families turning to them for food assistance. We have been working for seven years to address this, and we are looking to you as policy leaders with a powerful commitment to our military, to secure the passage of this vital provision.

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 assist 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 different circumstances, including 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.² 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” treats our troops 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.

The Blue Star Families annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey provides important, highly credible insight into this issue, given the lack of comprehensive data from DoD. Blue Star Families reports 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, nine percent of active duty family respondents indicated


that a member of their household sought emergency assistance through a food bank, food pantry, or charitable organization.⁴

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. 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 130% 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 assist in certification of eligibility and amount of allowance, such as additional household income. The allowance amount would equal the difference between current gross household income and 130% 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.

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 2015⁵. 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,

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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 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 would ensure that service members are able to provide the basic needs for their family members, eliminate unnecessary stress and anxiety, and contribute to optimal mission readiness. Furthermore, additional support for military families’ basic needs, including support for household food purchases, will lead to better nutrition and improved health outcomes, saving money 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.6

We implore you to prioritize inclusion of the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in the FY2020 NDAA Conference Report. Those who make significant sacrifices for our country should never struggle to meet their family’s basic needs.

Sincerely,

Abby J. Leibman
President & CEO

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