

U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Legislative Hearing
Testimony of Josh Protas
Vice President of Public Policy
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
May 18, 2022

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Josh Protas, and I am proud to serve as Vice President of Public Policy for MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger. Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst, without judgement or precondition. MAZON's founder, Leibel Fein (of blessed memory), articulated the moral foundation of our work, noting that, "by focusing citizens' attention on voluntary charitable efforts, we relieve the polity of the burden for policy reform, that by emphasizing kindness, we run the risk of postponing justice, of depressing the necessary sense of urgency that justice requires." Those words from 1985 still ring true today, and I am pleased to share MAZON's insights about the pursuit of justice for veterans and their families who have bravely served our country and now find themselves struggling to meet their basic human needs.

The widespread reality of hungry veterans should be viewed as a preventable pattern of friendly fire with tragic consequences, where struggling veterans are the

casualties of our collective indifference and our government's inaction. It does not have to be this way. I implore you to take heed of the recommendations from the witnesses here today and to proactively collect more information so we can target spending, ask difficult questions about why our system fails so many and where your responsibility lies in this, and listen to the stories of veterans with lived experiences around these issues. Think hard about how each of you can do more to ensure that Congress and our federal agencies do not abandon millions of our veterans living day to day with hunger, homelessness, and desperation.

For nearly ten years, MAZON has prioritized addressing the unfortunate, long-overlooked issue of food insecurity among our nation's veterans and military families. As concerning food insecurity rates among these populations persisted year after year, we focused our efforts to champion needed policy changes, eliminate structural barriers and bureaucratic hurdles, create educational materials and trainings to connect families with available programs and resources, and build partnerships to propose innovative solutions to these intractable, but solvable problems. MAZON has been proud to partner with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), numerous veterans service organizations (VSOs) and military support organizations (MSOs), and our extensive network of local agency and synagogue partners in this work.

Abby J. Leibman, MAZON's President and CEO, first testified about these issues before the House Committee on Agriculture more than six years ago, shining a spotlight on the unique circumstances and needs of low-income veterans and military families. She proposed thoughtful bipartisan policy solutions, most of which sadly remain unrealized today. Since then, my colleagues and I have testified numerous times before various committees about these issues, and we are disappointed time and again by

the lack of significant action to put an end to these solvable problems. In fact, we have often been criticized, dismissed, and ignored — both by policymakers, and by some in the anti-hunger community. We recognize that this issue is deeply shameful and often hidden. It makes sense that struggling veterans and military families do not want to call attention to their situations. But the ones who should feel ashamed are those in leadership positions with the power to help — and who do nothing or look the other way. Appended to my written testimony today is a copy of my written testimony for the hearing of this subcommittee from January 2020; unfortunately, the recommendations that I made remain just as relevant and urgent now as they were then.

At first glance, it might seem that food insecurity is not addressed directly by much of the proposed legislation discussed today, but MAZON firmly believes that food insecurity is woven into the fabric of the lived experience of far too many veterans. Our federal government must act proactively, holistically, and boldly to address food insecurity and the interrelated issues faced by veterans.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs identifies an individual's basic physiological necessities such as food, shelter, sleep, and rest that must be met before they can feel safe and secure, and before they can prosper as a functioning member of society. Many of our veterans face not only food insecurity, but a bevy of other social challenges due to mental and physical traumas that prevent them from participating more fully in society. While today's hearing focuses primarily on housing, medical care, and supportive services-related legislation, we urge Congress to consider these issues as a whole — not in a piecemeal fashion. For example, gaining housing for a homeless veteran is critical, but if that veteran cannot afford food, transportation, housing, medical care, and other essential living expenses, then we are only filling one void. If we address these issues holistically, then our

servicemembers can have a smooth, dignified transition into society and enjoy fulfilling lives that honor the magnitude of their service to our country.

When I testified before this subcommittee two years ago on the matter of veteran food insecurity, I shared the story of Tim, a Navy veteran who experienced a work-limiting injury and lost access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and housing when he fell through the cracks of the federal system. While Tim survived a brutal year of being homeless in Maine, going days without food, and sometimes resorting to catching squirrels; there were times that all he could think about was finding something to eat. He even contemplated stealing food, thinking that if he got caught, at least he would be fed in jail. While Tim was hungry and homeless and in desperation, he was solely focused on his basic physiological needs. Until those were met, he could not deal with the other steps necessary to get back on his feet and put his life back in order.

These basic physiological issues for veterans are all deeply connected. Hunger, housing, health care, and other core human needs are closely interrelated, with a crisis in one of these areas cascading and compounding to create challenges in another. An unstably housed veteran is more likely to be food insecure; a food insecure veteran is more likely to experience mental illness or another chronic illness such as hypertension, a substance or opioid use disorder, or even suicide; and a veteran experiencing mental illness or substance abuse is less likely to be employed, meaning they are less likely to be

stably housed.^{1,2,3,4} And thus, the viscous cycle repeats. We need the entirety of federal government engaged and committed — not just the VA but also the Department of Defense (DoD), USDA, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Health and Human Services (HHS), Small Business Administration (SBA), Department of Labor (DOL), and others. We appreciate thoughtful proposed legislation that begins to recognize the need for this approach, and we strongly urge this subcommittee to advance the bills as quickly as possible.

With the bills, Congress can take an important step forward to break this cycle and help more of our struggling veterans holistically meet their interrelated basic needs. We further encourage Congress and federal agencies to partner with state and local governments, VSOs, and organizations like MAZON to prevent this devastating cycle from continuing, because far too many of our veterans will continue to fall through the cracks with no real opportunity to thrive.

In your consideration of these issues, it is imperative to center the realities of veterans who have painful lived experience with food insecurity, homelessness, and other hardships. In that spirit, I would like to briefly share about a veteran I recently have come to know. Narcissis is a U.S. Army combat veteran and single mother who has raised three sons — one who currently serves in the

¹ Cohen, A.J., Dosa, D.M., Rudolph, J.L., Halladay, C.W., Heisler, M. and Thomas, K.S., 2022. Risk factors for Veteran food insecurity: findings from a National US Department of Veterans Affairs Food Insecurity Screener. *Public health nutrition*, 25(4), pp.819-828.

² Abraham, K.M., Chang, M.U.M., Van, T., Resnick, S.G. and Zivin, K., 2021. Employment after vocational rehabilitation predicts decreased health care utilization in veterans with mental health diagnoses. *Military medicine*, 186(9-10), pp.850-857.

³ Montgomery, A.E., Rahman, F.A., Cusack, M., Varley, A. and Byrne, T., 2020. Correlates of transitions into housing instability among veterans accessing Veterans Health Administration health care. *Medical Care*, 58(12), pp.1105-1110.

⁴ Kamdar, N.P., Horning, M.L., Geraci, J.C., Uzdevins, A.W., Helmer, D.A. and Hundt, N.E., 2021. Risk for depression and suicidal ideation among food insecure US veterans: data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Study. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 56(12), pp.2175-2184.

Armed Forces and another who previously served. Before her military service, she worked in homeless shelters and did not comprehend why there were so many homeless veterans. After her military service when Narcissis returned to civilian life, she quickly understood when she became a homeless veteran with a family. Narcissis did not know what to do or where to go for help. When she was at a low point and contemplated suicide, the personal outreach of an individual made all the difference. John, a member of the local Rotary Club, reached out and said words that Narcissis repeats to herself every day: “We will not forget you. You don’t forget you.”

That act of humanity and kindness by John opened a door and helped Narcissis connect to critical supports, like weekly meals that made an enormous difference for her family. As she has struggled with unemployment, Narcissis shared that not having a job makes her look at the Daily 22 List of veteran suicides and hope that she does not appear on it. The loss of income has led to food insecurity — this has clearly taken a mental toll. She observed from firsthand experience that these issues are significant factors in veteran suicides. The grinds of daily life, the difficulties of taking care of the basic needs for herself and her son who still lives at home, and the scars from traumas from her military service compound in ways that make securing employment more difficult.

Narcissis found that small things help, and she offered some simple recommendations for this committee and the general public that can make a difference: “Listen. Don’t Judge. See the Humanity of Someone Else.” These basic actions by John offered a lifeline for Narcissis and for her family when she was at rock bottom. John’s outreach helped to stop the ripple of cascading challenges that kept dragging Narcissis down. While she is in a better place now, she lost employment during the pandemic and faces challenges once again. I hope you take Narcissis’s story to heart and keep it with you as you consider what

more Congress can do to secure justice for veterans like her.

While estimates of food insecurity among veterans vary, one 2021 study found that even before COVID-19, 11.1% of working-age veterans lived in a food insecure household, and another study found that food insecurity rates among low-income veterans were upwards of 22.5%.^{5,6} The rates of food insecurity and other measures of economic hardship trend significantly higher for subsets of the veteran population that have unique challenges, including female veterans,⁷ Native American and other veterans of color,⁸ and LGBTQ+ veterans,⁹ though more robust research and targeted policy and programmatic interventions are desperately needed.

Perhaps most concerning is the exceptionally low rate of SNAP participation among food insecure veterans. Recent studies show that only 30% to 41% of food insecure veterans living in SNAP-eligible households participate in the program.^{10,11} This significant SNAP participation gap among veterans is staggering and unacceptable — food is literally left on the table and out of

⁵ Rabbitt, M.P. and Smith, M.D., 2021. *Food Insecurity Among Working-Age Veterans* (No. 1962-2021-1695).

⁶ Pooler, J.A., Srinivasan, M., Mian, P., and Miller, Z., 2021. Prevalence and Risk Factors for Food Insecurity Among Low-Income US Military Veterans. *Public Health Reports*, 136(5), pp.618-625.

⁷ Cohen, A.J., Dosa, D.M., Rudolph, J.L., Halladay, C.W., Heisler, M. and Thomas, K.S., 2022. Risk factors for Veteran food insecurity: findings from a National US Department of Veterans Affairs Food Insecurity Screener. *Public health nutrition*, 25(4), pp.819-828.

⁸ Serrato, J., Hassan, H. and Forchuk, C., 2019. Homeless Indigenous Veterans and the Current Gaps in Knowledge: The State of the Literature. *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health*, 27(1). Griffith, Cynthia, 2022. *Homelessness Among Native American Veterans is Under-Researched and Under-Reported*, invisiblePEOPLE.

⁹ Mayhowald, Lindsay, 2022. *LGBT+ Military Members and Veterans Face Economic, Housing, and Health Insecurities*, Center for American Progress report.

¹⁰ Pooler, J.A., Srinivasan, M., Miller, Z. and Mian, P., 2018. Veterans and Food Insecurity. Impaq International Issue Brief.

¹¹ United States Department of Agriculture, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – Introduction of Priority Areas for State Outreach Plans (Alexandria, VA: June 3, 2021).

reach for hundreds of thousands of low-income veterans. There is simply no excuse for this shameful situation to persist.

This points to a direct need to provide information about benefits eligibility directly where the veterans receive their information, like the Transition Assistance Program (TAPS) upon separation from duty; Census tracts identifying high population of veterans; and other reliable sources of information to ensure veterans actually receive the information they need.

The VA should mandate immediate, on-site SNAP eligibility screening and application assistance for veterans who screen positive for food insecurity. This must be done in collaboration with USDA and state agencies, and they must work with VSOs and community partners to develop outreach campaigns to similarly connect veterans outside of the VA system with SNAP and other resources. In addition, VA and USDA leadership must test and adopt new outreach models and technological innovations to connect veterans with SNAP and other wrap-around services. This would improve program access and participation, make holistic connections that respond to the full needs of each individual veteran, and start to address the systemic factors that contribute to many of the problems being discussed today.

Food insecurity is also directly associated with negative, costly health outcomes. One 2019 study found that food insecurity results in an average healthcare cost of \$1,834 per adult in the U.S.¹⁰ Surely, food insecurity leads to increased costs and poorer outcomes throughout the VA Health System, and it is not only a costly problem, but a wholly preventable one.

¹⁰ Berkowitz, S.A., Basu, S., Gundersen, C. and Seligman, H.K., 2019. Peer Reviewed: State-Level and County-Level Estimates of Health Care Costs Associated with Food Insecurity. Preventing chronic disease, 16.

The recent March 2022 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, “Federal Agencies Should Improve Oversight and Better Collaborate on Efforts to Support Veterans with Food Insecurity,” echoes the urgency of addressing this issue. This report offers an overview of responses to date by federal agencies and key recommendations for a more comprehensive, coordinated, and impactful federal response to the problem of veteran food insecurity.¹¹ We at MAZON were glad to see that GAO recommended better interagency coordination and collaboration — this is something we have advocated for years, and we know there is much more than can be done. Additional Congressional oversight and support for recommendations made by GAO can help further advance progress made to date.

We therefore strongly support proposed legislation to establish a VA Office of Food Insecurity. Especially seeing as the VA is the largest integrated healthcare system in the country, it could set forth an example to other health systems while also uprooting an entrenched social need, all while reducing healthcare costs and improving health outcomes for our veterans. While the VA has already begun some work on food insecurity — such as introducing a “screen and intervene” program where patients are screened for food insecurity — the collected data from this program are added to the patient’s electronic medical records, but it is unclear what happens next.¹² We need more coordination and oversight.

Several bills under consideration today could directly impact (or be amended to directly impact) food insecurity among veterans and their families:

¹¹ Government Accountability Office. Nutrition Assistance Programs: Federal Agencies Should Improve Oversight and Better Collaborate on Efforts to Support Veterans with Food Insecurity. Published March 2022. Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-104740.pdf>

¹² Cohen, A.J., Rudolph, J.L., Thomas, K.S., Archambault, E., Bowman, M.M., Going, C., Heisler, M., O’Toole, T.P. and Dosa, D.M., 2020. Food insecurity among veterans: resources to screen and intervene. *Federal Practitioner*, 37(1), p.16.

- **Establishment of Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Food Insecurity** would cement VA's commitment to addressing veteran food insecurity by establishing a dedicated office, requiring an Annual Report on Veteran Food Insecurity, and authorizing a federal pilot program with grants awarded to eligible entities to address food insecurity among veterans and family members. MAZON enthusiastically supports this legislation, which would enhance VA prioritization of veteran food insecurity issues and support innovation through grants made to community partners operating in states, Tribal Nations, and U.S. Territories.
- **HR 3950** seeks to improve Medical Legal Partnerships and establish a State Veterans Justice Assistance Program to support veterans whose medical needs put them at risk of recidivism or reoffending or becoming victim to a crime. MAZON endorses the proposals in this legislation. This program could be amended to specify interventions such as food insecurity screenings and assistance with federal nutrition program and benefit access. We must utilize every opportunity to provide eligibility screenings and application assistance to facilitate enrollment in programs such as SNAP and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), both of which are proven to reduce food insecurity and contribute to improved health and wellness outcomes.
- **The Extension of Certain VA Programs for Homeless Veterans; The Extension of Authority for Supportive Services for Very Low-Income Veteran Families in Permanent Housing; and The Pilot Program to Connect Homeless Veterans to a Network of Supportive Services**

could be improved and modified to include more wraparound services meant to address food insecurity, including access to SNAP, and could help inform the work of the Office of Food Insecurity to better design interventions for homeless veterans. MAZON supports the goals of these legislative proposals, all of which would support meeting the basic needs of homeless veterans.

- **Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to HR 6307** would establish a pilot program on tiny homes for homeless veterans. MAZON recommends the addition under the supportive services section of this legislation to include SNAP eligibility screening and application assistance as well as the provision of congregate meals for the village that would contribute to meeting the nutritional and social needs of resident veterans.
- **HR 2650** would support greater portability of professional licenses of servicemembers and their spouses. While this legislation seems to apply to active duty servicemembers and spouses rather than veterans, MAZON supports this proposal to remove barriers to military spouse employment, which is a significant contributing factor to food insecurity for low-income military families.
- As all of the proposed legislation under consideration by the subcommittee seeks to improve the immediate circumstances for homeless and economically distressed veterans, MAZON is supportive and encourages additional legislation to holistically meet the basic needs for veterans, caregivers, and others in veteran households. In addition, the VA should pursue more opportunities to adopt new technological processes utilizing principles of human centered design that reduce stigma and facilitate veteran access to benefits.

Veterans often struggle with the onerous processes required to meet their needs, so the VA should continue to streamline, optimize, simplify, and digitize these processes.

We would be remiss if we did not recognize that food insecure veterans often begin as food insecure servicemembers. While not under the direct jurisdiction of this subcommittee, MAZON hopes that the entirety of government, including Congress and the Administration, use the forthcoming White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, to highlight the need for all of us to come together and do right by our servicemembers, veterans, and their families. The conference, as well as the forthcoming Farm Bill reauthorization, provides real opportunities to strengthen and enhance proven programs such as SNAP that effectively reduce food insecurity, and create new and better systems to respond to and prevent problems for our servicemembers and veterans who already sacrifice so much.

Votes to cut funding for, restrict access to, or make harmful changes to SNAP in the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization process will directly hurt veterans like Tim and Narcissis, whose stories I shared today. Every time you are asked to vote on SNAP or another government program that support vulnerable populations, you think about Tim, Narcissis, and the millions of other veterans who experience a preventable cycle of hardship, as well all the individuals, organizations, and entities that work tirelessly to do right by our veterans who have bravely served.

As I said in my opening remarks, MAZON has been leading and working with the VA, USDA, and many organizations for over 10 years to address veteran food insecurity and related challenges. Unfortunately, as the recent GAO report shows, there is so much more we can and must do. Our struggling veterans desperately need

leadership and your dedicated commitment to address these issues. The greatest systems and processes to support veterans will not work unless Congress prioritizes them, gives them adequate resources, and commits to making them work.

In addition to the proposed legislation, MAZON strongly encourages Congress to explore creative programmatic and technological solutions where veterans can access benefits via their mobile device. There are innovative tech startup Bento, which seeks to build a foundation of trust among veterans through the provision of meals and connects individuals with longer-term supports like SNAP and a suite of wrap-around services.¹³ The last Farm Bill directed USDA to identify technologies and processes, in addition to an online pilot program, to increase access to benefits. We encourage USDA to provide a report on the status of those provisions, including how to expand these programs in the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization.

But let's be clear — it should not fall to nonprofit or charitable organizations to take on the work that is rightly the responsibility of government agencies. While the nonprofit sector continues to provide critical emergency assistance for veterans and others, it simply does not have the capacity to fully meet the needs of those who struggle with food insecurity. We cannot foodbank our way to an end of hunger. It is long past time for the federal government to step up and embrace its rightful role to fully meet the needs of those who bravely serve our country.

Picking up on the wisdom from MAZON's founder that I shared earlier, the federal government has the

¹³ U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Legislative Hearing March 16, 2022. Statement for the Record submitted by Bento.

responsibility and authority to make structural change to end veteran food insecurity. Now is the time.

I hope the testimonies today strongly impart to Congress and the Administration the urgency to act. The status quo is nothing more than continued injustice.

We stand ready to assist this subcommittee, your colleagues in Congress, and the Administration as you develop meaningful solutions to these entrenched problems that have not received the attention they deserve.

Thank you for your time today and I look forward to any questions you might have.

U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

"Reviewing the Availability of Resources to Address Veteran Hunger"

Testimony of Josh Protas
Vice President of Public Policy
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

January 9, 2020

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Josh Protas, and I am proud to serve as Vice President of Public Policy for MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national social benefit corporation working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the U.S. and Israel. Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst without judgement or precondition. In *Deuteronomy 15: 7-8*, we are commanded: "If there is among you a poor person, one of your kin, in any of your towns within your land which God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against them, but you shall open your hand to them, and lend them sufficient for their needs, whatever they may be." Founded in 1985, MAZON identifies emerging and persistent hunger needs and works to promote policies to address these needs. This work is informed by longstanding partnerships with hundreds of food banks, pantries, and other anti-hunger direct service agencies as well as more recent relationships with direct service providers and advocates for veterans, military families, Tribal nations, rural communities, college students, and seniors.

Our Board of Directors has made hunger among veterans and military families a core priority for our education and advocacy efforts. We hold a strong interest in the development of effective and compassionate federal food and nutrition policies for veterans and military families. This is not MAZON's first time appearing before Congress on this topic. Four years ago, Abby Leibman, MAZON's President and CEO, spoke as a

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witness before the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition to discuss military and veteran hunger. In 2015, MAZON sponsored the first ever Congressional briefing on the issue of veteran food insecurity, and in January 2018, MAZON coordinated and moderated a Congressional briefing about "Veterans in the Farm Bill." Each of these occasions proved to be significant in shining a more prominent spotlight on these long-ignored issues and resulted in positive steps by federal agencies to take a more active role in collecting data about and addressing veteran food insecurity.

While there has been some progress in addressing veteran food insecurity in America made by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) since 2015, that progress has been extremely modest compared to the severity of the problem. If Congress and federal agencies do not take timely and concerted efforts to prioritize this critical issue, it will only get worse and become more difficult to resolve. This is in part due to the harmful impact of administrative changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) promulgated by the current Administration, which are condoned and even celebrated by some Members of Congress.

There are tens of thousands of veterans struggling to adjust and survive following the transition from military service. Some have recently returned from combat, while others are elderly and facing challenges they thought they had long overcome. Far too often, this struggle leads to despair because there is either an actual, or *perceived*, lack of support; and available support is tinged with stigma or shame, involves an overly complicated application process, or veterans simply do not know that help exists or how to access it. The result for those of limited financial means is often a downward spiral that triggers despair, hopelessness, and tragically can lead to self-harm or even suicide. In fact, recent findings from the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests ways to address the troubling correlation between economic hardship and "deaths of despair." The study found a significant reduction in non-drug suicides among adults with high school education or less due to simple policy interventions that improved their economic well-being: an increase in the minimum wage and the earned income tax credit.¹ As part of the efforts to address the recent suicide epidemic by veterans and military service members, policy makers must recognize the vital importance of federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP in helping to meet their basic needs. It is clear that Members of Congress should support policy proposals that expand access and participation in SNAP in an effort to strengthen the program, not weaken it. Failing to make improvements to SNAP, as well as failing to ensure that veterans are aware of and connected to the program, ignores a valuable and effective tool in the campaign to end veteran suicide.

The scope of food insecurity among veterans is complex, and we simply need more data to be able to respond effectively to the needs of America's food insecure veterans. What we do know is that SNAP helps about 1.3 million low-income veterans, based on American Community Survey data, and that about 7 percent of veterans live in households that receive SNAP. Florida has the largest number of veterans participating in SNAP (116,000), followed by Texas (97,000), California (94,000), Pennsylvania

¹ Dow, WH; Godoy, A; Lowenstein, CA; Reich, M. "Can Economic Policies Reduce Deaths of Despair?" *The National Bureau of Economic Research*. April 2019. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25787>.

(63,000), and New York (59,000).² Several years ago, Blue Star Families helpfully added questions about food insecurity to its Annual Military Lifestyle Survey. However, we should not have to rely solely on this survey—the federal government should routinely gather comprehensive national data to better inform proactive and robust policy responses to this unacceptable—yet solvable—problem.

Data about veteran SNAP participation only tell part of the story. Appallingly, we do not know how many veterans are struggling with hunger, without the assistance of SNAP.

A recent issue brief by Impaq International notes that among food insecure veterans, less than one-third were in households receiving SNAP, and among veterans in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, only about 4 in 10 were in SNAP-recipient households.³ These findings should be deeply troubling to this Subcommittee—this means that the majority of veterans who experience food insecurity do not get the help they need and to which they are entitled. These veterans struggle needlessly, and we fail them as a country when we leave SNAP benefits that they desperately need on the table. If we take the figure of 1.3 million veterans who participate in SNAP and then project—based on the findings by Impaq International—how many more should be receiving SNAP benefits, an estimated 4.3 million veterans experience food insecurity but do not receive SNAP. Nearly 4.3 million veterans who could have assistance available to them are instead are struggling in vain for unacceptable reasons. Connecting these food insecure veterans with SNAP would support better physical and mental health outcomes, employment and economic security, and overall well-being. It would also realize significant long-term health care savings by preventively addressing costly diet-related chronic health conditions. This simple but impactful action should be a top priority for the VA, USDA, and Congress.

Furthermore, we are deeply concerned about special populations of veterans that face heightened rates of food insecurity:

- In a study of **post-9/11 veterans** at the Minneapolis VA Healthcare System, over one in four veterans (roughly 27%) reported problems with food security—about twice the rate of the general population.⁴

² “Number of Veterans Living in Households Where Someone Participates in SNAP (2016-2018).” December 20, 2019. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* updated data from 2018 report and analysis of data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-almost-14-million-low-income-veterans-including-thousands-in>.

³ Pooler, P; Srinivasan, M; Mian, P; Miller, Z. “Veterans and Food Insecurity.” *Impaq International*. November 2018. <https://www.impaqint.com/work/issue-briefs/veterans-and-food-insecurity>.

⁴ Widome, R; Jensen, A; Bangerter, A; Fu, S. “Food Insecurity Among Veterans of the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” *Public Health Nutrition*, 18(5), p. 844-849. May 2014. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/food-insecurity-among-veterans-of-the-us-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/F03B64DD63287F2BE5F2067F3E5AC5FB>.

- Recent academic research has noted that more than one in four **women veterans** struggle with hunger and that this prevalence of food insecurity is associated with delayed access to health care and worse health outcomes.^{5,6}
- A recent study about “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University,” which is part of a growing body of research about food insecurity among college students, found that an alarming 67% of **student veterans** reported being food insecure. While this represents a small sample size from a single college campus, it illustrates the need for additional data about the concerning level of need among student veterans.⁷
- Rural and remote areas also experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity than urban and suburban regions, and **Native American and rural veteran populations** face greater barriers to accessing many critical supports and services including employment, healthcare, transportation, and nutritious food. Furthermore, American Indian and Alaska Native veterans serve in the Armed Forces at higher rates per capita than any other group and this population experiences food insecurity at rates higher than any other demographic group in the U.S. Though there has not been specific data collected about food insecurity rates for Native American or Alaska Native veterans, it is clear that there is a high level of need that exists and is not being adequately addressed.
- Recent research indicates that **low-income, working-age veterans raising children** have more than twice the odds for very low food security compared to non-veterans.⁸

Food insecurity and SNAP participation rates among veterans are clearly tied to issues of unemployment and underemployment for many veterans. While veteran unemployment rates have declined in recent years, underemployment affects more veteran job seekers than non-veteran job seekers. A recent report found that nearly one-third of veteran job seekers are underemployed—a rate 15.6% higher than non-veteran job seekers.⁹ Current SNAP work requirements do not increase employment outcomes, nor do they reduce poverty or food insecurity. USDA’s rule change that would limit those who could be exempted from existing work requirements, particularly individuals who are underemployed or have difficulty maintaining regular schedules with sufficient hours, would move us further in the wrong direction. Taking food away from people makes it more difficult for them to find and sustain meaningful work. Restrictive and arbitrary SNAP work requirements only act as a barrier

⁵ Nerain, K; Bean-Mayberry, B; Washington, DL; Canelo, IA; Darling, JE; Yano, EM. “Access to Care and Health Outcomes Among Women Veterans Using Veterans Administration Health Care: Association With Food Insufficiency.” *Women’s Health Issues*, 28(3). February 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29475630>.

⁶ Petersen, H. “Our Veterans Shouldn’t Go Hungry.” *U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Vantage Point Blog*. December 4, 2019. <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/69018/veterans-shouldnt-go-hungry/>.

⁷ Saltsman, A; Fowler, M; Dogali, M; Johnston, G; Wetherell, O. “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University.” *Urban Action Institute of Worcester State University and WSU’s Department of Urban Studies CityLab*. March 2019. <https://www.worcester.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=13534>.

⁸ Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. “Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011-2014.” Poster presentation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

⁹ Barrera, Cathy & Phillip Carter. “Challenges on the Homefront: Underemployment Hits Veterans Hard.” *Call of Duty Endowment & ZipRecruiter*. November 2017. https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf.

to accessing the program, exacerbating the problem of food insecurity for veterans and others who struggle instead of helping to solve it.

SNAP is the cornerstone of our nation's nutrition safety net—it helps approximately 36 million low-income Americans by providing a modest allowance to help people pay for food. While the main goal of SNAP is to provide nutrition assistance, there is a ripple effect in communities that supports the federal, state, and local economies—every \$1 spent in SNAP benefits generates \$1.70 in economic activity.¹⁰

SNAP also supports and encourages work, with a carefully designed benefit formula that contains an important work incentive—for most SNAP households, the program provides income support as they earn more and work toward self-sufficiency.

Another important facet of SNAP is that it supports healthy eating. For all Americans, research has made it clear that adequate nutritious food is a vital prerequisite for good health and for reaching one's full potential in life. For those with medical challenges, that connection is even more crucial. The billions of dollars invested in health care for veterans cannot, and must not, overlook the relationship between food security and health. Modest investments in nutrition support could mean the difference between emotional and physical well-being and poverty and despair for countless veterans.

While SNAP is one of the most successful and efficient federal assistance programs, veterans often face unique barriers to accessing the program. For a veteran trying to find out about and access SNAP, the process can often be difficult and confusing. While SNAP guidelines are set at the federal level, each state designs its own application process—the rules are complicated, they vary from state to state, and the application can be lengthy, often requiring recertification. This obviously makes for a complex landscape for an applicant.

We must work together to ensure that struggling veterans and those who serve them: (1) know that SNAP exists, (2) know they might be eligible for SNAP, (3) know where to apply for SNAP, and (4) know how to apply for SNAP. No program can work effectively if it is too difficult to access, if potential recipients are unaware that it exists, and if it comes with restrictions that unintentionally leave out vulnerable populations like veterans, among others.

In the past year, we have seen unprecedented administrative attacks that would restrict and cut SNAP for millions of Americans, including veterans. There is no more insidious rule than that which proscribes harsh and arbitrary work requirements for childless unemployed and underemployed adults age 18-49 (otherwise known as "Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents," or ABAWDs). On February 1, 2019, the Trump Administration posted a notice for proposed rulemaking that, by USDA's own estimate, would result in nearly 688,000 people losing access to SNAP. MAZON submitted

¹⁰ "Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. June 25, 2019. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

comments to USDA expressing deep concern that this rule change would severely impact populations like veterans, who often face unique challenges and may require more than 3 months to secure employment that enables them to be self-sufficient. On November 12, 2019, my organization participated in a meeting with the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) to further explain our deep concerns, then on December 4, 2019, USDA seemed to dismiss our formal comments and tens of thousands of others as they issued a Final Rule.

In order to understand the misguidedness of this administrative change, it is important to note that most SNAP recipients who are able to work do, in fact, actually work. Under current law, childless adults ages 18 to 49 are restricted to only 90 days of SNAP benefits in three years unless they can prove they are working or participating in an employment and training program for 80 hours per month. States currently have flexibility to request waivers from this harsh and arbitrary time limit for communities that face high unemployment or insufficient job opportunities.

It is clear that a significant number of those who are subject to this rule are veterans. This rule is not nuanced, it is not flexible, it is not a reflection of the realities of struggling Americans in general, and it clearly does not recognize the realities of veterans in that age bracket. These are men and women who often endure many transitions before they secure long-term employment. They are among our nation's underemployed, picking up work when and where they can. MAZON continues to urge USDA to withdraw the rule, and we are committed to pursuing all available advocacy strategies to ensure that this draconian measure is overturned. If the goal of USDA and the current administration is to move able-bodied recipients of SNAP toward self-sufficiency and into employment, there are clearly more effective actions—including targeted investments in employment and training programs that are sorely lacking in most communities—to prioritize instead of the current ideologically-driven approach.

Furthermore, we have proof that this type of policy increases hunger and hardship.

The state of Maine offers a cautionary tale. In 2015, then-Governor LePage chose not to seek a state waiver for SNAP ABAWD requirements, even though his state was eligible for the waiver due to limited job opportunities throughout the state. The devastating impacts of this decision rippled across Maine, with increased demand on the charitable emergency food network, which was already overburdened and straining to keep up with the need. Mainers struggled to find work, in many cases settling for low-wage jobs with limited or no benefits. Thousands of individuals were forced to make painful trade-offs—having to decide whether to pay for food or medicine.

MAZON's partners in the state reported on the widespread food insecurity that persisted and the harmful impact on Mainers in need, including an estimated 2,800 veterans in Maine who were affected by the newly imposed SNAP time limits. Preble Street—our local partner that provides barrier-free services to empower people experiencing homelessness, hunger, and poverty—has submitted a packet of materials to be included in the official record for today's hearing, documenting increased food insecurity among Mainers, including veterans, due to this situation. These materials include personal testimonies from several veterans who were directly impacted by the SNAP policy changes.

I would like to briefly tell you about one of these veterans, Tim Keefe. I spoke with Tim last week and he agreed to allow me to share about his very painful experience since he is not here to do so himself. I urge this Subcommittee to hold another hearing on this topic to be able to hear directly from veterans like Tim who have lived experience struggling with food insecurity—it is critical to hear the voices of those personally impacted by this issue.

Tim is a Navy veteran living in Maine. After being injured at work and completing all measures included in the worker's compensation process, Tim found himself unable to return to work and fell on hard times. With no income, Tim applied for SNAP so that he could buy food. Though the Department of Labor determined that Tim was medically unable to work, he was told that this was not an acceptable verification of disability status for SNAP. Because of the SNAP policy change made by the state of Maine to no longer waive the time limit for "able-bodied adults without dependents," Tim lost his SNAP benefits after three months. The question he repeatedly asked—to officials at the state SNAP office, to officials at the Social Security office where he inquired about the appeal process for disability claims, and to others in the bureaucratic maze he was forced into as he sought assistance—was, "What do I eat between now and then?"

Nobody had an answer for Tim, and he went through a very difficult and painful period. Without SNAP, Tim had no assistance, and he became homeless. Tim endured the harsh weather in rural Maine, living in a tent until he was found and then moving again and again. He resorted to scrounging for food and even catching squirrels to eat to get by. Tim shared in his testimony before the Maine state legislature calling for an exemption for veterans from SNAP work requirements, "There were many times, more than I'd like to try and count, when I would go two or even three days without food. I had to add seven holes to the only belt I've owned for this year to keep my pants on." Tim turned to the Preble Street Veterans Housing Services that helped him with emergency housing and he was able to get food from the local food bank. But that only went so far. Tim noted that, "the food bank has limited resources. Last month I was able to eat two meals a day for 10 days and one meal a day of rice and beans or a canned vegetable for the remainder of the month. I am truly grateful for that food, but I know that I am still lacking in nutrition and calories."

After Tim turned 50, the SNAP time limit no longer applied to him and he was able once again to get the assistance from SNAP that he so desperately needed. Fortunately, Tim is in a much better place now. But he wants others to know about the unnecessary and heart-breaking ordeal that he went through to help inform policy change so that other struggling individuals—veterans and non-veterans alike—do not fall through the cracks like he did. Nobody should ever be forced to ask, "but what do I eat?" because they can't get the help they need from SNAP.

MAZON has time and again raised concerns about the impact of SNAP time limits for people like Tim who need assistance from SNAP. During the 2018 Farm Bill process, we persistently urged the House and Senate Agriculture Committees to protect and strengthen SNAP for all who need it, including veterans. We testified before the House Agriculture Committee and participated in Farm Bill Listening Sessions, raising concerns about proposals that would make it harder for people to know about, apply

for, and access SNAP. As a result of thoughtful and engaged debate and deliberation, in the end Congress agreed that significant changes to the SNAP ABAWD waivers were unwarranted and unwise. The final Farm Bill—which passed both chambers with historic bipartisan margins of support—instead strengthens ten pilot programs that are currently examining best practices for SNAP employment and training.

We all can agree that those who make great personal sacrifices for our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals for themselves or their families. Therefore, we urge this Committee to consider the following policy recommendations:

1. Protect and Improve SNAP

USDA must withdraw its three harmful administrative proposals that would strip SNAP benefits for millions of Americans. Congress must continue to reject these changes to SNAP that would severely hurt veterans, among others. The policies are misguided and ill-informed, and we simply do not know enough about how populations like veterans will be impacted. It is entirely inappropriate for USDA to move forward with administrative changes to SNAP without making any effort to understand how this will negatively impact the lives of America's veterans.

Furthermore, Congress and USDA should increase the amount of SNAP benefits to better support nutritious food purchases, invest further in the SNAP Employment and Training Program to build on successful models, with targeted Veterans E&T initiatives, and support the Veteran Farmers Market Nutrition Program initiative to incentivize purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers markets.

2. Connect Veterans to SNAP

In response to MAZON's 2015 Congressional briefing about veteran food insecurity, the VA initiated the Ensuring Veteran Food Security Working Group, piloting and later implementing across the VA network a formal process to identify veterans who are food insecure. While this represented an important initial step, we are concerned that these actions do not go far enough and that more oversight is needed.

The VA should adopt the validated two-question Hunger Vital Signs screening tool, which is used by groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics, in order to more accurately identify all veterans who are at risk of food insecurity. The current screening tool of a single question only identifies veterans at risk of very-low food security, which is not sufficient. The results of the VA food insecurity screenings indicate very low rates of food insecurity and do not track with academic research and other data, including from Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey. Too many struggling veterans fall through the cracks with the current screening protocol and the VA must adopt a more comprehensive and validated screening method. The VA must also require a more comprehensive intervention and response for veterans who screen positive for food insecurity, including on-site SNAP eligibility screening and application assistance in addition to a broader nutrition consultation and/or referral to a local food pantry or other local

services. MAZON recommends the initiation and funding of a VA pilot program to demonstrate and evaluate such a SNAP application assistance program.

There has been evidence of confusion and misinformation about veteran eligibility for SNAP, particularly regarding the consideration of VA disability ratings and the exemption from SNAP time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents. To provide clarification and help ensure that fewer veterans experience food insecurity, USDA should prepare and distribute guidance specific about veterans and SNAP eligibility to USDA regional offices, state SNAP agencies, VA centers, veteran service organizations, and community partners.

3. Integrate Nutrition Assistance Information into Transition Materials and Training

The transition to civilian life poses significant challenges for many veterans, and many do not feel that they have adequate preparation and resources to help them succeed. Key findings from a recent Pew Research Center survey of veterans highlighted difficulties experienced by many veterans during the transition to civilian life—only about half of veterans say the military prepared them well for their transition to civilian life; post-9/11 veterans were more than twice as likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say that readjusting to civilian life was difficult; and about one third of veterans say they had trouble paying the bills after leaving the military, yet only 12% indicated that they received food assistance from the government. Furthermore, about 40% of veterans say that the government has not given them enough help.¹¹

As part of its efforts to meet the needs of veterans who are recently transitioning, underemployed, or vulnerable, the VA must proactively address the issue of veteran food insecurity. The VA should integrate information about federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP as part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) materials and trainings; include information about federal assistance programs like SNAP as part of the VA's new "Solid Start" suicide prevention program; and work with community partners and USDA to create and actively distribute veteran-specific resources about food insecurity and SNAP. All relevant VA staff must be trained on issues of food insecurity, so that they know and understand SNAP and its rules.

4. Listen to Veterans

The stigma associated with receiving SNAP poses an intangible yet formidable barrier that is especially pronounced for the veteran population. Negative public perceptions of SNAP have been heightened in recent years as a result of rhetoric associated with regulatory changes proposed by the Trump administration designed to restrict access to SNAP. This creates a chilling effect and adds to the stigma that makes veterans and other individuals in need reluctant to seek help and apply for SNAP.

¹¹ Parker, K; Igielnik, R; Barroso, A; Cilluffo, A. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation." *Pew Research Center*. September 10, 2019. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

This Subcommittee, or the full House Veterans' Affairs Committee, should hold a follow-up hearing on the issue of veteran food insecurity to include the perspective of individual veterans who have real lived experience with this issue, researchers who have examined food insecurity within the veteran and general populations, and additional veteran service organizations to explore models for community partnerships around outreach and SNAP enrollment.

We also urge USDA and the VA to collaborate with veteran service organizations and anti-hunger organizations to develop a strategic outreach plan for veterans who do not receive care or services through the VA, including peer-to-peer outreach. Such efforts ideally could take place within the context of a federal interagency task force focused on veteran food insecurity, modeled on the successful example of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness that has made great strides toward the goal of ending veteran homelessness in the U.S. Exploration of such an interagency approach to addressing veteran food insecurity would be a worthy next step for this Subcommittee, in collaboration with the House Committee on Agriculture's Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations.

5. Explore Related Issues

Lastly, I implore Congress—especially members of this Subcommittee who also serve on the House Armed Services Committee (Reps. Bergman, Brindisi, Banks, and Luria)—to address the separate but related issue of food insecurity among currently serving military families. This is another long-neglected issue of national security, military readiness, retention, and recruitment, and we at MAZON have proposed easy, common-sense policies for Congress to enact as soon as possible.

In closing, I would like to again thank Chairman Levin and Ranking Member Bilirakus for inviting me to share MAZON's perspective on this critically important issue. The failure to address veteran food insecurity undercuts our next generation of Americans who want to serve in the Armed Forces and presents a challenge to our national security. Children from families where a parent served in the military are much more likely to enlist for military service than counterparts from civilian households. But low-income, working age veterans raising children have much higher odds of experiencing very low food security compared to non-veterans.¹² As we are reminded by Mission: Readiness, an organization of over 750 retired admirals, generals, and other top military leaders, obesity—which is directly related to food insecurity and poor nutrition—limits the pool of eligible recruits for military service and negatively affects our national security.¹³ Failing to address the crisis of food insecurity and obesity for our nation's children—especially the children in military and veteran households who are more likely to serve in the military—threatens our national security.

¹² Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. "Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011-2014." Poster presentation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

¹³ Maxey, H; Bishop-Josef, S; Goodman, B. "Unhealthy and Unprepared." *Council for a Strong America*. October 2018. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/737-unhealthy-and-unprepared>.

While food pantries across the country provide critical food assistance to veterans and others in need, they were only conceived as a temporary and emergency response to the widespread problem. Veteran food insecurity will not be solved by food pantries that are already struggling to keep up with current demands and cannot make up for the gaps in our safety net programs, which continue to be at risk of harmful changes and cuts.

Allowing veterans who have made great personal sacrifices in service to our nation to struggle with hunger is shameful, insulting, unnecessary, and costly. Indeed, it is unconscionable. If our federal agencies and Congress do not take more proactive steps to identify veterans who may experience food insecurity and to connect them with available benefits and resources, we do these veterans and our nation as a whole a grave disservice.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.