

U.S. House Committee on Rules

“Rules Committee Roundtable Examining the Hunger Crisis Among Veterans and  
Military Families”

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Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Rules, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, and thank you for examining this critically important issue: food insecurity among veterans and military families.

My name is Abby J. Leibman, and I am proud to serve as President and CEO of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national Jewish organization 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 15:7-11, 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.” From our founding in 1985, MAZON continues to identify emerging and persistent hunger needs, then seeks to explore, understand, and develop solutions to these problems. Today, our policy priorities include addressing food insecurity among military families, veterans, Native Americans, single mothers, LGBTQ older adults, and the people of Puerto Rico and the territories.

Nearly a decade ago, MAZON made ending hunger among veterans and military families a focus of our work as my colleagues and I became aware of an alarming number of individuals from these populations who were struggling with food insecurity. We were shocked to learn that food pantries operate on or near almost every military base in the country. We soon realized that a failure to acknowledge and address the underlying issues — by the charitable food sector, the media, and public officials — perpetuated the problem. MAZON quickly turned to action, launching a campaign to urge Congress to enact policy solutions to end this crisis.

Little noticed and deliberately obfuscated, these persistent problems had readily available solutions, but there is a lack of political will to realize those solutions.

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As Chairman McGovern often says: “We can end hunger in this country. It is merely a matter of political will.” This is particularly true when it comes to addressing hunger among veterans and military families.

This is not the first time that MAZON has weighed in with Congress nor the executive branch on this topic. We have written bills that were introduced in both chambers of Congress, testified before multiple congressional committees, and sought administrative fixes with the White House, Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Defense (DoD), and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We hosted summits to educate and empower partners from the anti-hunger field as well as those working with, representing, and serving veterans and military families.

Over the past nine years, we have seen greater awareness of hunger among these families, more colleagues willing to work toward solutions, and a recognition by some policymakers that they can make a difference here. However, the problem not only persists, but it has actually worsened as the number of Americans experiencing hunger — including those who served our country and those who are still serving — skyrocketed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, lack of data remains a constant barrier to advancing MAZON’s policy solutions on this issue. We often hear pushback from those resistant to addressing this issue along the lines of: “If veterans and military families are facing food insecurity, why am I not hearing about it?” The truth is that veterans and servicemembers confronting food insecurity typically do not call attention to their situation due to shame, stigma, and fear of retribution.

In April, MAZON released a report entitled “Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.”<sup>1</sup> I implore every member of this committee to read our report, if you have not already done so. When you do, you will learn stories like that of Gabriel, a U.S. Marine whose family is stationed in southern California, who asks: “I’m doing all I can and serving my country, and I have to worry about how I’m going to buy food? I am risking my life to protect the Constitution of the United States, so shouldn’t the government make sure I can properly feed my family?”

Or Erika, a former military spouse, whose family was stationed in Washington state, who recounted: “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.”

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<sup>1</sup> Leibman, A; Protas, J. “Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.” MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger. April 2021. <https://mazon.org/wp-content/uploads/MAZON-Military-Hunger-Report-April-2021.pdf>.

Fixing this confusing and unconscionable barrier that Erika mentions is one of the simplest solutions that would address military hunger: ensuring that a servicemember's Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) does not count as income in determining eligibility for federal nutrition safety net programs.

Currently, a servicemember's BAH counts as income in determining eligibility for SNAP, which prevents many struggling military families from accessing this critically important — and often life-saving — federal benefit. By contrast, neither federal housing subsidies for civilians nor the value of in-kind housing on base are treated as income for determining SNAP eligibility. The IRS does not treat BAH as income. Similarly, the BAH is not calculated as a part of a servicemember's Adjusted Gross Income, nor is it treated as income for determining eligibility for most federal assistance programs like free and reduced-price school meals.

Simply put, if a servicemember's BAH is not considered as income for tax purposes, it should not be considered income for SNAP purposes. MAZON has worked to rectify this error for nearly a decade — advocating for both administrative action and statutory change. Unfortunately, this has not yet come to fruition, despite bipartisan and bicameral support.

As recently as 2018, we urged Congress to rectify this error in that year's Farm Bill, but we were rebuffed, and the BAH continues to be counted as income for the purposes of qualifying for SNAP. Following this setback, MAZON developed a new proposal to address military hunger through the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) process. The past two NDAA bills passed by the House included provisions to establish a new allowance program for certain servicemembers called the "Military Family Basic Needs Allowance." The allowance aims to help low-ranking and junior-enlisted servicemembers with multiple dependents (i.e. families) — those who are quietly trying to survive with help from food pantries and other service providers, without calling attention to their situation.

MAZON is leading a national advocacy campaign with key partners from the military community — including the National Military Family Association (NMFA) and the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) to secure passage of the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance. We are confident that this Allowance would provide strategic and meaningful support to military families facing food insecurity, while also accounting for the challenges and expenses associated with military service.

Given that servicemembers of color are overrepresented among low-ranking and junior-enlisted ranks (and underrepresented among officers and military leadership), we believe this policy is also an important step toward correcting longstanding injustice and inequity by providing assistance to struggling military families who are disproportionately people of color.

Though this provision was included in the FY20 and FY21 House NDAA bills, the provision did not make it into the final NDAA, likely due to pushback in the Senate and DoD leadership in the last Administration. With bipartisan bills introduced in the House and Senate again this year, we are urging Congress to prioritize the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance and for the Biden Administration to support this provision in the FY22 NDAA.

It is important to note that military families face unique financial challenges and that the face of America's military has changed. In recent decades, the demographic makeup of the military's enlisted personnel has shifted from predominantly single, 18-year-old men to much more diverse troops — including many who support families. Military compensation policy has not adequately kept pace with the changing needs or rising cost of living, and today's military families face high spousal unemployment rates, unexpected costs related to frequent relocation, and lack of access to affordable childcare. Therefore, it is long past time for Congress to re-examine military pay levels, acknowledging that the composition and needs of America's military have changed significantly over time.

With regard to veterans, we at MAZON have come to understand a distinct — yet similar, and certainly related — set of challenges and solutions.

Tens of thousands of veterans struggle to adjust to and survive civilian life following the transition from military service. Some have recently returned from combat, while others are older and face challenges they thought they had long overcome. While limited data is available about veterans facing food insecurity, we know that:

- 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.<sup>2</sup>
- While risk of food insecurity seems to decline with age, **older veterans** face myriad challenges related to healthcare, housing, and transportation. Studies estimate that about 4.3% of veterans age 65-74 and 2.3% of those 75 and older face food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>
- Native Americans serve in the military 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.<sup>4</sup> Though

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<sup>2</sup> 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>.

<sup>3</sup> 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>.

<sup>4</sup> Jernigan, Valarie Blue Bird et al. "Food Insecurity among American Indians and Alaska Natives: A National Profile using the Current Population Survey-Food Security Supplement." *Journal of hunger & environmental nutrition* vol. 12,1 (2017): 1-10. doi:10.1080/19320248.2016.1227750. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5422031>.

there has not been specific data collected about food insecurity rates for **Native American veterans**, it is clear that there is a high level of need that exists and is not being adequately addressed.

- Over one in four **post-9/11 veterans** (roughly 27%) report problems with food security — about twice the rate of the general population.<sup>5</sup>

We know that about 1.4 million veterans participate in SNAP,<sup>6</sup> but this only tells part of the story — research shows that among food insecure veterans, less than one-third live in households that participate in SNAP, and among veterans living in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, only about 4 in 10 received SNAP benefits.<sup>7</sup>

While SNAP is one of the most successful and efficient federal assistance programs, veterans often face barriers to accessing the program. For a veteran trying to learn about or access SNAP, the process can often be difficult and confusing. Though 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 process can be lengthy, often requiring recertification. This obviously makes for a complex landscape for an applicant.

In recent years, there have been several efforts to increase SNAP work requirements for certain program recipients, referred to as “Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents” or ABAWDs. Under current law, ABAWDs ages 18-49 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. While the Families First Coronavirus Response Act partially waived these work requirements for the duration of the national emergency,<sup>8</sup> MAZON remains concerned about the impact on America’s veterans, and we will continue to urge policymakers to assess the distinct needs of veterans when considering the impact of any further changes.

For decades, we have known that veterans are among our nation’s most chronically unemployed and underemployed — and they are certainly among

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<sup>5</sup> 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/foodinsecurity-among-veterans-of-the-us-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/F03B64DD63287F2BE5F2067F3E5AC5FB>.

<sup>6</sup> “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-includingthousands-in>.

<sup>7</sup> 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>.

<sup>8</sup> “New Rule on SNAP Work Requirements.” *National Conference of State Legislatures*. March 2020. <https://www.ncsl.org/ncsl-in-dc/standing-committees/health-and-human-services/proposed-rule-by-usda-fns-and-snap.aspx>.

the millions of Americans who lost work during the COVID-19 crisis. Veterans often cope with physical and mental health injuries that are not always recognized by either government agencies or potential employers, which cause them to struggle to find and maintain employment. Harsher work requirements for SNAP would only strip them of assistance — not help them find nor sustain meaningful work.

We also know that 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 heightened in recent years as a result of harmful rhetoric, particularly from the last Administration, which advanced policies designed to restrict access to SNAP. Unfortunately, this created a chilling effect that added to existing stigma that makes veterans and others reluctant to seek help and apply for SNAP.

While there is much work required to combat these persistent challenges, we have made significant progress in addressing food insecurity among America's veterans. Following 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 were concerned that it was only a single question, and that it was not sufficient in portraying the scope of the problem. The VA recently adopted the validated two-question Hunger Vital Signs screening tool, which is used by groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics — we believe this will more accurately identify veterans who are at risk of food insecurity.<sup>9</sup> MAZON welcomes the opportunity to work with the VA to employ 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 local food pantry or other services.

We are also pleased to learn that USDA and VA are working together, after years of MAZON's insistence, to develop a two-page "Quick Start Guide" about federal nutrition programs that will be included in a veteran welcome kit. We look forward to seeing the final document and collaborating with federal agencies to ensure that veterans and those who serve veterans are well aware of how programs like SNAP work, who is eligible, and how to access the benefits. We also encourage VA officials to utilize MAZON's recent course, created in partnership with the PsychArmor Institute entitled "Food Insecurity: Bringing Solutions to the Table," which was designed to help identify and address the needs of veterans. Together, we can employ robust education and outreach mechanisms to reach all those within and beyond the VA system.

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<sup>9</sup> Cohen, Alicia J et al. "Food Insecurity Among Veterans: Resources to Screen and Intervene." *Federal practitioner : for the health care professionals of the VA, DoD, and PHS* vol. 37,1 (2020): 16-23, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7010340>.

We know that for both current servicemembers and veterans alike, struggling with food insecurity can often lead to despair because there is either an actual or perceived lack of support, and the assistance that is available is often tinged with stigma or shame, involves an overly complicated application process, and/or lacks clear information about the programs and who is eligible. As a result, this can lead to a downward spiral that triggers despair, hopelessness, and sometimes, tragically, self-harm and suicide. In fact, a recent study led by researchers from USDA's Economic Research Service found a clear linkage between food insecurity and mental health concerns (anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation), which correlated to a service member's intention to leave the military.<sup>10</sup>

Addressing food insecurity among veterans and currently-serving military families must be treated as a matter of troop readiness, and thus a matter of national security. Furthermore, tackling these problems will support better nutrition and improved health outcomes, reducing the likelihood of chronic diet-related health conditions. Positive health outcomes for children in military families — who are more likely to serve in the Armed Forces than children in non-military families — means that more future enlistees will be physically fit to serve.

We are encouraged by momentum in the last few months as bipartisan cosponsors continue to add their names to the Military Hunger Prevention Act and as the First Lady's Joining Forces initiative recently launched with an acknowledgment of military food insecurity. We hope the Biden Administration will include support for this provision in their forthcoming budget, but in the meantime, Congress must act to right this egregious wrong.

In conclusion, MAZON recommends that Members of Congress:

- 1. Support Chairman McGovern's call for a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Hunger.**

As the Biden Administration continues to put forth policies to “build back better,” we support the call for a government-wide, public conference to convene experts in food, health, nutrition, and economic security to develop a comprehensive plan to end hunger once and for all in this country. MAZON would appreciate the opportunity to work with Chairman McGovern and government agencies to elevate issues related to hunger among veterans and military families as part of this conference.

- 2. Support the bipartisan Military Hunger Prevention Act.**

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew R Beymer, Joanna J Reagan, Matthew P Rabbitt, Abby E Webster, Eren Y Watkins, Association between Food Insecurity, Mental Health, and Intentions to Leave the US Army in a Cross-Sectional Sample of US Soldiers, *The Journal of Nutrition*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/in/nxab089>.

The Military Hunger Prevention Act (H.R. 2339, S. 1488) would establish a “Military Family Basic Needs Allowance” to ensure that all currently-serving military families have enough food to survive and thrive. Leadership of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees must prioritize this provision in the FY22 NDAA, and all Members of Congress should encourage the Biden Administration to support this policy.

**3. Encourage USDA to ensure that a servicemember’s BAH does not count as income in determining eligibility for federal nutrition safety net programs.**

President Biden and USDA Secretary Vilsack can and must take executive action to exclude the BAH as income for all federal nutrition programs — most importantly SNAP. This would ensure that military families are not prevented from qualifying for assistance. Now more than ever, struggling military families must have access to these programs so they do not have to turn in desperation to food pantries simply because they cannot get the government assistance they need and deserve.

**4. Re-examine military pay levels.**

Policymakers must consider raising the base pay rates for junior-enlisted servicemembers to acknowledge that the composition of our military has changed significantly in recent decades and that personnel with families face unique financial challenges.

**5. Protect and improve SNAP.**

Congress must continue to reject any proposals that would strip SNAP benefits for anyone in need. Misguided policies that aim to impose harsher restrictions for ABAWDs would severely hurt veterans, among others. Strengthening SNAP is the best way to fully and effectively meet critical needs, help lift people out of challenging circumstances, and repair the gaps that have allowed far too many people to fall through the cracks. Policymakers must also increase SNAP benefits and revise the calculations for federal poverty guidelines in ways that are consistent with current realities.

**6. Connect more veterans to SNAP**

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. We are pleased to learn that USDA and VA are coordinating to include a “Quick Start Guide” about federal nutrition programs into the veteran welcome kit — we look forward to

seeing the final resource and would be thrilled to work with the Administration to ensure successful implementation and outreach.

We also urge USDA and VA to collaborate with veteran service organizations and anti-hunger groups to develop a strategic outreach plan for veterans who do not receive care or services through the VA, including peer-to-peer outreach. MAZON looks forward to continuing our work on the VA's Ensuring Veteran Food Security Working Group to train all relevant VA staff on issues of food insecurity so that they know about and understand programs like SNAP, their opportunities and their limits, and the common barriers to assistance for veterans.

**7. Call on the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to provide comprehensive and updated data about food insecurity among veterans and military families.**

Lack of data has been a constant barrier in actualizing our policy solutions to address these problems and oftentimes used as an excuse by policymakers to continue ignoring the problem. Congress should direct GAO to collect and publish data to illustrate the full scope of the issue and include specific data related to populations that we know face barriers to assistance like servicemembers and veteran who are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). This expanded data set will allow Members of Congress, the Administration, and advocates to better understand the needs facing these populations and seek tailored and targeted solutions.

**8. Encourage federal agencies — including DoD, USDA, and the VA — to collaborate and share data and resources about food insecurity among veterans and military families, and to work with advocates to seek solutions.**

Despite strong anecdotal evidence, food insecurity among veterans and military families is not adequately monitored or documented by government agencies, and this has obscured the problem and allowed it to be ignored. The limited data that is available is often too limited in scope, out of date, and difficult to obtain. For instance, DoD's recent 13<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) documented SNAP usage, but they asked the wrong questions — rather than how many servicemembers access SNAP, it is critical to understand how many military families are struggling without this assistance, quietly visiting food pantries on or near military bases.

We must work together to change the narrative around those who struggle with hunger in this country. At MAZON, we prioritize a justice-centered approach of systemic change, and we believe that our leaders in government can play an important role in moving the public's focus away from charities straining to

meet the needs of those who are hungry and towards our commitment to strengthen public assistance programs. It is long past time to reset the public narrative to emphasize how public assistance programs offer meaningful support without judgment and provide pathways to opportunity and success, reflecting the best of who we are as a nation.

Allowing hunger among veterans and military families to persist is shameful, and it should be alarming to Congress, the White House, the Pentagon, the VA, and all of us who benefit from the protection provided by those who selflessly serve in uniform. We must do better to ensure that no one who makes great personal sacrifices in service to our nation struggles with hunger.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.