

National Commission on Hunger

Testimony of
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MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

Oakland, CA
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Distinguished members of the Commission: thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

I am Mia Hubbard, Vice President of Programs at MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national nonprofit organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the US and Israel. Founded in 1985, MAZON partners with food banks and pantries that provide for people who are hungry while at the same time advocating for other ways to end hunger and its causes. In 2013, our Board of Directors identified hunger among military families as a core priority for MAZON's education and advocacy efforts. Through our "Help Our Heroes" initiative, MAZON works with legislators and activists to identify and eliminate the barriers that prevent military and veteran families from accessing vital safety net programs. MAZON has a strong interest in the development of sensible and compassionate food and nutrition policies for military and veterans families. It is on this topic that I would like to speak with you today.

MAZON believes that those who make great personal sacrifices in service to our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals to their families. MAZON is focused on addressing the food security needs of our nation's military and veteran families by working with service members and veterans, members of Congress, the Administration, military service organizations, and our network of hundreds of food banks, food pantries and anti-hunger organizations across the country.

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We first became interested in this issue when our colleagues from the emergency food network shared concerns about the uptick in the number of military families and veterans turning to them for food assistance. Across the country, service members are showing up at food pantries, sometimes in uniform, looking for help to feed their families. While many emergency food providers have responded by developing specific and innovative programs to assist food-insecure military families, these organizations have limited capacity to address this population.

MAZON was very concerned about these anecdotal reports and decided to investigate the issue. We conducted an exhaustive search for accurate data from the Pentagon, the Department of Defense, USDA, Congress and direct service providers. We found that for active duty service members, food insecurity is triggered by low pay among enlistees, high unemployment among troop spouses, larger household sizes, and personal financial challenges. For veterans experiencing hunger, they often find it difficult to transition back to civilian life, or to make ends meet with their low disability pay. The pervasive reliance on food pantries and distribution programs on and near military bases clearly points to a failure in our government safety net programs to meet the need of those who are serving our country. A source at the Pentagon recently found (professed? acknowledged? conceded? admitted? that there are food pantries operating on or near every single naval and marine base in the United States! But there are three important steps that the Commission can recommend to begin to address this growing problem:

Demand more data – Despite strong anecdotal evidence, food insecurity among military families is not adequately documented or monitored by government agencies, and indeed the problem has long been obscured and ignored. Data are often withheld from the public or are excessively difficult to obtain. What data we have been able to secure are often contradictory, out of date or simply incomprehensible.

Remove policy barriers – Federal policies are denying active duty military families the resources they need to help keep them from experiencing food insecurity.

Urge agency collaboration – A growing number of disabled veterans are caught in the middle of bureaucratic delays and federal agency silos, unaware of or unable to access food benefits despite their obvious need.

MISSING DATA

Unfortunately there is very little reliable data regarding food insecurity among military families. USDA's most recent data indicates that 5,000 active duty service members participate in SNAP. However, we believe the scope of the need is significantly larger than this SNAP participation estimate reflects. The USDA figure only counts families that self-report as active duty military and is derived using a methodology that is skewed to underreport the number of military families for multiple reasons. Indeed, according to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, an average of 22,000 active duty service members were estimated to receive SNAP annually between 2009 and 2012. Similar data for WIC isn't even available. So no one really knows the level of demand for these programs.

Accurately documenting and monitoring military participation in government food programs like SNAP is critical, but it isn't enough: We need to better understand the scope and characteristics of the growing problem of food insecurity among military families, identify gaps in federal food program usage, and provide consideration of the unique challenges confronting these vulnerable households. DoD, USDA, and Congress must take a greater interest in understanding this problem. MAZON has sought out additional data by working with colleagues in the US Senate to request a General Accounting Office report to more deeply explore these issues. Having this Commission weigh in on the need for better government data and accountability, including the issuance of a GAO report, will give greater urgency to the call for more government information and monitoring. But even if only one military family is going without adequate and nutritious food, this nation is not meeting its responsibility to those who serve our country.

UNFAIR POLICY BARRIERS

Indeed, any service members struggling to make ends meet should be eligible for federal food assistance programs. However, some lower ranking service members – especially those with children who live off base or in privatized housing – are systematically declared ineligible for SNAP because their housing allowance is counted as income. For these families, the best option available to them is to frequent food pantries on and off military bases.

The Basic Allowance for Housing is excluded as income for the purposes of calculating income taxes and eligibility for some government programs, including WIC. By the same token, we believe that the BAH should be consistently excluded as income for the purposes of determining eligibility for all nutrition assistance programs. The intent of

the BAH is to provide uniformed service members accurate and equitable housing compensation based on the housing costs in the local civilian housing market. The intent was not to put them at a disadvantage or disqualify them from receiving food assistance. A simple policy fix will easily correct this unintended policy flaw and help thousands of military families get the assistance they need. It will also eliminate the disparities between service members who live on- and off-base with regard to program eligibility. MAZON is working with anti-hunger advocates, food banks and champions on Capitol Hill to eliminate this unnecessary and unfair policy barrier, and we urge the Commission to include the elimination of BAH barrier to SNAP in its recommendations.

AGENCY SILOS

Finally I want to speak about veteran hunger, because large portions of the veteran community, who used to get “three squares a day” as soldiers, now do not know where their next meal will come from. It is estimated that over 300,000 elderly veterans are food insecure and confront the same barriers faced by all seniors trying to access benefits – stigma, misinformation about potential eligibility, and a daunting application process. More recent vets face serious challenges, too. According to a 2012 University of Minnesota study of soldiers returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, one in four veterans report being food insecure (27%), and 12% of those vets were classified as having very low food security. That is nearly double the prevalence of food insecurity in the general US population. In addition we know that many veterans return from combat with disabilities that make it more difficult to maintain gainful employment and provide food for themselves and their families. Households with a disabled veteran are nearly twice as likely to be food insecure as households that do not have someone with a disability. Ensuring that all veterans have access to food is critical, and providing such access to disabled veterans is the least this nation owes to its returning and injured soldiers.

Unfortunately, despite good intentions and best efforts, this is a promise that is not always kept. A veteran’s food security is impacted when she is denied disability benefits, because she must make do with less or no income, making difficult choices between shelter, food, medicine, utilities and other vital needs. But a veteran who awaits a disability determination feels this impact a second time because this determination can be critical to obtaining additional benefits through SNAP. As we all know, veterans already face enormous challenges in making claims through the VA’s daunting claims process, where delays and multiple appeals are commonplace. During this waiting period, many veterans are unable, or limited in their ability, to access nutrition assistance benefits despite their obvious need.

For those veterans who do meet disability eligibility criteria, USDA and the VA must do more to help those who are newly eligible as they navigate the application process and seek out the benefits and resources they need to meet their basic needs. Many recent vets may not be aware of their eligibility for SNAP or the more simplified income and resource rules for disabled veterans. USDA could help the VA serve as a conduit for outreach and education about SNAP and help link vets to nutrition assistance. Better coordination between USDA and the VA would go a long way in connecting veterans with consistent nutrition, contributing to better long-term health outcomes and reducing unnecessarily high rates of poverty and homelessness. The two agencies must identify and maximize opportunity to cross-promote nutrition benefits available to disabled and aging veterans and their families, and find new areas for collaboration. Greater interagency cooperation and where possible, program coordination, are smart and cost-effective ways to help ensure that veterans don't come home to hunger, and we ask the Commission to consider including this recommendation in its report.

CONCLUSION

The unfortunate reality of what I have outlined today – of limited data, unfair policy barriers, and bureaucratic silos – comes at a time when the need among military families and veterans has never been greater. The strain of this well hidden problem is beginning to show up beyond the lines forming at emergency food sites across this country: Service members and their families including veterans, retirees and reservists used \$103 million in SNAP benefits at US commissaries in 2013, according to the Defense Commissary Agency. That is triple the amount used before the recession.

Despite these warning signs, military hunger issues have a history of obscurity and policy failures. When media stories about military families on SNAP circulated in the late 1990s, Congress was concerned about the optics of members of our military receiving food stamps. In order to get these families off of SNAP, Congress in 2000 created a parallel program – the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance – that is administered by the Department of Defense with an explicitly stated goal of removing military families from the SNAP rolls. This little-known and poorly administered DoD program has not worked either to get military families off of SNAP or, more importantly, to adequately address the challenges of food insecurity that are faced by some military families. These families deserve more than failed policies and government indifference.

Therefore I strongly urge the Commission to shed much-needed light on military hunger issues by including these sensible recommendations in its final report. Unfortunately, in recent years, too many aspect of the hunger issue have become bitterly partisan, caught up in arguments about deficit reduction and who is truly

deserving of government assistance. But military hunger issues are an area, like many discussed today, where there is an opportunity for bipartisan cooperation, and where Commissioners can find common ground.

The principle of leaving no one behind is deeply embedded in the ethos of the U.S. military. But if we continue to ignore the problem of hunger among service members and veterans and the accompanying policy challenges, we are, in essence, leaving them behind and in the enemy hands of hunger and poverty. As the Commission goes about its difficult deliberations, I urge you not to leave these vulnerable military families behind. Soldiers promise to serve us with honor, and we should be able to promise them the dignity of food security.