

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 18, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

We are writing to express significant alarm over food insecurity and hunger facing numerous servicemembers and their families nationwide, and the compounding effect that the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impacts have had. We believe that as a country we must do more to assist these struggling families, and therefore ask the Department of Defense to outline concrete steps they intend to take to support these families, and ways in which Congress can assist these efforts to reduce food insecurity among our servicemembers and their families.

The problem of food insecurity existed long before the pandemic began, with military families using food pantries and distribution programs on or near every single military base in the United States.¹ A 2019 survey organized by the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) showed the pervasiveness of food insecurity in the military.² Per the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Six Item Food Security Scale, one in eight out of MFAN's survey respondents in 2019 reported experiencing food insecurity.

Moreover, a Blue Star Families 2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey found that seven percent of military family respondents stated that someone in their household had faced food insecurity in the previous year, and nine percent of military family respondents indicated that someone in their household had sought emergency food assistance.³ In addition, Pentagon records show that during the 2018-19 school year, one-third of military children at DoD-run schools in the U.S. were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this crisis for military families. Military spouses already struggled with high levels of unemployment, at 24 percent, prior to the pandemic.⁴ Due to COVID-19, many military families have lost needed second sources of family income, and struggle with working or finding work, while also managing virtual schooling and insufficient child care options. This has had a catastrophic effect on family finances, increasing the risks of food insecurity. The COVID-19 Military Support Initiative Pain Points Poll, organized by Blue Star Families from July 2020, also revealed disturbing findings, with five percent of all

¹ <https://mazon.org/priorities/military-families/>

² Military Family Advisory Network, 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey Results: <https://militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/MFAN2019SurveyResults.pdf>

³ 2018 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report: <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/advocates-push-for-more-help-for-military-families-struggling-with-hunger-1.648721>

respondents unable to afford more than a week's worth of food, and 17 percent of military spouse respondents who reported losing a job or being unable to work as a result of the crisis.⁵

Despite these challenges, we still require our servicemembers and their families to maintain mission readiness, to conduct Permanent Change of Station moves, to train, to deploy, and to execute their duties without fail. They are obligated to honor the commitments they have made by choosing to serve and protect our freedoms. We too have an obligation – to make sure that our military families have what they need to not just survive, but thrive.

We understand that the report examining military food insecurity called for in the Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act is overdue at this point, and that a briefing on the report is expected in the coming months for the House and Senate Armed Services Committee staffs. We request this report be completed expeditiously and that either a briefing be expanded to include all interested Congressional staff, or that a separate briefing on this report be held so that other interested Congressional staff could participate.

In addition, we ask that the Department of Defense assign a single point of contact within the Department to lead this effort. We also ask that the Department provide a plan for addressing food insecurity and hunger for our servicemembers and their families by April 15. Any plan should, at least, address the following:

- recommended inter-agency coordination with USDA and other relevant federal agencies,
- an engagement strategy for partners such as Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger, and National Military Family Association, which have been deeply involved in responding to this issue;
- your assessment of recent proposals such as the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance and the removal of the barrier to federal nutrition assistance programs created by counting the Basic Allowance for Housing as income;
- suggestions to foster a change of culture within the Department to remove the shame and stigma that prevent many who are struggling from seeking help, and
- the costs of failing to take action to respond.

The problem of food insecurity among military families is an issue of mission readiness as well as troop retention and recruitment. We appreciate your attention to this urgent matter and stand ready to help.

Sincerely,



MARK R. WARNER
United States Senator



TAMMY DUCKWORTH
United States Senator

⁵ COVID-19 Military Support Initiative (July 2020). Final Pain Points Poll Data, Part 1: Demographics, Employment, Financial Readiness, and Childcare. Blue Star Families. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PPP-Wks1-10_Wrap-up_Part-1.pdf