

October 12, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

We, the undersigned national organizations that serve and address the needs of our nation's military families, with sizable networks across the country, are united in our commitment to ensure that the individuals serving in our uniformed services have the resources they need to succeed in their mission and take care of the basic needs of their families. Reports of military families who struggle with food insecurity, turning in desperation to food pantries around the country, are shocking and unacceptable. Fortunately, there are several immediate actions your Administration can take that will make a meaningful difference in addressing this long-overlooked problem. We urge you to:

- **Publicly support and urge Congress to prioritize the [full Military Family Basic Needs Allowance provision](#) in the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (FY22 NDAA).** We were encouraged when, as a candidate, you acknowledged the sad reality of food insecurity among military families and [expressed support](#) for the concept of a basic needs allowance to provide assistance to low-income military families who struggle to make ends meet. Now you can play a leadership role in establishing a Military Family Basic Needs Allowance that excludes the Basic Allowance for Housing as counted income by highlighting your support for this provision and urging its inclusion in the FY22 NDAA.
- **Take administrative action to rectify anomalies in statutes governing SNAP and other federal programs that have prevented struggling, low-income military families from qualifying for needed assistance.** Eligibility guidelines for federal assistance programs for military households are confusing and inconsistent. The treatment of the Basic Allowance for Housing as income for *some* federal programs, including SNAP, WIC, and the National School Lunch Program has created unintended barriers that prevent thousands of junior enlisted military families from receiving vital nutrition benefits. Administrative actions directed under your leadership could remove these unintended barriers, establish helpful consistencies for military personnel across federal programs, and remove the inequities that have negatively impacted military families. In addition, we urge you to support legislative proposals to remove barriers to federal nutrition benefits for military families and require a stepped-up role for the Department of Defense in addressing the multiple and complex facets of military food insecurity, including coordinating screenings and benefit enrollment assistance, raising awareness and reducing stigma, and streamlining program participation and other

innovative solutions to address systemic issues and root causes of military food insecurity.

- **Prioritize a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Hunger that includes prominent consideration of veteran and military family food insecurity issues.** By joining the call from House Rules Committee Chairman Jim McGovern, your Administration has the opportunity to exercise bold leadership and bring together policymakers, advocates, and those with lived experience together in a focused way to develop smart and innovative proposals and bolster the necessary political will to end hunger in America once and for all. We look forward to an opportunity to work together with your Administration to contribute to this summit and respond to the unacceptable crisis of hunger in America, including among veterans and military families.

The issue of military hunger is neither an isolated problem nor a novel one, as has been clearly documented in the new report by MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger — [Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.](#) Military families are being served by food pantries and distribution programs on or near *every single military base* in the United States. In the Blue Star Families [2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey](#), 14 percent of active-duty enlisted family respondents reported low or very low food security in the previous year. The [2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses](#) (2019 ADSS) conducted by the Department of Defense reported that 11 percent of active duty spouses described their overall financial situation as “not comfortable” and another 20 percent of spouses reported that they had experienced some financial difficulty. [Recent Pentagon records](#) show that during the 2018-19 school year, *one-third of military children* at DoD-run schools in the U.S. were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

There can be no denying that food insecurity among military families remains a real and painful reality and that government safety net programs are not adequately meeting the needs of those who serve our country. The scope and severity of food insecurity for military families have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic is not only a national health emergency but also a time of urgent concern for those who are most vulnerable in our country. This includes our service members and their families who were already struggling. According to a Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) study, active duty respondents in the E1 to E6 enlisted ranks were [more likely](#) to experience food insecurity. Additionally, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) surveyed enlisted service members and their families between ranks E-1 – E-6 and found that [among 11,395 military and family members surveyed in April 2021](#), 14 percent reported visiting a food distribution site to make ends meet during the previous 12 months. Further, during a nine month period in 2020, NMFA found that 34 percent of military spouse respondents who were employed before the pandemic reported losing their job as a result of the crisis while another 25 percent reported a reduction in working hours. The recent spike in unemployment for military spouses comes on top of a 22 percent pre-pandemic unemployment rate. The unique challenges and expanded awareness of this moment make action to address the problem of military hunger even more pressing.

Military hunger is an issue of mission readiness, retention, and recruitment. It is also a matter of racial equity (junior enlisted servicemembers, who are most impacted by this issue, are disproportionately people of color) **and one that has a direct correlation to the rising challenge of military suicide.** We urge you to weigh the significant personal and societal costs of continued inaction to address hunger among military families. It does not have to be this way, and we are hopeful that we can work with you to finally achieve common-sense solutions to this problem.

We appreciate your continued commitment to those who serve our nation and all of our military families. We stand ready to work with you to ensure that those who make significant sacrifices for our country never struggle to put food on the table and meet their basic needs.

Sincerely,

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
National Military Family Association
Military Officers Association of America
Blue Star Families
VoteVets
African American Health Alliance
Military Child Education Coalition
Exceptional Families of the Military
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
Service Women's Action Network
Association of Military Surgeons of the United States
Feminist Majority Foundation
Jewish War Veterans of the USA
USA Army Warrant Officers Association
Association of Military Banks of America
PenFed Foundation
The Independence Fund
Partners in PROMISE
Military Family Advisory Network
Child Welfare League of America
Modern Military Association of America
MomsRising
Psych Hub
Combined Arms

CC:

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin
Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Gil Cisneros
Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack
Dr. Jill Biden, First Lady of the United States
Rory Brosius, Executive Director of Joining Forces
Senator Jack Reed, Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee
Senator Jim Inhofe, Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee
Representative Adam Smith, Chair of the House Armed Services Committee
Representative Mike Rogers, Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Committee
Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Chair of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel
Senator Thom Tillis, Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel
Representative Jackie Speier, Chair of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel
Representative Mike Gallagher, Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel
Senator Debbie Stabenow, Chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Senator John Boozman, Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Representative David Scott, Chair of the House Agriculture Committee
Representative Glenn GT Thompson, Ranking Member of the House Agriculture Committee
Senator Cory Booker, Chair of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research
Senator Mike Braun, Ranking Member of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research
Representative Jahana Hayes, Chair of the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations
Representative Don Bacon, Ranking Member of the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations