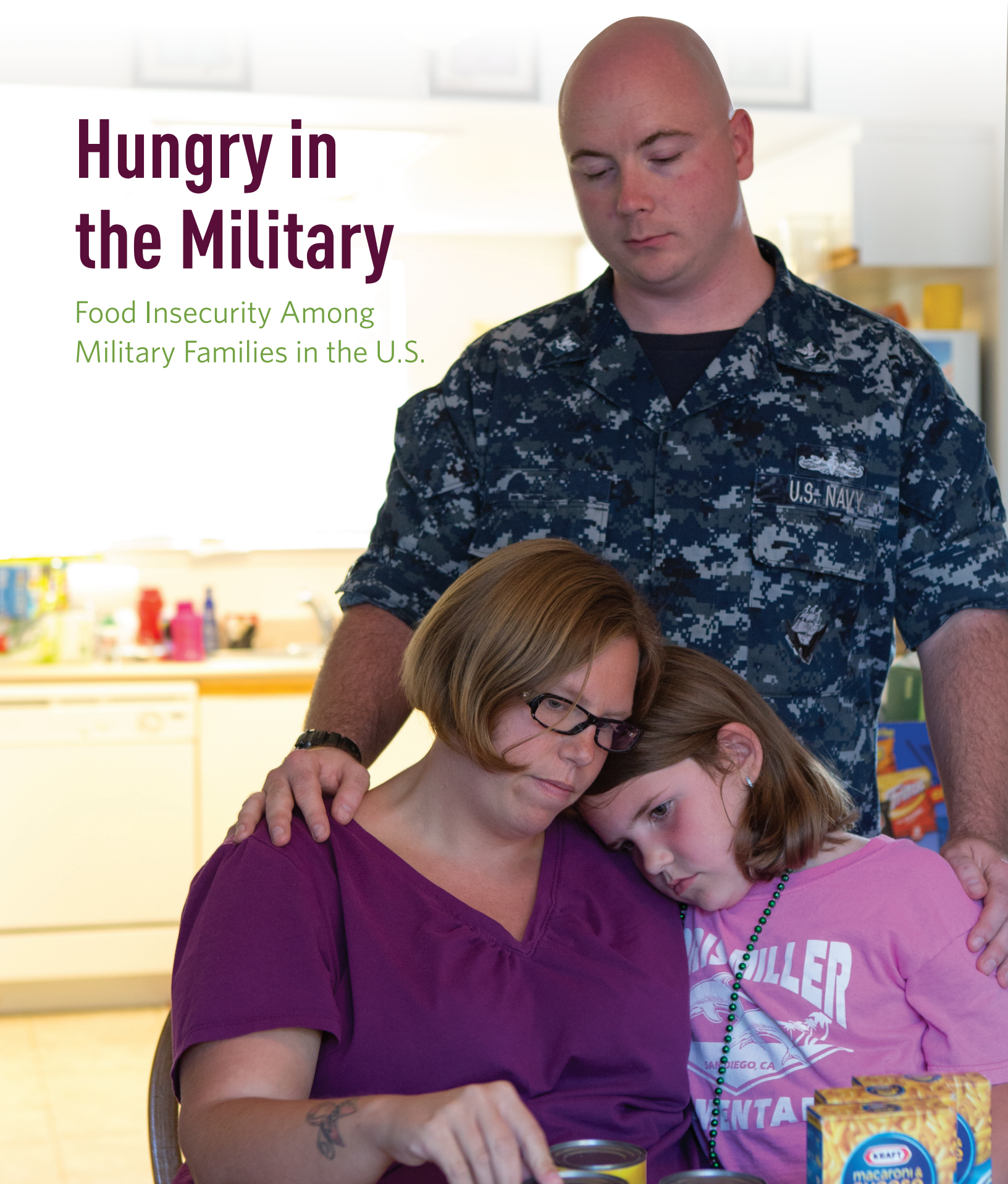


# Hungry in the Military

Food Insecurity Among  
Military Families in the U.S.



By Abby J. Leibman and Josh Protas  
April 2021

**MAZON**

A Jewish Response  
To Hunger

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Cover photo credit: Barbara Grover

Dedication: For Dave Reaney whose powerful questions about military hunger inspired MAZON to seek answers, and to the brave men and women who shared their stories about food insecurity.

This report would not have been possible without the extraordinary research and writing skills of Liza Lieberman and Cara Herman.

# INTRODUCTION

In 2012, MAZON first became aware that there was an alarming number of currently serving military families struggling with food insecurity. Little noticed and often deliberately obfuscated, it was a persistent problem for which there were readily available solutions, but little political will to realize those solutions.

Though for many years food pantries provided emergency assistance to low-income active duty families on or near almost every single military base across the country, MAZON recognized that the failure by the charitable food sector, the media, and public officials to acknowledge and address the underlying issues contributing to food insecurity for military families perpetuated the problem.

Listening to and learning from servicemembers, military spouses, direct service providers, and organizations that prioritize the needs of military families, MAZON turned its newfound awareness into action. Analyzing existing data, anecdotal experiences, and a review of the historical response, a picture began to emerge of not only what was needed, but what was possible. When MAZON began to raise this issue with military leadership, policymakers, and other advocates, we were met with an avalanche of criticism that was unrivaled by any of our other advocacy efforts. While dismayed, we were never discouraged — it is the role of an advocate to raise the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it makes those in power — in order to secure justice for those in need.

MAZON prioritized a broad-based, flexible, and immediate response to needs that have been too long unaddressed. Securing a response proved to be complex and frustrating, but this only deepened our resolve. As we posited solutions, we were turned away by those in authority, who either disclaimed responsibility or raised specious arguments. In 2019, MAZON designed the “Military Family Basic Needs Allowance” as a simple yet powerful program that could lay the foundation for building real food security for all currently serving military families.

While the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance has also met resistance, every year since it was conceived, it has gained support from military families, military service organizational partners, anti-hunger advocates, and a growing chorus of elected officials.

As we anticipate a new path forward to enact this proposal and explore new efforts to realize our goals to end food insecurity among military families, we continue to learn from what we’ve done, when we succeeded, and when success eluded us. We will continue to lead the national effort to ensure that our policymakers address military hunger so that no family is left behind.

Sincerely,



**Abby J. Leibman**

PRESIDENT & CEO  
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger



All across America, food banks are experiencing unprecedented demand. Families struggling to put food on the table during the COVID-19 pandemic are turning to food pantries, charities, and federal benefits as they endure the painful reality of hunger. Among those seeking help are military families who don't know where their next meal will come from. Servicemembers who have enlisted to fight for their country, already sacrificing so much, are struggling to feed themselves and their families.

This is not a new problem. Sadly, even before the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, military families faced food insecurity. These currently serving members of the Armed Forces — often junior-enlisted servicemembers (typically enlisted ranks E-1 through E-4) with multiple dependents — have turned in desperation to emergency assistance for years, surviving with the help of the food pantries that operate on or near every military installation in the United States. At Camp Pendelton alone, there are four pantries that serve the base community,

each of which routinely assist hundreds of military families every month. Due to the lack of transparency from the Department of Defense (DoD) in collecting data on food insecurity among servicemembers and their families, and their reluctance to publicize any information they already have access to, the true scale of this crisis is unknown. However, the data that is publicly available from both government and military interest group surveys indicate that the scope of the crisis is broad and affects military families across the country.<sup>1</sup> This matches anecdotal accounts reporting increases in the number of military families seeking assistance to put food on the table.

This report is based on the expertise and experience of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger — a national nonprofit organization fighting to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel — after nearly a decade of exploring, understanding, and developing solutions to end military hunger.

## OUR KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- At least part of the problem stems from an unintended barrier to assistance for struggling military families — counting a servicemember's housing allowance as revenue in determining eligibility for federal nutrition programs like SNAP (formerly food stamps).
- Junior-enlisted members are more diverse in race, ethnicity, and gender than higher military ranks. They are also supporting families at much higher rates than previous cohorts of servicemembers. The Pentagon has not adequately adjusted the base salary to reflect the reality of our modern military force.
- The circumstances that give rise to food insecurity among military families are complex, yet simplistic responses based on unfounded stereotypes are often lifted up ahead of more meaningful responses.
- In the last year, COVID-19 has exacerbated the unique financial challenges of military families such as high rates of spousal unemployment, access to affordable childcare, and frequent relocation.

## TO ENSURE THAT ALL INDIVIDUALS WHO ENLIST TO SERVE HAVE ENOUGH FOOD TO FEED THEIR FAMILIES, MAZON MAKES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The administration must include the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in President Biden's Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) Budget Request, and Congress must prioritize this provision in its FY22 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).
2. The administration must take executive action to ensure that a servicemember's Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) does not count as income in determining eligibility for federal nutrition safety net programs.
3. Federal agencies — including DoD, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) — must collaborate to share data and resources about food insecurity among military families to find solutions.
4. Congress must study and document, in collaboration with the administration, the full scope of military hunger and publish comprehensive data.
5. Congress should re-examine military pay levels, acknowledging that the composition and needs of America's military have changed significantly over time.
6. Anti-hunger advocates, government agencies, community organizations, and media outlets must reset the narrative around hunger and address the persistent shame and stigma that prevents so many Americans — especially members of the military and military families — from seeking the nutrition assistance they need.

For 36 years, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger has been fighting to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel. MAZON (which means “sustenance” in Hebrew) is a leader in the national anti-hunger field, building consensus among the emergency food system in the U.S. that structural change, and working toward that change, is critical to ending hunger.

Jewish values ground and guide MAZON's approach. Centering the importance of *tzedek* (pursuing justice) and *b'tselem elohim* (respecting the inherent dignity of every person), we empower individuals and communities to address the unjust systems that allow hunger to persist. We educate and engage Jewish community leaders and congregations around the country, working together to fight for what we know is possible: systems built on wisdom, compassion, mutual support, and meaningful opportunity.

MAZON's legacy of seeding, supporting, and strengthening the anti-hunger movement has uniquely positioned us to identify and explore problems that have previously been overlooked or ignored. This includes the unique challenges and barriers facing military families, as well as veterans, Native Americans, single mothers, LGBTQ older adults, and Americans in Puerto Rico.

Nearly ten years ago, our partners in the charitable food network shared concerns about the uptick in the number of military families turning to them for food assistance. Across the country, servicemembers were — and still are — showing up at food pantries, sometimes in uniform, seeking help to feed their families. While many food pantries and other direct service providers have responded by developing specific and innovative programs to assist military families, most of these organizations are strapped by increasing demands for services in general and have limited capacity to specifically address the needs of military families; they are not focused on long-term solutions but rather provide short-term limited relief.

Clearly, we were alarmed, and we immediately committed to investigate the problem. We conducted an exhaustive search for accurate data from federal agencies including DoD, USDA, and VA, as well as Congress and direct service providers. We found that the hunger among military families is incredibly complex. Although often hidden, it is so prevalent that food pantries operate on or near every military installation in the United States. We also determined that an outdated and confusing federal law actually denies military families access to safety net programs that could help them put food on the table.

**“Food pantries operate on or near every military installation in the United States.”**

In the last decade, MAZON has prioritized solutions to address military hunger for Congress and the executive branch. Our policy experts have written bills that were introduced in both chambers of Congress, sought administrative action, testified before multiple congressional committees, cultivated media attention, and hosted summits to educate and empower partners from military service organizations and anti-hunger organizations. We have moved the needle. However, the problem persists, and sadly it has only gotten worse as the number of Americans experiencing hunger — including those in the military — has skyrocketed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, MAZON remains as committed as ever to pursuing viable solutions to military hunger. Those who serve to defend our great nation and fight for our freedom deserve better. Even one hungry military family is too many.

# UNDERSTANDING MILITARY HUNGER

**“I will not stand by and watch as our military is permitted to erode to the breaking point due to the President’s lack of foresight and the Congress’ lack of compassion. These military men and women on food stamps — our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines — are the very same Americans that the President and Congress have sent into harm’s way in recent years in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, and East Timor. They deserve our continuing respect, our unwavering support, and a living wage.”**

— Senator John McCain, speaking on the Senate floor in April 2000

## Historical Context

The context for today’s scope of military hunger goes back decades.

In the 1990s, news outlets reported several stories about military families participating in the food stamp program. Military and elected officials were very concerned about the optics of these news stories. However, some leaders chose to address the surface-level optics instead of addressing the root of the problem.

The late Senator John McCain, then the senior Senator from Arizona, spoke often about “ending the food stamp army,” even introducing a bill called the “Remove Service Members from Food Stamps Act of 2000.” In a campaign event that year, McCain declared it “unconscionable that the men and women who are willing to sacrifice their lives for their country have to rely on food stamps to make ends meet.”<sup>2</sup>

In 2000, Senator McCain played a vital role in creating the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance (FSSA), which had the express purpose of transitioning military families off food stamps (in 2008, the food stamp program became the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP). Unfortunately, the structure of FSSA was flawed from the start. The program failed to exclude the BAH as counted income

for determining eligibility. Furthermore, to apply for FSSA benefits, a servicemember had to go through the base chain of command, which deterred them from seeking the support they needed out of fear of telling a commander that their family was struggling financially. Such an admission could not only result in negative treatment and performance reviews. It could jeopardize security clearance and damage career prospects as such members were viewed as somehow vulnerable. This exacerbated the stigma and shame that often exists around seeking assistance from federal safety net programs, and FSSA participation numbers were very low.

As part of the FY 2013 NDAA, Congress created a Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC), which later recommended that Congress sunset the FSSA program and instead direct military families toward SNAP. MAZON was the only anti-hunger organization to weigh in directly with MCRMC, urging that Congress instead adopt structural reforms to FSSA because we felt that with improvement, it could be more readily accessed by, and responsive to, military families.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, MAZON submitted testimony and sent letters imploring DoD Secretary Ashton Carter to reform FSSA in several meaningful ways, including moving the application process out of the base chain of command, excluding the BAH as counted income for determining eligibility,

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**“I’m shocked that so many military families are standing in line at the food pantry because they really need help. Many of us struggle for months before finding out that there are services for us, and then it’s pretty much word of mouth.”**

— Ashley, a military spouse whose family is stationed in San Diego, California

and increasing the income threshold. However, Congress and the Obama administration chose to allow the program to sunset domestically in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

In the five years following 2016, neither Congress nor the Obama, Trump, or Biden administrations have taken additional action to provide assistance to military families facing food insecurity. MAZON has repeatedly recommended proposals that would help these families, as outlined later in this report, but federal officials have repeatedly turned their backs on these proposals.

At MAZON’s request, Members of Congress sought a 2016 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) entitled “Military Personnel: DOD Needs More Complete Data on Active-Duty Servicemembers’ Use of Food Assistance Programs.”<sup>5</sup> The report detailed military hunger, outlining specific recommendations for Congress and the Pentagon. Following a comprehensive review, the nonpartisan government researchers noted that DoD does not collect data about servicemembers who participate in federal nutrition assistance programs or are at risk of food insecurity, nor do they coordinate with USDA to prevent military families from going hungry.

In the five years since the GAO report was published, the Pentagon has taken no action to thoughtfully

understand nor address this problem. GAO explicitly recommended that DoD “coordinate with USDA to leverage its access to data on active-duty servicemembers and their families who use its programs and services and consider outreaching to other organizations that have data on servicemembers’ use of food assistance.”<sup>6</sup> To date, there has been no official public response.

Meanwhile, the situation has grown more dire. In the past year, servicemembers have stepped up to help deliver food to those newly facing hunger in the wake of COVID-19, even as many of their own families are also struggling.

## Military Families Face Unique Challenges

The face of America’s military has changed. In recent decades, the demographic make-up of the military’s enlisted personnel has shifted from predominantly single, 18-year-old men to much more diverse troops. Today’s military is comprised of men and women representing a wide array of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds,<sup>7</sup> including individuals who support families.<sup>8</sup> However, military compensation policy has not adequately kept pace with the changing needs of enlisted servicemembers or the cost of living. Our country’s military pay structure was not designed

**“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone.”**

— President Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 1953



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to support junior-enlisted servicemembers and their families, particularly not those living in high-cost areas. Compensation levels for junior-enlisted ranks are no longer consistent with the household structure and needs of military families. Furthermore, military lifestyles impose unique costs and challenges, which are often exacerbated for these junior-enlisted, low-ranking, and low-paid servicemembers with families.

Like many Americans, military families often rely on two incomes. However, the unemployment rate among military spouses has been exceptionally high for many years, even before the pandemic, due to specific demands placed on military families. This year, as national unemployment rates skyrocketed during the COVID-19 crisis, the toll hit military families particularly hard. Military spouses, who faced a 24% unemployment rate and even higher rates of underemployment before the pandemic, now report desperate levels of income loss. Surveys conducted during the pandemic estimate that military spousal unemployment rates exceed 30%.<sup>9</sup> One survey found that 18% of military spouses who were working prior to the COVID-19 crisis have lost their job or are unable to work as a result of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> And yet, these rates do not take into account significant rates of underemployment and employment in jobs or positions below a military spouse's professional training and/or experience.

Military spouses who do work tend to be unable to accrue seniority in the workplace due to frequent moves between stations, and they are often among the first let go and the last to be rehired in a weak economy. Careers that require licensure can delay or stymie their earning capacity, given that state licenses often vary and they have little control over when or where their family will be stationed.

The cost of relocation often falls heavily on military families as well. These families go where they are ordered, often every two to three years, which may mean moving to a location with higher cost of living, limited access to affordable childcare, and/or away

**"Being in a military family is challenging in ways most people can never imagine. You make so many sacrifices: missed time with loved ones, not having a constant place to call home, job security for dependents, and so much more. I don't want another military family to worry about food the way we did."**

— Erika, a former military spouse, during testimony before the House Agriculture Committee in January 2016

from networks of community and family support. DoD will reimburse the families for some relocation-related expenses, but not all of them, which can drain military families of savings and leave them with little financial cushion. Additionally, military spouses will often have to find new employment opportunities upon relocation, which contributes to the high unemployment rates.

## Built-in Barriers to Nutrition Assistance

Currently, every servicemember who lives in off-base or privatized military housing is entitled to a BAH to pay for housing that is managed by a private company or in the surrounding community. If a servicemember and their family lives in military base housing, the money is automatically deducted from the servicemember's paycheck. For those who live off base or in privatized housing, the BAH must go toward housing and utilities, and it covers an estimated 95% of housing costs. Military families are often left with little to no money to spend on other necessities of living, like food.

Although servicemembers may never see it in their bank accounts, BAH is considered income for

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determining SNAP eligibility, which prevents many struggling military families from accessing this critically important — and often life-saving — federal benefit. By contrast, federal housing subsidies for civilians are not counted as income for determining SNAP eligibility, and servicemembers who receive in-kind housing on base do not have the value of that housing counted as income for determining SNAP eligibility. The IRS also does not treat BAH as income and it 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.

Given the remarkably low incomes for low-level enlistees, it is perfectly understandable that a servicemember with a spouse and two kids would need assistance from SNAP in order to afford enough

food. This is particularly true for those living in areas where housing costs are high, but their family requires more space than offered on base for junior-enlisted servicemembers. Living off-base or in privatized (on-base) housing is increasingly common, especially for those with families. However, two servicemembers with the same base pay and family composition could have different SNAP eligibility status because of where they live — only the one who lives on base will be eligible for SNAP.

BAH is an allowance, not income, as it is specifically intended to provide adequate and safe housing for military families. Although it is an addition to a servicemember's base pay, BAH is tax-exempt and it is not included on the servicemembers W-2 as income. If the BAH is not considered as income for tax purposes, it should not be considered as income for SNAP purposes.

**"I'm doing all I can and serving my country, and I have to worry about how I'm going to buy food? Recently when we applied for food stamps we were denied because our BAH counts as income. The only reason we are even getting by is because our neighbor told us about the food distributions. I don't think the government protects military families enough because so many of us need to go to food distributions run by outside groups. We are in the only job where we have to give up our lives to protect the Constitution of the United States, so shouldn't the government make sure we can properly feed our families?"**

— Gabriel, a Marine whose family is stationed in southern California

## Responding to Common Pushback

When MAZON first started exploring the scope of military hunger, one large hurdle became abundantly clear: While government officials seem to accept that food insecurity can be a problem for some military families, without public data showing the pervasiveness of military hunger, most believe that the problem affects an insignificant number of servicemembers. The Pentagon has countered MAZON's concerns and proposals, saying that "military members receive appropriate compensation already" compared to counterparts in the private sector.<sup>11</sup> But the fact that we have food pantries that serve military families across the country says otherwise.

Some policymakers claim that food insecurity among military families is a matter of personal financial management. A common notion suggests that if a military family faces hunger, they must spend money irresponsibly and not budget well. Sometimes critics share stories of young servicemembers who excitedly spend their first paycheck on a new car, evoking

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**“The Department of Defense’s response to military hunger has been to put it politely, lacking. Their description of this problem as minimal and their suggestion that these members take financial literacy training is not only insulting and condescending, it also does nothing to help the problem. If anything, their response helps to exacerbate this problem by keeping the barriers of shame and stigma to assistance intact. Our Nation’s servicemembers are willing to fight and die for our country and we should be providing them with the funds and resources necessary to ensure that they can feed their families.”**

— Congressman Don Young of Alaska, in a July 2019 statement

offensive myths and tropes of a modern-day “welfare queen.” However, such a dismissal rooted in harmful stereotypes and stigmas about poverty masks the struggles military families face.

In a private meeting between MAZON and congressional staff members, senior-level staff of the Senate Armed Services Committee claimed that servicemembers equate food pantries to discount grocery stores and utilize both simply as a matter of maximizing purchasing power. Let’s be clear: those who face food insecurity and turn in desperation to food pantries are not bargain hunting — they are trying to survive. Servicemembers and military spouses regularly say that although they were reluctant to visit a food pantry, they had no other option. Particularly for military families, there is a deep and persistent sense of shame and embarrassment in needing help, but they do what is necessary to feed their families.

Lack of data also enables policymakers to downplay and downright ignore the shameful problem of military hunger. Food pantries and other direct service providers do not inquire about the circumstances of those who use their services and they rarely differentiate between active duty servicemembers, veterans, National Guard, and members of the Reserves. Despite being called upon formally by GAO five years ago, and through

**“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. I don’t even remember leaving the office because I had been turned down from something that I felt I didn’t even want to be asking for in the first place. It was the very last ditch effort for us even asking for it.”**

— Erika, a former military spouse, whose family was stationed in Bremerton, Washington

report language included in several previous NDAA bills, the Pentagon has neither collected nor provided adequate data about how many servicemembers and their families are at risk of food insecurity, including how many are impacted by the BAH barrier to nutrition assistance.

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However, even in the absence of formal data, anecdotal evidence suggests widespread hunger among military families:

- Pentagon records obtained by NBC News through a Freedom of Information Act request give just a hint of the problem. The data shows that during the 2018-19 school year, one third of children at DoD-run schools on military bases in the United States — more than 6,500 children — were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. At one base — Georgia's Fort Stewart — 65% were eligible.<sup>12</sup>
- According to the Blue Star Families 2018 Military Families' Lifestyle Survey, 7% of military family respondents indicated that someone in their household faced food insecurity in the past year, and 9% of military family respondents indicated that someone in their household had sought emergency food assistance.<sup>13</sup>
- Authors of the 2016 GAO report obtained data from DoD Education Activity (DODEA), which operates schools on military installations across the country, and found that 26% of students in military families were eligible for free meals and 25% were eligible for reduced-price meals.<sup>14</sup>

## The Cost of Inaction

Policy reforms are necessary to solve the challenges and respond to the needs of military families facing hunger. Military suicide rates are on the rise,<sup>15</sup> and there is a clear correlation between food insecurity and suicide.<sup>16</sup> In addition to being the right thing to do, addressing military hunger is a matter of readiness, retention, and recruitment.

Every day that goes by without a solution to military hunger is dangerous for our country. Troops cannot be fully present if they are worried about their children's next meal and servicemembers cannot focus on the mission at hand if they are concerned about

**"Addressing military hunger is a matter of readiness, retention, and recruitment."**

providing the basic needs for their family. Ensuring that servicemembers can provide the basic needs for their family members eliminates unnecessary stress and anxiety and contributes to optimal mission readiness.

Furthermore, servicemembers cannot stay in the military if doing so means they are unable to afford food for their family. By not adequately serving those who serve our country, our government risks losing excellent talent in our military ranks. This is particularly a concern for servicemembers of color, who are disproportionately represented in the junior-enlisted ranks and underrepresented among military officers and leadership. The Pentagon is "dedicated to honoring the women and men who serve this country by ensuring them the same promotion and developmental opportunities regardless of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."<sup>17</sup> To advance this shared goal of increasing diversity in military leadership, it is essential that we adequately support junior-enlisted servicemembers and enable them to fully meet their family's basic needs so that they don't look outside of the military for career options with greater economic stability.

Lastly, ensuring basic needs for military families — including for household food purchases — will lead to 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 military than children in non-military families — means that more future enlistees will be physically fit to serve.



As a leader in developing solutions that seek to address the scope and complexity of military hunger, MAZON called on USDA in 2012 to issue an administrative action explicitly to exclude BAH from income calculations for SNAP eligibility. However, USDA demurred, opining that this could not be done because it would require statutory change through federal legislation.

Although MAZON pressed USDA to initiate a statutory change, USDA continued to deny it had the authority to act. In response, MAZON partnered with California Congresswoman Susan Davis to craft the “Military Hunger Prevention Act,” aiming to remove BAH from a servicemember’s income for purposes of SNAP eligibility. The proposal garnered bipartisan support in both the House and Senate. In testimony supporting the legislation before the House Agriculture Committee’s Nutrition Subcommittee in January 2016, Abby J. Leibman, MAZON’s President & CEO, argued: “Those who make great personal sacrifices in service to our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals to their families.”

Congressman Mike Conaway, then Chair of the House Agriculture Committee, agreed to address the issue in the 2018 Farm Bill, but he did not seek advice nor

counsel from leaders like MAZON about how to craft the provision. Conaway’s deeply partisan Farm Bill legislation rejected MAZON’s bipartisan solution in favor of a confusing provision to exclude only the first \$500 of a servicemember’s BAH from counting as income when determining SNAP eligibility. This arbitrary proposal would have only added an additional layer of complication, falling far short of solving the real problem. In the end, the provision was stripped from the final Farm Bill that was enacted into law, resulting in no congressional action to address military hunger.

In 2019, MAZON created a new proposal to address military hunger through the NDAA process. The past two NDAA bills passed by the House included MAZON’s proposed provision to establish a new allowance program for certain servicemembers called the “Military Family Basic Needs Allowance.”

In many ways, this new program will resemble FSSA, but with three critical differences:

- 1. Military personnel will be automatically notified of eligibility based on determined compensation levels.**

Servicemembers will receive notification of potential eligibility for this allowance in a streamlined and efficient manner, eliminating barriers to participation we have seen in the past like shame, stigma, and fear of retribution. Defense Finance and Accounting Services (DFAS) will automatically notify all servicemembers whose base pay is at or below a certain threshold — ideally 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, which is the upper gross income eligibility limit for SNAP.

The servicemember will have to provide evidence of any additional income that might place them above the threshold of eligibility. The servicemember will also have the right to opt-out of receiving the added allowance. If they do qualify and choose to participate, the servicemember will begin receiving the allowance automatically, and

**“Of all the sacrifices our military families make, the ability to put food on the table just should not be one of them. For a servicemember who was deployed overseas, the last thing they need to be worrying about is whether their loved ones are going hungry. We should be able to meet the basic needs of our military families.”**

— Congresswoman Susan Davis, during a briefing in October 2020

the process will be reviewed again annually if not more regularly.

## **2. BAH will not be counted as income in determining eligibility and benefit amounts for this allowance.**

Including the BAH as “income” clearly treats our troops differently than the civilian population and their counterparts who live on base. For civilians, the value of housing assistance subsidies and benefits are not counted as income in determining SNAP eligibility. Current SNAP policy presents a harmful and dangerous barrier that must be avoided in the new allowance program.

## **3. Servicemembers will proactively receive information about budgeting and additional federal assistance programs.**

When a servicemember is notified by DFAS that they might be eligible for this allowance, they will receive materials and resources about financial management as well as other federal assistance programs for which they may also be eligible. These resources will help military families navigate the stresses, stigmas, and challenges of living on a tight budget.

Importantly, due to the anomaly of how Coast Guard operations are authorized, a separate provision must be enacted through DHS to ensure inclusion of these families.

MAZON is confident that creating this common-sense allowance will provide strategic and meaningful support to military families facing food insecurity, while also accounting for the unique challenges and expenses associated with military service. Given that servicemembers of color are overrepresented among low-income junior-enlisted ranks (and underrepresented among officers and military leadership), the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance is a step toward correcting long standing injustice and inequity by providing assistance to struggling military families, who are disproportionately people of color.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the average allowance for a junior-enlisted servicemember would be about \$400 per month — a reasonable amount to ensure the nutrition and wellness of our troops and their families, particularly within the context of the Pentagon’s total budget.

“Despite consistent pay increases in recent years, some military families are still struggling to make ends meet, and even report food insecurity, lack of quality child care, and poor financial health. That is totally unacceptable. Military servicemembers and their families risk everything for our country — they have earned a guaranteed living wage. As president, I will work aggressively to update the federal workforce compensation framework for servicemembers, so that the government leads the way in ensuring that hard-working families can attain a middle class life, and I will support legislation that will, in the meantime, provide an additional allowance for military families living below the poverty line.”

— President Joe Biden, during the 2020 Presidential campaign<sup>18</sup>

## HOUSEHOLD EXAMPLES OF MILITARY FAMILY BASIC NEEDS ALLOWANCE BENEFITS, BASED ON CURRENT MILITARY PAY SCALE<sup>19</sup> AND FEDERAL POVERTY GUIDELINES (FPG)<sup>20</sup>



### EXAMPLE 1

#### E4 / 4 Years of Service - Household of 4 (3 dependents)

Base pay = \$2,634.60 / month - \$31,615.20 / annual

130% FPG for household of 4 = \$34,060

Difference between 130% FPG and annual base pay = \$2,444.80

Monthly difference / benefit amount = \$203.73



### EXAMPLE 2

#### E6 / 6 Years of Service - Household of 6 (5 Dependents)

Difference Base pay = \$3,354.90 / month - \$40,258.80 annual

130% FPG for household of 6 = \$45,708.00

Difference between 130% FPG and annual base pay = \$5,449.20

Monthly difference / benefit amount = \$451.10



### EXAMPLE 3

#### E2 / Less Than 2 Years of Service - Household of 4 (3 Dependents)

Base pay = \$1,942.50 / month - \$23,310 / annual

130% FPG for household of 4 = \$34,060.00

Difference between 130% FPG and annual base pay = \$10,750

Monthly difference / benefit amount = \$895.83

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. The administration must prioritize the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in President Biden's FY22 Budget Request, and Congress must prioritize this provision in its FY22 National Defense Authorization Act.**

President Biden must support the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance and include funding for it in his FY22 Budget Request, and the House and Senate Armed Service Committees must include it in both chambers' versions of the FY22 NDAA. Leaders of those committees must prioritize this measure in the final bill. Additionally, support for a similar provision to support low-income Coast Guard families must be included through the Homeland Security Appropriations process. It is clear that this targeted and temporary assistance program will be structured in a streamlined and efficient manner to eliminate common barriers to nutrition assistance including shame, stigma, and fear of retribution.

To effectively implement and administer the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance, there must be a permanent single point of contact at DoD to coordinate with other agencies, Congress, and civil society partners like MAZON. The executive branch and Congress must continue to emphasize that permanent solutions to military hunger are an urgent national priority and fundamentally influence recruitment, retention, and morale among the Armed Services.

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**2. The administration must take executive action 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 must take administrative action to exclude the BAH as income for all federal nutrition programs including SNAP, WIC, and free and reduced-price school meals. This would ensure that military families are not prevented from qualifying for assistance. Now more than ever, struggling military families must be able to access these programs so that they do not have to turn in desperation to food pantries simply because they cannot get the government assistance they need.

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**3. Federal agencies including DoD, USDA, DHS, and VA must work collaboratively to share data and resources about food insecurity among military families and work together to proactively find solutions.**

Federal agencies including DoD, USDA, DHS, and VA must work together to proactively inform those transitioning from military service about the availability of nutrition assistance. In particular, the VA should integrate information about federal nutrition programs like SNAP as part of the Transition Assistance Program and other veteran outreach efforts.

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**4. Congress must study and document, in collaboration with the administration, the full scope of military hunger and publicly publish comprehensive data.**

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

While the recently released 13th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) documented SNAP usage,<sup>21</sup> DoD asked the wrong question. Rather than how many servicemembers are accessing SNAP, we must explore how many families are struggling without the assistance of federal safety net programs, quietly visiting food pantries on our near military bases.

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**5. Congress must re-examine military pay levels, acknowledging that the composition and needs of America's military have changed significantly over time.**

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.

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**6. Anti-hunger advocates, government agencies, community organizations, and media outlets must reset the narrative around hunger and address the persistent shame and stigma that prevent so many Americans — especially members of the military and their families — from seeking the nutrition assistance they need.**

Collectively, we must acknowledge that there is often an unspoken stigma associated with accepting government benefits, particularly among military ranks. Some servicemembers are understandably resistant to ask for help because of the shame of their situation and the fear of retribution. This attitude can persist as a servicemember transitions into civilian life, clearly contributing to the related barriers to assistance among America's veterans.

The broader anti-hunger community must work together to prioritize a justice-centered approach to ending military hunger that appropriately centers systemic changes and policy priorities. Leaders in government, as well as the press, can play an important role in moving the public's focus away from charities straining to meet the needs of people facing hunger. This will allow us to ensure that public assistance programs will appropriately fulfill our collective responsibility to care for the vulnerable, support people in times of need, and expand opportunities so that all Americans can reach their full potential.

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It is unconscionable that salaries earned by enlisted personnel in this country are not sufficient to meet their families' needs. Those who make significant sacrifices for our country should never go hungry.

We must fulfill our collective responsibility to care for the most vulnerable, support them in times of need, and expand opportunities so that all can reach their full potential. To do so, implementing the recommendations in this report will make a true difference. However, we know we must continue to strive for systemic change that addresses the structural problems that allow hunger to continue, especially among military families.

"In 1962, I took a leave from my teaching job in Pomona, CA to join my husband who was drafted. At that time, military personnel were not eligible for food stamps. I was 6 months pregnant, and we didn't have enough income to buy food for the whole month. I then resigned from my teaching position so that I could access all of the money from my pension account. A few months later, my full-term daughter was born with a low birthweight of 4 lb 12 oz and spent the first week of her life in an incubator. So thank you for all of your advocacy on behalf of food insecurity. In this land of plenty, there is no excuse for anyone to go hungry for even one day."

— Barbara Sarkany, in a note to MAZON in January 2021

## The definition of key terms used in this report are listed below.

**BAH:** The U.S. government provides a Basic Allowance for Housing for active duty servicemembers to pay for housing on base or in the surrounding community. Previously called the Basic Allowance for Quarters, today the BAH amount is based on geography, pay grade, and number of dependents.

**DoD:** The U.S. Department of Defense — commonly referred to as “the Pentagon” — coordinates all agencies and functions of the government related to national security, including the military.

**FSSA:** The Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance was created by Congress in 2000, with the express purpose of moving military families off food stamps.

**GAO:** The U.S. Government Accountability Office provides fact-based, nonpartisan reports to Congress on a regular basis.

**MCRMC:** The Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission was created by Congress in 2012 to assess military compensation policies and issue budget recommendations.

**QRMC:** The Pentagon’s Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, which most recently came out in December 2020.

**SNAP:** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, is our country’s most important anti-hunger program, providing cash assistance specifically for food purchases to anyone who qualifies.

**USDA:** The U.S. Department of Agriculture oversees all government laws related to farming, forestry, rural economic development, and food, including federal nutrition programs like SNAP.

**VA:** U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs oversees all government functions related to America’s veterans, including healthcare, disability, education, and other benefits.

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Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON is a national advocacy organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel.

**MAZON** | A Jewish Response  
To Hunger

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