

October 12, 2020

Hon. Jim Inhofe, Chair
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Jack Reed, Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Thom Tillis, Chair
Subcommittee on Personnel
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Kirsten E. Gillibrand, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Personnel
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed, Chairman Tillis, and Ranking Member Gillibrand:

We, the undersigned organizations representing diverse public interest sectors and sizable networks across the country, are united in our commitment to ensure that the individuals serving in our armed forces 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 because they face an unintended barrier to qualifying for needed federal assistance, are shocking and unacceptable. Fortunately, there is a bipartisan, common-sense solution to this problem. **We urge you to provide needed assistance to these struggling military families by prioritizing the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in the Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).**

This proposal, which has been championed by National Military Family Association and MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and enjoys broad support within the military service organization community and among anti-hunger organizations, would address the longstanding shortcoming in military compensation policy that has left thousands of military families — primarily lower ranking enlisted service members with multiple dependents — to endure the painful reality of food insecurity.

This provision was included in the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel mark with unanimous bipartisan support and in the FY21 NDAA passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. Despite overwhelming support for its common-sense and targeted approach, the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance was omitted last year from the final FY20 NDAA. **We call on you to use your position of leadership with the Senate Armed Services Committee to address the long-overlooked problem of food insecurity among military families and prioritize inclusion of the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance in the final FY21 NDAA.**

The issue of military hunger is neither an isolated problem nor a novel one. Military families are being served by food pantries and distribution programs on or near every single military base in the United States. In a 2019 survey conducted by the Military Family Advisory Network, one in eight

military family respondents reported being food insecure.¹ In the Blue Star Families 2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, financial hardship was identified as a top lifestyle stressor, with 7 percent of military family respondents indicating that someone in their household faced food insecurity in the past year, and 9 percent of military family respondents indicating that someone in their household had sought emergency food assistance.² The 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (2017 ADSS) conducted by the Department of Defense reported that 10 percent of active duty spouses described their overall financial situation as “not comfortable” and another 19 percent of spouses reported that they had experienced some financial difficulty.³ 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.⁴ 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. The COVID-19 Military Support Initiative Pain Points Poll results have revealed concerning rates of hardship experienced by military families due to the pandemic, including 5 percent of all respondents unable to afford more than a week’s worth of food⁵, and 17 percent of military spouse respondents who reported losing a job or being unable to work as a result of the crisis.⁶ The recent spike in unemployment for military spouses comes on top of a 24 percent pre-pandemic unemployment rate. The unique challenges and expanded awareness of this moment make action in support of this provision even more pressing.

The Military Family Basic Needs Allowance is smart policy that supports key goals of mission readiness, troop retention, and future recruitment. We implore you to prioritize inclusion of this provision in the final FY21 NDAA. **Those who make significant sacrifices for our country should never struggle to meet their family’s basic needs.** 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 meet their basic needs.

¹ Military Family Advisory Network, 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey Results:

<https://militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/MFAN2019SurveyResults.pdf>

² 2018 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report:

<https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>

³ 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (2017 ADSS):

<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/Survey-Active-Duty-Spouses-2017-Overview-Briefing-MSO.pdf>

⁴“Why Are Many of America’s Military Families Going Hungry?” NBC News. Jul 12, 2019:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/why-are-many-america-s-military-families-going-%20hungry-1028886>

⁵ COVID-19 Military Support Initiative (September 2020). [Pain Points Poll information on food insecurity]. Unpublished raw data.

Blue Star Families. Available upon request <https://www.tfaforms.com/4824633> or survey@bluestarfam.org

⁶ COVID-19 Military Support Initiative (July 2020). *Final Pain Points Poll Data, Part 1: Demographics, Employment, Financial Readiness, and Childcare*. Blue Star Families. [Descriptive Statistic Reference File]

https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PPP-Wks1-10_Wrap-up_Part-1.pdf

Sincerely,

African American Health Alliance
Alabama Arise
Alabama Food Bank Association
Alliance to End Hunger
American Psychological Association
Arizona Center for Economic Progress
Arizona Food Bank Network
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance
Association of the United States Navy
Blue Star Families
Bread for the World
Broadmoor Improvement Association
Budget & Tax Center, North Carolina Justice Center
Carl B. & Florence E. King Foundation
Catholic Charities USA
Center for Rural Affairs
Child Welfare League of America
Church World Service
Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma
Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona
Community Harvest Food Bank of NE IN, Inc.
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
D.C. Hunger Solutions
Diaper Bank of North Carolina
Empower Missouri
Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States (EANGUS)
Equality North Carolina
Exceptional Families of the Military
Feeding America
Feeding Indiana's Hungry
Feeding Louisiana
Feeding New York
Feeding South Dakota
Feeding Tampa Bay
FeedMore WNY
Fleet Reserve Association
Florida Impact to End Hunger
Food Bank For New York City
Food Bank of Alaska
Food Bank of Northern Indiana
Food Bank of Northern Nevada
Food Bank of Northwest Louisiana

Great Plains Food Bank
Hunger Free America
Hunger Free Vermont
Hunger Solutions New York
Illinois Hunger Coalition
Indiana Institute for Working Families
Indy Hunger Network
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
Japanese American Citizens League
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Jewish Family Service of San Diego
Jewish Family Service of Seattle
Jewish Federation of Chicago
Kentucky Center for Economic Policy
Kentucky Equal Justice Center
Long Island Cares, Inc.--The Harry Chapin Food Bank
Louisiana Appleseed
Louisiana Budget Project
Louisiana Partnership for Children and Families
MANNA FoodBank
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
Military Chaplains Association
Military Child Education Coalition
Military Family Advisory Network
Military Officers Association of America
Missouri Budget Project
Modern Military Association of America
MomsRising
NAACP
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Coalition for the Homeless
National Council of Jewish Women
National Diaper Bank Network
National Military Family Association
National WIC Association
Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies
North Carolina Alliance for Health
Operation Food Search
Reconstructing Judaism
Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma
RESULTS
RESULTS DC
Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA

SC Appleseed
Share Our Strength
Tennessee Justice Center
The Greater Boston Food Bank
The Partnership for A Healthy Mississippi
The United States Army Warrant Officers Association
The Youth and Children's Advocacy Network
Top Box Foods Louisiana
TREA: The Enlisted Association
Union for Reform Judaism
United Way of Southeast Louisiana
We All Rise
West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy
William E. Morris Institute for Justice (Arizona)
Worthington Foundation
zero8hundred