

April 29, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader McConnell, and Minority Leader Schumer:

We write to encourage you to immediately amend Section 403(k), Title 37 of the United States Code to exclude the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) from being counted as income when calculating eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other federal nutrition assistance benefits. Including BAH in the evaluation of SNAP eligibility creates an artificial and unnecessary barrier for military families, as the allowance is a non-taxable portion of a service member's pay that allows for equitable housing compensation. Addressing this barrier, which many military families face in accessing food assistance, would help those struggling to make ends meet during this unprecedented pandemic, and would boost the financial resiliency of those military families during the economic downturn.

Our nation is currently facing a devastating public health crisis – the likes of which have not been seen in more than a century. While civilian Americans scramble to stock their kitchens, thousands of low-income military families are turning to food pantries for aid to put food on the table. This is neither an isolated problem, nor a novel one. Military families are being served by food pantries and distribution programs on or near every military installation in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

To better understand the most acute challenges facing military families today, the COVID-19 Military Support Initiative (CMSI) conducted a Pain Points Poll garnering over 3,200 respondents from March 18 to April 7, 2020. Among military family respondents:

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia McFadden, et al., "Why Are Many of America's Military Families Going Hungry?" *NBC News*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/why-are-many-america-s-military-families-going-hungry-n1028886>.

- 7 percent were unable to afford a week’s supply of food for their family;
- 12 percent indicated that they or someone in their household is considered “high-risk” for the virus and are unable to shop for groceries during the outbreak;
- 9 percent said they are unable to find the groceries they need for a member of their household who has dietary restrictions.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated many of the underlying factors that contribute to military family financial and food insecurity, including:

- high rates of un/underemployment among military spouses;
- limited availability and high costs of childcare; and
- out-of-pocket housing and relocation expenses.

The Pain Points Poll shows that spouses are losing their jobs and/or working reduced hours because of the current crisis. Although employment figures have improved for military spouse respondents since the start of the polling period, during week 3 (April 1-7) 34 percent indicated that they or their civilian spouse had either lost their job or experienced a reduction in working hours. Since military spouses already faced a 24 percent unemployment rate in a previously thriving economy, further increases to unemployment or under-employment exacerbate the military family’s financial situation.<sup>2</sup>

High rates of military spouse un/underemployment are aggravated by a scarcity of affordable childcare. COVID-19 has increased the inaccessibility of childcare resources. Forty-one percent of military family respondents were unable to access their normal child care provider in week 3, up from 29 percent in the first week of polling (March 18-31), and 9 percent said that their family continues to pay for childcare even though the provider is closed.

Additionally, the outbreak has caused increased out-of-pocket relocation expenses for some families. Thousands of military families have been upended by postponed or canceled PCS orders, and some have even found themselves homeless – having sold their home or given up their lease in anticipation of a move that is now postponed indefinitely. Sixteen percent of week 3 Pain Points Poll respondents with current PCS orders indicated that they are (or will be) making two house payments within the next 60 days due to the Stop Movement order.

Food insecurity has a detrimental effect on military family readiness, service member readiness, and military readiness. Excluding BAH from SNAP eligibility calculations would ensure that more

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<sup>2</sup> <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/Survey-Active-Duty-Spouses-2017-Overview-Briefing-MSO.pdf>

military families qualify for SNAP, reducing their food insecurity, eliminating unnecessary stress and anxiety for the service member, and thereby contributing to optimal mission readiness.

We appreciate your continued commitment to those who serve our Nation and their 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.

Sincerely,

Air Force Association (AFA)

Armed Services YMCA (ASYMCA)

Blue Star Families (BSF)

Chief Warrant & Warrant Officers Association, U.S. Coast Guard (CWOAUSCG)

Elizabeth Dole Foundation (EDF)

Fleet Reserve Association (FRA)

Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

Military Chaplains Association of the United States of America (MCA)

Military Officers Association of America (MOAA)

Modern Military Association of America (MMAA)

National Military Family Association (NMFA)

PsychArmor

Psych Hub

The Retired Enlisted Association (TREA)

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

United States Army Warrant Officers Association (USAWOA)