

January 15, 2016

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway, Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Frank Lucas
House Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
2405 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Comments for Record: House Committee on Agriculture Hearing on Military and Veteran Food Insecurity (January 12, 2016)

Chairman Conaway:

The Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma and the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma appreciate your efforts to address the important issue of food insecurity among military service members and veterans. Holding this hearing is an important step forward in acknowledging that our nation's heroes are not immune to hunger.

According to a study published in 2015, more than 1 in 4 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans reported being food insecure in the past year.ⁱ A separate 2015 study by the Yale University School of Medicine found that 24 percent of veterans who have accessed care through the Veterans Health Administration (VA) reported being food insecure, and that being food insecure was associated with diminished management of hypertension, diabetes, HIV, and depression.ⁱⁱ With more than 300,000 veterans in Oklahoma, 500 of whom are homeless, we are deeply concerned that these numbers indicate tens of thousands of our state's former service members are struggling with hunger.ⁱⁱⁱ

Data for food insecurity among active-duty service members is scarce, as this is not something that is tracked nor even acknowledged to exist by the Department of Defense. However, Feeding America's "Hunger in America 2014" report provided rates of food insecurity among military personnel for the first time. According to that report, 20 percent of Feeding America client households reported having at least one member who has served in the U.S. military, and 4 percent of households contain at least one member who is currently serving.^{iv}

The Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma's Mobile Eatery serves hot meals to 25-30 military veterans each week. While it is an honor to serve these individuals, it is disheartening to see them anxiously await their meal knowing that excitement may be an indication of their struggle with food insecurity. We know there are many more veterans who would benefit from this program, and because of the demonstrated need, the Mobile Eatery program will be expanded to two additional locations in early 2016. It is vital that we have accurate data on food insecurity among veterans in Oklahoma so we can efficiently plan to meet the needs of this important population.

In light of our increasing awareness of hunger among the military and veteran population, the Oklahoma Food Banks make the following recommendations:

Prioritize data collection on military and veteran food insecurity:

This can be accomplished by continuing to formally acknowledge the existence of the problem through hearings in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Individual Representatives adding the issue to their policy priorities would thus encourage continued research and data collection by academic institutions and perhaps eventually by the Department of Defense. If even one military family goes without adequate food, we are failing to fulfill our responsibilities as a nation.

Track military and veteran participation in federal safety net programs:

Federal programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Women Infants and Children (WIC) are critical to keeping millions of people nationwide out of poverty. SNAP benefits lifted at least 4.7 million people out of poverty in 2014, including 2.1 million children.^v These safety net programs also play a critical role in the lives of our military and veteran families. Comprehensive data demonstrating their enrollment and participation would serve not only to illuminate the issue of food insecurity among this population, but also as compelling evidence for the case that federal safety net programs should remain the cornerstone of national efforts to end hunger.

Exclude Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as countable income in SNAP determination:

There is an egregious inequity in federal law that precludes some active duty military families from qualifying for SNAP benefits because their Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) benefits are counted as income in the determination of SNAP eligibility. We recommend a simple resolution of this problem: *excluding BAH benefits as countable income in the SNAP determination process*. This would eliminate the disparity that exists in the current way that SNAP eligibility is determined for military and civilian populations receiving federal housing benefits.^{vi}

The Oklahoma Food Banks are deeply concerned about food insecurity among military and veterans. Due to our statewide service area, we have the ability to make meaningful differences in the lives of Oklahoma's veterans and military service members, but we cannot do it alone. We encourage the Committee to take immediate action on the issue, and offer our sincerest appreciation for holding this hearing.

Sincerely,



Rodney Bivens, Executive Director
Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma



Eileen Bradshaw, Executive Director
Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma

ⁱ Widome R, Jensen A, Bangerter A, Fu S (2015). Food insecurity among veterans of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Public Health Nutrition*, 18, pp 844-849. doi:10.1017/S136898001400072X.

ⁱⁱ Wang EA, McGinnis KA, Goulet J, Bryant K, Gibert C, Leaf DA, Mattocks K, Fiellin LE, Vogenthaler N, Justice AC, Fiellin DA, Veterans Aging Cohort Study Project Team (2015). Food insecurity and health: data from the Veterans Aging Cohort Study. *Public Health Reports*, 130(3): 261-268.

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau (2014). American Community Survey 5-year estimates.
<http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

^{iv} Feeding America (2014). Hunger in America Report.

<http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/hunger-in-america/>

^v White House (2015). Long Term Benefits of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP_report_final_nonembargo.pdf

^{vi} MAZON (2015). Help our Heroes. <http://mazon.org/our-response/our-initiatives/help-our-heroes/>