

May 2018

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

The House Farm Bill recently passed by the House Committee on Agriculture, if enacted, would seriously threaten the food security, health, and well-being of millions of veterans, active duty members of the military, future enlistees, and their families. As organizations that represent military families and veterans, we ask you to vote “No” on H.R. 2.

It’s a national shame that so many of our nation’s military families and veterans struggle with hunger and food insecurity. **The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps 23,000 active-duty service members and nearly 1.5 million veterans purchase food and improve their nutrition, health, well-being, and economic security.**

Incidences of military families and veterans struggling to get adequate food — and the ensuing harms to their health — are all too common. So common, in fact, that beginning in October 2017, all patients treated in the Veterans Health Administration¹ are being screened for food insecurity.

A study² in Women’s Health Issues found that 27.6 percent of female veterans were food insufficient and experienced worse health outcomes. Another recent study³ in Public Health Nutrition documented rates of food insecurity among veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan almost twice as high as those among the general population. In addition, a study⁴ from the Veteran Administration’s National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans found that nearly 50 percent of screened homeless and formerly homeless veterans experienced food insecurity. Of that group, a significant number had diabetes or prediabetes and many experienced hypoglycemia symptoms.

SNAP, the nation’s leading defense against hunger, provides vital nutrition support to families — including military families and veterans. Military commissaries across the United States accept SNAP benefits, reflecting the importance of SNAP for military families and veterans. These and other SNAP-authorized food retail outlets allow these households to purchase foods with dignity and in a manner similar to other customers.

SNAP is a model of an effective public program backed by a growing body of research extolling how SNAP reduces poverty, supports economic stability and academic outcomes; improves health; and protects against obesity.⁵ SNAP is there to help not only active duty and veteran families, but also to support military readiness for the next generation of military leaders as well as healthy outcomes for their dependents.

The House Farm Bill is an insult to military service families and veterans.

The House Farm Bill is a shameful retreat from efforts to improve and strengthen SNAP. If enacted, the bill would lead to greater hunger and poverty among all families, including military and veteran families, as well as reduced economic growth and productivity in communities across the country.

The approximately \$20 billion in cuts to SNAP benefits over 10 years would take food assistance away from struggling households. This would leave them to the type of hard decisions, such as between essential expenses, which often spirals into poor health outcomes, loss of productivity, and even homelessness. The following provisions would particularly harm military families and veterans:

- Food Benefit Cuts to Working Families: The bill cuts \$5 billion in SNAP food benefits over 10 years by eliminating a state option (broad-based categorical eligibility) that allows states to adjust SNAP asset tests and to screen families with gross incomes slightly above 130 percent of the poverty line to determine if their net incomes (after expenses for shelter, childcare, or certain other basic expenses) qualify them for a SNAP benefit. Many states have chosen this simplification option.⁶ The proposed change would take SNAP away from low-income working people with children, exacerbate the “cliff effect” when they improve their earnings, eliminate their children’s direct connection to free school meals, and significantly increase states’ administrative costs and burdens. Active military and veterans households are among those who would be harmed by these cuts.
- Food Benefit Cuts to Families Struggling to Heat and Eat: The bill cuts \$5 billion in SNAP food benefits over 10 years for non-elderly SNAP households struggling to pay for both utilities and food (“heat and eat”) by severing states’ coordination of SNAP benefits with low income energy payments.
- Cutoffs of SNAP Eligibility for Adults Without Sufficient Regular Work Hours: The bill would subject more adults to harsh SNAP eligibility cutoffs (time limits) unless they work sufficient hours each week — expanding from those aged 18 to 50 to those up to 60 years of age and including custodial parents with children age six or above. In two-parent households, both adults would need to work the requisite hours. This is problematic, including for veterans and currently serving military households. Veterans may be between jobs or lack steady enough work to meet the 20-hour per week minimum, including for reasons outside of their control, such as service-related trauma, undiagnosed mental or physical disabilities, lack of job opportunities, difficulty translating military-related skills to civilian employment, or lack of transportation to get to jobs. Recently returning veterans experience more frequent employment transitions; therefore, SNAP can provide a helpful bridge during these periods. Unemployment rates for military spouses are nearly 20 percent, adding to the economic hardship challenges for families of junior-enlisted personnel who get by on low pay. Many military spouses have child care responsibilities and/or have difficulty finding jobs after relocation. Yet this bill would cut a portion of such two-person military households’ SNAP food benefit allotment if the military spouse fell short of the work hours required.

The bill’s funding for SNAP Employment and Training services amounts to a mere \$30 per month per person — hardly sufficient to provide the comprehensive services needed for most individuals to attain higher-paying, stable jobs. While we support the goal of helping people find and maintain employment, taking away food benefits from struggling households to finance an underfunded, untested workforce bureaucracy is not the right approach.

The bill does include \$116 million to allow up to \$500 of Basic Allowance for Housing for military families to be excluded when determining SNAP eligibility, and allows those households to claim expenses that exceed that threshold for purposes of their shelter deduction. However, don’t let this modest change aimed at helping military families fool you — the damage done to military and veteran families by all of the harmful provisions in this bill would far surpass any benefits.

As groups representing members who serve and have served their country, we ask that you vote “No” on HR 2.

Signed:

American Military Partner Association
Blue Star Families
Military Impacted Schools Association
Mom2Mom Global
National Association for Black Veterans (NABVETS)
National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
National Military Family Association
Protect Our Defenders
Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)
Veteran's HomeFront
Volunteers of America
VoteVets
Women Veterans United Committee, Inc.
Women Veterans Interactive
Women Veteran Social Justice

Endnotes:

¹Dewey, C. (2017). Why so many veterans go hunger — and VA's new plan to fix it. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/10/09/why-so-many-veterans-go-hungry-and-the-vas-new-plan-to-fix-it/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4de0c17c6b1c. Accessed on May 11, 2018.

²Food Research & Action Center. (2018). ResearchWire. Available at: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/researchwire-april-2018.pdf#page=6>. Accessed on May 11, 2018.

³National Center for Biotechnology Information. (2015). Food insecurity among veterans of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24806818>. Accessed on May 11, 2018.

⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). Screening for food Insecurity in Six Veterans Administration Clinics for the Homeless. Available at: https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2017/16_0375.htm. Accessed on May 11, 2018.

⁵Food Research & Action Center. (2017). The Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Improving Health and Well-Being. Available at: <http://www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-role-snap-improving-health-well-being.pdf>. Accessed on May 11, 2018.

⁶U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2018). Broad-based Categorical Eligibility. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/BBCE.pdf>. Accessed on May 11, 2018.