

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 17, 2021

Senator Jack Reed
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

Senator James Inhofe
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

Representative Adam Smith
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
United States House of Representatives

Representative Mike Rogers
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States House of Representatives

Dear Chairmen Reed and Smith and Ranking Members Inhofe and Rogers:

We write in support of the House-approved provision in H.R.4350, Section 601 of the fiscal year (FY) 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) authorizing a basic needs allowance, and urge the Senate to recede its similar provision. As drafted in H.R.4350, this provision will help support food insecure servicemembers who, through no fault of their own, are ineligible for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

In addition to their base pay, servicemembers receive a Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) which varies by rank, location and dependent status and is intended to help cover the cost of off-base or privatized military housing. Under current guidelines, BAH covers 95% of housing costs, so servicemembers are expected to pay out of pocket to cover the difference. BAH is not intended to serve as a supplemental income, and in fact is not treated as income for the purpose of taxes or qualifying for most federal assistance programs. However, federal statute does count BAH as income when considering servicemembers' SNAP eligibility. The result is that the majority of military families are ineligible for SNAP benefits.

Due to this flaw in the current SNAP law, thousands of low-income military families facing food insecurity often rely on food pantries and food banks for emergency food assistance. Section 601 of H.R.4350 intends to correct this unacceptable situation and ensure these families can put food on the table by establishing a basic needs allowance for servicemembers with a gross income at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Guideline.

The Senate did attempt to address this problem as well, and we appreciate the Senate Armed Services Committee's attention to the needs of military families. However, S. 2792, Section 601, defines gross household income to include "all household income derived from any source." This definition would count BAH as income, significantly reducing the number of military

families struggling with food insecurity who would be eligible to receive the new basic needs allowance, and ultimately undermining the efficacy of the provision by forcing the most vulnerable families to continue regularly turning in desperation for help from food pantries that exist on or near every military base across the country. The Congressional Budget Office's score of Section 601 as proposed in the Senate bill reflects the extremely limited reach of this weakened provision – only about 500 military families would receive the allowance each year, with an average benefit of just \$200 per month. We know that this problem is much more extensive and that the financial need among struggling military families remains greater than what would be addressed by the provision in the Senate bill and urge you to support a more adequate solution to this long-overlooked issue.

The House-approved provision, which mirrors the bipartisan, bicameral *Military Hunger Prevention Act* and does not count BAH as income, is supported by diverse stakeholders, including organizations focused on supporting military families and organizations dedicated to anti-hunger initiatives. A number of advocacy groups have been closely monitoring this issue and have seen an alarming rise in need in the last year.

The Armed Services YMCA, one of the top food pantry providers at military installations, reported a 400% increase in demand and provided more than two million pounds of food serving more than 40,000 families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, a Military Family Advisory Network survey found that one in eight military family respondents is food insecure, and nearly twenty-four percent of currently serving military families have children who rely on free or reduced-price school meals. Research conducted by the National Military Family Association this year revealed that 14 percent of military families visited a food pantry at least once in the past 12 months. The physical and mental impacts of this type of household food insecurity ultimately impact servicemembers' ability to perform their mission, thereby compromising military readiness.

Supporting the House-approved provision in the FY22 NDAA will help correct the current flaw in federal law that prevents too many military families from qualifying for needed nutrition assistance and perpetuates preventable hardship. We urge the Committee to adopt the House language and end the scourge of military hunger.

Thank you for your leadership on this critical topic, and we look forward to working together to ensure that the individuals who serve our country can put food on their families' tables. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



TAMMY DUCKWORTH
UNITED STATES SENATOR



KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND
UNITED STATES SENATOR



MAZIE K. HIRONO
UNITED STATES SENATOR



CORY A. BOOKER
UNITED STATES SENATOR



TAMMY BALDWIN
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PATTY MURRAY
UNITED STATES SENATOR



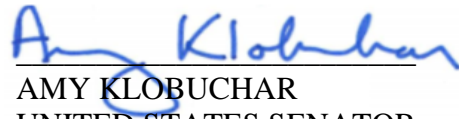
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BEN RAY LUJÁN
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JACKY ROSEN
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