



Duckworth, Panetta To Leadership: Address Military Hunger In National Defense Authorization Act

November 17 2021 2:54 PM



WASHINGTON, D.C. — Combat Veteran and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), who served in the Reserve Forces for 23 years and is a member of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), led 12 of her colleagues in sending a letter to the Chairs and Ranking Members of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) and the U.S. House Armed Services Committee (HASC) urging them to include a House-approved provision authored by Duckworth and Panetta that tackles the issue of

military hunger in the final version of the NDAA. U.S. Representative Jimmy Panetta (D-CA-20) led his colleagues in sending a similar letter today.

“Due to 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,” wrote the members, adding that their provision “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... income at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Guideline.”

“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,” the members continued. “We urge the Committee to adopt the House language and end the scourge of military hunger.”

Along with Duckworth, the letter was signed by U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM), Patty Murray (D-WA), Jacky Rosen (D-NV), Raphael Warnock (D-GA), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Alex Padilla (D-CA) and Jon Ossoff (D-GA).

Duckworth and U.S. Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) [introduced](#) the bipartisan Military Hunger Prevention Act—which would create a basic needs allowance to help low-income military families put food on the table—in April of this year. In June of last year, Duckworth and Blackburn [sent](#) a bipartisan letter to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue requesting that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) take swift action to cease considering monthly Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as earned income when determining a military household’s eligibility for USDA nutrition programs. Duckworth also [sent](#) a letter to the Biden Administration in March of this year urging it to develop concrete steps to tackle the alarming rate of food insecurity many military families currently face.

Full text of the letter can be found [here](#) and below:

November 17, 2021

Senator Jack Reed Senator James Inhofe

Chairman Ranking Member

Committee on Armed Services Committee on Armed Services

United States Senate United States Senate

Representative Adam Smith Representative Mike Rogers
Chairman Ranking Member

Committee on Armed Services Committee on Armed Services

United States House of Representatives United States House of Representatives

Dear Chairman 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 offbase or privatized military housing. Under current guidelines, BAH covers 95% of housing costs, so service members 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 service members' 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 Service 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,