

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

“Policy Brief Launch: Solving Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans and Military Families”

DATE

Tuesday, June 7, 2022 at 9:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING

Anne Marie Dougherty

CEO, Bob Woodruff Foundation

Jim McGovern

U.S. Representative; Chairman, House Rules Committee; Member, House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operation

Margaret Kabat

Senior Advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Families, Caregivers, and Survivors, Department of Veterans Affairs

CSIS EXPERTS

Caitlin Welsh

Director, Global Food Security Program, CSIS

Colonel Christopher Reid

Military Fellow, International Security Program, CSIS

Colonel Danielle Ngo

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Transcript By

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Caitlin Welsh:

Good morning. I'm Caitlin Welsh, director of the CSIS Global Food Security Program. Welcome to this public launch of the CSIS Policy Brief: Solving Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans and Military Families.

Food insecurity has afflicted military and veteran households for decades, and new data helps us understand its extent. USDA's Economic Research Service recently reported that as many as one-third of respondents at a major U.S. Army installation were food-insecure, which is significantly higher than the general population, and that working-age veterans have a 7.4 percent greater risk for food insecurity than on veterans nationwide. Food insecurity affects military-mission readiness, retention, and recruitment. For these reasons, Defense Secretary Austin said last year, quote: "Our men and women in uniform and their families have enough to worry about. Basic necessities like food and housing shouldn't be among them." And General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said just last month, "No soldier, airman, sailor, or Marine should struggle to feed their family."

Yet, progress remains elusive. Our brief, written by CSIS's Jamie Lutz and me, puts forward policy solutions tailored to active-duty military members and their families, those in transition between active duty and veteran status, and veterans. The recommendations included in our brief are the result of over 15 months of research and interviews with members of all branches of the military, representatives of the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, and Veterans Affairs, staff of members of Congress and congressional committees, advocacy organizations, and other researchers. To all those who contributed to our final brief, thank you.

A common theme across our research was the notion that food insecurity does not exist in a vacuum; it exists alongside and is often exacerbated by other challenges. Therefore, policy recommendations at the conclusion of our brief concern not just improvements to food security-specific programming but to a host of other issues, including military family economic security, including their recently mandated basic needs allowance, spousal employment, and access to childcare, changes to long-standing requirements around permanent change of station moves, improvements to data collection, efforts to address stigma around food insecurity, and others. There is no silver bullet. Addressing food insecurity in the military and veteran communities requires a holistic approach including these and important steps.

We intend for our brief to be actionable and hope it will inform policymakers' decisions on Capitol Hill and the executive branch. We were very proud to undertake this research in partnership with the Bob Woodruff Foundation, whose comprehensive investments to support military – whose comprehensive investments support military and veteran families' well-being, including their food security.

I'm pleased to turn the stage to Anne Marie Dougherty, CEO of the Bob Woodruff Foundation.

Anne Marie
Dougherty:

At the Bob Woodruff Foundation we find, fund, shape and accelerate equitable solutions that help our impacted veterans, service members, their families and their caregivers thrive. We are dedicated to improving the overall health and wellbeing of the military and veteran population and to ensuring that communities across the country have the resources and the capacity to meet their needs wherever they are.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought food insecurity rushing to the forefront of the national conversation, but we know that it's not a new issue. Eighty-seven percent of BWF's local partners across the U.S. reported they were serving veterans with food and nutritional need, but only 27 percent of them could completely meet those veterans' needs. These numbers are alarming, and they're also a call to action.

BWF has invested resources to understand the challenges that contribute to military and veteran food insecurity, so that we can be a part of the long-term solution. We know that food insecurity and especially mental health feed each other, and about the relationship between stress, food insecurity, eating decisions and health outcomes that intersect with other issues within our community.

Our partners are the subject matter experts we need to rely on for the most current data to inform our investment strategy. The Center for Strategic and International Studies is one of those partners. We are proud to partner with CSIS in support of their research looking at long-term solutions to food insecurity in the U.S. military and veteran communities.

As you know, CSIS has done an extraordinary job exploring current policies and programs to come up with recommendations for solutions that will mitigate the alarming rate of food insecurity among our military and veteran families.

BWF is currently granting to organizations addressing food insecurity in our military and veteran population, and the lessons from our partners are informing those grants. We're granting across the spectrum a full plate, providing meals; a full pantry, helping families so that they never have to choose between paying rent and filling their pantry; and full coverage, to help resolve the systemic challenges that create food insecurity.

With the support of our partners, our vision is to one day achieve that full coverage, and that's a future where all Americans are food secure.

Ms. Welsh: Thank you to Anne Marie Dougherty, CEO of the Bob Woodruff Foundation, for these important remarks.

We're also very pleased to feature Representative Jim McGovern of Massachusetts' second district, who is a long-time champion of food security and military and veteran wellbeing. Representative McGovern was unable to join us this morning, and so, we recorded this conversation yesterday evening.

(Begin recorded segment.)

Ms. Welsh: Representative McGovern, it's a true honor to have you here with us today. During your 25 years in the House of Representatives, you have championed efforts to combat food insecurity, globally and domestically, particularly among U.S. veterans and military families. You currently serve as chair of the House Hunger Caucus, as a member of the Congressional Military Family Caucus, a member of the House Agriculture Committee Subcommittee on Nutrition, and chair of the House Rules Committee.

As chair of the House Rules Committee, you convened a roundtable last year that examined food insecurity in the military and veteran communities. This roundtable resulted in a letter that you and a bipartisan group of colleagues sent to the secretaries of defense, agriculture and veterans affairs urging them to address hunger and food insecurity among military families.

And I'd like to start here. In the roundtable you convened last year, you said, we have to call this issue what it is – a national outrage. You are a steadfast champion of food security in the military community, so what is it that motivates you to take action against food insecurity among active-duty service members, among veterans and their families.

Representative James McGovern (D-MA): Well, first of all, I think food insecurity should not be tolerated for anybody in this country, but when it comes to our veterans who served our country, many of them risked their lives for our country. When it comes to our active-duty service members and their families, who are right now, you know, serving our country and putting their lives on the line to protect us – I mean, the notion that they struggle with putting food on the table I find offensive, and it shouldn't happen.

Hunger and food insecurity are essentially political conditions. I mean, we have the food. We have the resources. What we lack is the political will. And you know, I think we owe it to those who have served our country and who are serving our country to make sure that they're not going hungry. This should not be a radical idea, and as you mentioned, it was a bipartisan appeal, Democrats and Republicans urging that action be taken. And I'm proud of that fact, that it was a bipartisan appeal.

Ms. Welsh: Great. Thank you. That's a great segue to my – to my next question. As you mentioned, so food security and also military and veteran well-being are typically supported by Democrats and Republicans, and you've worked many times with many colleagues across the aisle on these issues. But despite enjoying bipartisan support in the Congress, the challenge of food insecurity in the military persists. So why do you think this is?

Rep. McGovern Well, I mean, one is the Department of Defense historically has refused to acknowledge the problem, which is a great mystery to me. You know, when we did the hearing in the Rules Committee that you referred to, we heard from experts who told us that our servicemembers and veterans and their families, you know, need more support to be able to, you know, put nutritious food on the table. They talked about improving data collection, removing the basic allowance for housing from the SNAP calculation, base pay increases, expanding short-term SNAP guaranteed smooth transitions into civilian life. You know, these are all simple things that we can do just to make life easier for our active-duty servicemembers and for – and for veterans. And I should point out that we did have, I think, an important win to get the basic needs assessment into the NDAA. But that was an uphill battle. But there are – there are answers and there are solutions here that are simple. We did – we made some progress. We need to make more progress.

Ms. Welsh Yeah. Thank you.

Now, you just mentioned a number of possible solutions. Clearly, there's no silver bullet to address food insecurity among active-duty military members or among veterans and their families. This is the responsibility of multiple departments – the Department of Agriculture, Defense, Veterans Affairs – that are under the jurisdiction of multiple different committees of Congress. Do you think this helps explain why the issue is particularly difficult to solve?

Rep. McGovern Yeah, no, look, it is – it is complex, you know, to have multiple committees involved in the process and multiple agencies, and people often get lost in the system. And it's one of the reasons why I've called for this White House conference on hunger, nutrition, and health, you know, to serve as a place to break down the silos, to highlight, you know, what's not working in this country, and to talk about the complexities of the system. And so, you know – you know, I also think, you know, one of the problems has been kind of a general indifference. We tolerate food insecurity in this country, again, not just amongst our veterans and amongst our active-duty servicemembers but amongst – you know, we have 40 million people in this country who don't know where the next meal's going to come from. So, you know, this needs to become more of a political priority.

Ms. Welsh Thank you for mentioning the White House conference. Last month, as you know, President Biden announced the first White House conference on hunger, nutrition, and health in over 50 years. You played a critical role in making this conference a reality. You led a bipartisan bill calling for the conference. You secured over \$2 ½ million in funding for it. You drummed up national media attention and led other important steps. When it comes to food insecurity among active-duty military members and their families and veterans, are there particular outcomes that you're hoping for?

Rep. McGovern Yeah, there are. And by the way, we reached out and talked to the secretary of VA, Denis McDonough. We reached out to the secretary of defense, as well, because we want them to be part of this conversation.

Look, I mean, you know, as I said, you know, we need – we need to remove the basic housing allowance from the SNAP calculation so that people's overall income who are active-duty servicemembers is not hurt by the fact that they get this housing allowance, that they still can qualify for other things. We need to create a basic needs allowance for military families. We need to improve military spouse workforce issues such as job placement assistance, you know, post-move. We need to ensure E-6 and below military families are screened for SNAP and WIC eligibility, you know. You know, we need to create a transitional SNAP benefit for servicemembers when they're separating from the military, and more technical assistance and partnerships. I mean, I can go on and on and on.

But we have a whole list of things to do. And again, I think this White House conference provides the secretary of defense and the secretary of the VA an opportunity to put some things on the table that we can get done. And again, I think – I think there's bipartisan support for these things.

Ms. Welsh Yeah, thank you. Thank you very much for your support there. And wondering for our audience, do you have any final messages – and this being for any final message for your colleagues in Congress, in the executive branch, or final messages for members of our military, veterans, and their families?

Rep. McGovern Well, look, I mean, I think my message is that, you know, we are building a movement here to try to solve some of the problems that we've been talking about on this call. And again, I would say that, you know, we ought to start with the fact that our enlisted families should be paid enough so they don't need to rely on SNAP, so that they're not hungry to begin with. I mean, again, we're asking people to sacrifice, you know, for the protection of this country; I mean, we ought to pay them a livable wage, and I want DOD to start caring more for military families. SNAP should not have to cover DOD's failure, in my opinion.

And then the final thing I'll say is, look, as I said before: Hunger is a political condition. I mean, it's not like we don't have the food, it's not like we don't have the resources and the money; we need the political will. And so this White House conference will be an opportunity for us to get the political will to help our service members, to help our veterans, and to help, quite frankly, all families who struggle with food insecurity in this country.

Ms. Welsh Thank you. As many of us know, the last White House conference on this topic did result in very tangible outcomes that affect food security to this day for families across our country, so we do hope to see similar outcomes out of the coming White House conference. So thank you again for your leadership on that issue.

Rep. McGovern And I'd just say one final thing: You know what? There are ways for people to participate in the planning of this conference and so people should get involved and should make their ideas heard, and they can call their elected representatives as well, because we don't know everything and some of the people who may be listening to this conversation may have some good ideas. They ought to make them known, they ought to get them to the White House, and that will be talked about at this conference. So I appreciate the opportunity to be with you.

Ms. Welsh Good. Thank you. Thanks for bringing up those listening sessions that are happening across the country right now. You said that you don't know everything; you do know – (laughs) – an incredible amount. You are an expert on this topic and a steadfast champion, and we really, really appreciate your leadership on these issues and thank you very much for joining us today.

Rep. McGovern All the best. Thank you.

(End of recorded segment.)

Ms. Welsh Thank you again to Representative McGovern for joining me in yesterday's conversation and for being a steadfast champion for food security in the military and veteran communities.

I'm very pleased now to turn to our expert panel, which includes Meg Kabat, who is senior adviser to the secretary of Veterans Affairs for Families, Caregivers, and Survivors in the Department of Veterans Affairs; Air Force Colonel Chris Reid, who is also a military fellow with CSIS; and Army Colonel Danielle Ngo, also a military fellow with CSIS. Thank you all for joining me this morning.

And to our audience, if you'd like to submit questions, please do so using the "Ask Live Questions Here" button on our event website.

With our panel I'll be discussing policy solutions to food insecurity among active-duty service members and their families and among veterans.

And Meg, I'd like to turn to you first to talk about food insecurity in the veteran communities. You advise Secretary McDonough on a variety of issues, including food security. Can you describe your and the secretary's vision regarding this issue, including some of the programming that you have in mind?

Meg Kabat

Absolutely. First of all, thank you for having me here, including the Department of Veterans Affairs, and certainly for all the work that you've done on this incredibly important topic.

So for VA, for Secretary McDonough, for myself, food security is one aspect of providing all-inclusive, all-encompassing health care to veterans, and what we find is, you know, food security is often called a social determinant of health; I like to use the expression I heard many years ago: a social driver of health. And so if individuals have access to food, healthy food, then they are able to take care of themselves, take care of their families. Certainly in VA we care for a veteran population that has more significant health issues than the general public, and therefore, nutrition is really a very important part of their health care. So we're doing a lot of things. Back in 2017, we added a couple of questions to our primary care screening that we do around food security in order to identify veterans who are struggling with this particular issue. And then we changed that to the hunger vital sign that's used more frequently now, which is just two questions that helps clinicians in the moment identify veterans who are struggling with this issue. And for us, a big part of this is identification and also awareness. We find, even in your study, it was noted that veterans who are accessing the G.I. Bill and education are less likely to utilize SNAP. So what we need to focus on is really making sure that we're talking about food security, not just in our health care programs but also in our benefit programs and our staff are asking veterans about whether or not they're food secure and how we can help them. So we have a lot of established partnerships; we have over 40 food pantries, so if a veteran is – it's identified that that veteran has challenges in this area they can immediately get access to food, a lot of partnerships with local farm stands and local different producers or different kinds of food. I recently had the opportunity to go up to Massachusetts to go to the Bedford VA and while I was there it was farm stand Thursday and veterans could actually drive through a long line and be handed a box of surplus produce. And so we're working in a lot of different ways to address this particular issue.

- Ms. Welsh OK, thank you. One thing I've noticed is that when we talk about food insecurity in these populations we will often talk about active-duty military members and their families, but about veterans singularly. Can you speak to the VA's efforts to address food insecurity among the entire family?
- Ms. Kabat Absolutely. I think that's a really key point, and I'm the senior adviser for Families, Caregivers, and Survivors, which is a new position, and I think that symbolizes real recognition on the part of this administration in really just health care and benefits in general that the entire family is impacted by a whole variety of different issues that impact the veteran. And certainly, DOD does a really amazing, holistic job of supporting the entire family, and unfortunately, a lot of those services and supports fall off when the individual service member transitions to veteran status. So we're doing a variety of different things; one is really to just increase awareness. We know that sometimes veterans are food-insecure themselves because they are making sure that their children are getting access to food, and so we need to really be asking questions not just about the individual veteran but about their entire family. We're really taking steps to do that and think about the veteran as a part of an entire ecosystem and not just the veteran themselves.
- Ms. Welsh Sure. Our research – and I'm sure yours does as well – shows that there are certain veterans, certain subpopulations who are more at risk of food insecurity than others. Can you speak to us a little bit about this?
- Ms. Kabat Sure. We certainly know that this is one issue that impacts veterans of color substantially at a higher rate. It also impacts veterans who are in rural areas, and this is an area where we really need that collaboration. Very excited about the White House conference that was mentioned before to really talk about those rural veterans because of the lack of access to food. It's not just an economic piece; it's also there's not a grocery store that has the healthy, fresh produce and those kinds of things nearby, so we really need that collective partnership to focus in on those particular veterans.
- Ms. Welsh Thank you. Thank you. How about some other subpopulations of veterans, including those who experience PTSD, for example, and homelessness? What about those factors?
- Ms. Kabat So we find that food insecurity is really part of a giant circle or cycle. If you're food-insecure, you're less likely to – you don't feel well; you probably don't access health care, which means your diabetes, your mental health, whatever those issues, those symptoms get exacerbated; you're less likely to access care. It's just a giant circle. So one of the really important things that we're doing – and you mentioned this in your study as well – is really increasing the amount of peer support that we can provide to veterans who have chronic conditions like PTSD and things like diabetes that really do have an important aspect of recovery and maintenance in those kinds of

conditions is access to healthy food. And so training our peer support folks about accessing, talking about food insecurity, providing resources in the local community, all of those kinds of things.

Ms. Welsh Thank you very much. We'll circle back to a number of these issues at the conclusion of our panel, but thank you for your remarks and thanks again for being with us today.

Ms. Kabat Absolutely. Thank you.

Ms. Welsh I'm happy now to turn to Air Force Colonel Chris Reid, who is joining us from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, where his brother-in-law is assuming command of the 820th Air Force Red Horse Squadron.

Colonel Reid, thank you so much for joining us this morning, and congratulations to your family.

Colonel Chris Reid Thank you. It's great to be here.

Ms. Welsh Great. Thank you, Colonel Reid.

While an Air Force colonel, you're also a CSIS military fellow and you've been actively engaged in this work stream since you joined CSIS. And can you explain for our audience, why is food security in the U.S. military so important to you?

Col. Reid Yeah, thanks. First thing: Myself as well as all of the military fellows at CSIS are voluntary participants in the study. You know, we're not forced to be in any of these projects, necessarily, so it's really just a matter of our interests, and most of the time it boils down to things that we have seen and that have affected the folks that we have led, so in particular, in command I have dealt with a lot of these issues for young airmen and their families and, quite honestly, even some of the middle ranks as well, so sometimes some of the issues are masked depending on what the circumstances are and how many times the military's asked them to move and how many demands that the military has placed on them. So really it kind of spreads a wide area, but seeing the effects on these folks and just knowing the true value of what our military brings us and its people has motivated me to want to be a part of this.

Ms. Welsh Thank you. And thank you again for your input, particularly to the solutions that we put forward at the conclusion of our policy brief. There were a few that you worked with us particularly on, one having to do with spousal employment. One of these solutions had to do with helping military spouses to find and maintain professional careers. On the outside, one might think

that this has nothing to do with food security, but can you explain why you think that this is very important to solving food security in military families?

Col. Reid

Yeah, absolutely. The report does a great job, I think, of pointing out what dual incomes bring, you know, and so when we sort of compare our military we often do this and everything that – when we talk about military incentives, I think we compare civilian life to the military life and we try to do cross-comparisons, so – and some of the same challenges can be found in the corporate structure, but military has a couple of unique twists to it with all the moves. So when we talk about dual-income versus just really supporting the military member themselves and keeping them employed throughout wherever they go, you will have some severe impacts to not being able to maintain a dual-income stream to the household. There's also things like childcare that, quite frankly, are one of the toughest hills to climb. Someone could move into a base, a new base and see just a long waiting list for the child development center, and so that is difficult in even looking for work, and I think that the report does a great job of wanting to extend the length of time for reimbursement for those services out to the average time that it takes the spouse to be employed. And I think the – you know, it's really interesting that you have a group of folks that have committed their lives to the military life of service, right, but aren't in uniform, and so, you know, the nation is really missing out on this, like, great treasure of people that have already committed themselves to service. So from a value perspective and from just, like, our nation's strength, it's tough to see the challenges and sacrifices they've had to make.

Ms. Welsh

Yeah. Thank you. It was beautifully stated. Thank you for reminding us of that.

Things like spousal employment and also childcare relate to a fact of military life, which is frequent, permanent change of station moves. How does changing the way that the military approaches PCS moves, how might that affect food security in military families?

Col. Reid

Yeah, I think the – one of the main things, you know, if the report and the recommendations take hold with respect to increasing incentives in the private sector for spouse employment that would be fabulous, but until such time every move is just a complete reset of that spouse's, you know, what they've accomplished and what – where they are professionally. There are a number of programs that get spouses work at some entry-level jobs, but there is very little done at the professional level to keep spouses employed with respect to certifications, licensing in a whole bunch of different careers. And then there is a couple of incentives for some privatized companies to hire spouses, but that effort is pretty paltry, if you look at it as well. So just, you know, resetting one's life every time you move is a complete – I know for me personally and then for the folks that I've led, it is almost all the time net

loss now when one moves to their personal finances. There's a number of bonuses you can get and allowances you can get when you move, but the way the market is right now and the way that a lot of the prices have surged really today in today's military it is a net loss for an individual any time one has to move.

Ms. Welsh

Yeah. Thank you, Colonel Reid. We will come back to a number of these things at the end of our panel, and thank you, again, for joining us. I should have noted that in Nevada you are three hours behind us, so it is 6:30 where you are. So, thank you, again, for joining us so early in the morning.

I'm very happy right now to turn to Army Colonel and CSIS Military Fellow Danielle Ngo.

Danielle, thank you, again, for joining us today and for all of your important inputs throughout this project.

I'll start with the same question that I asked Colonel Reid. While an Army colonel you – while an Army colonel – and Chris is in the Air Force – but you're also a CSIS military fellow, and you've been actively engaged in this work stream since you joined CSIS.

So, can you explain to us why is this topic important to you?

Colonel Danielle
Ngo

Yes, thank you Caitlin. It's really important to me for, really, three reasons.

The first reason is because it's about taking care of soldiers and their families, and for soldiers, making sure that they're fit and healthy, right, because then it goes into the second reason is readiness. You want your soldiers, your military, to be ready to fight when you need them to fight.

And in order to do that, soldiers can't be worried about their families back home if they're deployed, and when's the next time they're going to get food on the table, or are they eating healthy? So, if the soldier's family's taken care of, then the soldier is taken care of too. Then they don't have to worry about those issues.

And thirdly, when my family and I moved here to America we were on WIC and food stamps, too, so I know personally how that is, and at times it can be a stigma – and we've mentioned that before; Chris mentioned that – to being on those types of supplements. But when you need it, it's there for you and it's great, and I think if soldiers, sailors, air men, they need it, then they should get it.

But having a job and like Chris said earlier, dual income streams, most families can't live on one income stream in today's economy, and so, if you have two income streams then you're less likely to need those – those – help.

Ms. Welsh

Yeah, those forms of assistance. Yeah, yeah, so many things come to play in these solutions, as we mentioned.

When you and I were speaking earlier, you reminded us of the importance of the pandemic to this issue, and indeed, it was the pandemic that brought this issue to the forefront, especially in the media. We saw long lines at food banks and food pantries, including around military installations, and that was a shock to many, but to – many others weren't surprised.

Can you explain to us the importance of the pandemic to food security – or food insecurity in the military community?

Col. Ngo

Sure. So, during the pandemic the military suffered along with the rest of the United States, but there are certain aspects of the military that were exacerbated.

For example, single soldiers they have access to dining facilities, and those dining facilities offer healthy, nutritious meals. And the military's worked really hard at making sure that our soldiers get those rounded meals. But during the pandemic, a lot of service members were told to stay at home to not spread COVID, and because of that, they had to look for sources of food or more easily get food like drive thru, takeout food, which is often not the most healthy, nutritious food. And their families, too – a lot more military members are living off post. If they're not young, single soldiers who are required to live on base, if they have families, most families now have the option of living on or off base, and if the housing is filled up on base, they have to live off base.

And so, they don't have access to those healthy nutritious dining facility meals that other soldiers have access to, so – and they have to pay more money, right? So, those meals are supplemented. So, if they are eating off base more, it's going to cost more, and so, food insecurity increased during the time of the pandemic. And also, now with inflation, it's more expensive to buy food. So, you'll buy cheaper processed foods – and again health and nutrition for our family members and our soldiers are important. And it was hard because of the pandemic and now because of inflation.

Ms. Welsh

Yeah. Yeah, of course related to the pandemic.

Speaking of solutions that we put forward in our brief, you touched on the importance of spousal employment, of course, and also the importance of childcare. Again, these things might not seem to be solutions to food

insecurity in the military, but our research shows that they are really important to solving this problem.

Can you speak a little bit more about the importance of spousal employment and to improving access to childcare in the military?

Col. Ngo

Sure. Both of these issues are personal for me. The first one, spousal employment, my husband is a civilian, and he had taken a contractor job with the Department of Defense. And back in 2014 when I was a battalion commander, he decided to try his hand at a federal job, and he loved it. The problem is we moved that same year, but he loved it so much that he decided to stay there and work – fly back and work.

And so, every time we've moved, four times since then, he's moved with me and flown back to Colorado to work, and we're lucky because we can afford for him to do it. He's an independent contractor, so we can write part of that off on our taxes, but most people can't do that. Most families can't do that. So, their spouses, therefore, cannot maintain their jobs. And my husband also decides to stay there because the credentialing process, and the re-application for his medical credentials is just so overwhelming that he doesn't want to do that.

And in terms of childcare, I'll just give you an example. When I was stationed in Hawaii, I went through 11 childcare providers in one year waiting for a child development center to open, and you know, I was brigade commander. And I didn't want to say, hey, I'm a brigade commander put me to the front of the line, because I know that there are soldiers who can't afford childcare off base.

So, I looked off base to try to find childcare, and it's really hard to find qualified people who you trust to take care of your children and who will feed them a good, healthy diet. So, it's really important to get good childcare so families don't have to worry; soldiers don't have to worry about how their children are being taken care of, and if they're being fed well.

And now as well, with the supply chain problems, you know, how are – how are they going to get the good food that they need?

Ms. Welsh

Yeah, so many problems – so many issues that are related to these challenges of food security in military and veteran communities. Thank you, again, for joining us for today.

I'd like to take a step back and ask a – pose a question to all panelists and this has to do with stigma, real and perceived, around experiencing food insecurity and accessing help to address food insecurity.

Can we speak a little bit about how – about the existence of stigma, and how to overcome stigma to help families who need assistance to access it?

Colonel Reid, do you mind if I start with you?

Col. Reid

You know, sure, I'd love to talk about stigma. I think it's the first thing that I would just note is just an observation, and that is that when you join the military you are given everything you need to do your job, right. So, when you're employed, you're given all of your gear when you're back at station. You know, you're given everything you need to theoretically do your job.

And so, the concept of stigma amongst the uniformed member is not difficult to understand, right, because, you know, you've got this group of folks that, from a pride perspective – just, you know, professional dedicating oneself to service to the country and being given everything that they need to do their job, that really psychologically is easy to understand.

So, folks see that as a failure on their part, and if it was a failure on their part, I would question why we've, you know, had to have – the need to have a lot of the offices for these programs on base – physically on base, and that is – to me, that is the nation saying that, hey, we know up front you're going to need supplementals, and so that's an issue, in my opinion, from a readiness perspective and everything else.

So, again, yeah, stigma is bred into our culture from that perspective. It's just that, you know, you go in thinking that the nation's given everything to you that you need to do your job.

Ms. Welsh

Thank you, Colonel Reid.

We spoke earlier about a toolkit that the Department of Defense put online for how to speak to members of the military about food insecurity, how to access resources, et cetera. That's a step in the right direction, but do you think that this is enough? You know, what are your thoughts there?

Col. Reid

Yeah. I think the toolkit is a great thing and I also believe in what the report showed, which is that the educational pieces vis-à-vis bred into the culture as well from day one. You know, the report that CSIS put together really acutely noticed that a lot of these programs, a lot of this advice, is given as they transition out of the military and that's a shame, especially when you consider the most vulnerable population, right, to a lot of these issues are the new accessions at the lowest levels in our ranks – rank structure.

So I don't know why the – you know, over the years we've always, you know, worried more about, you know, transitioning folks out, which is a very

important topic. But around the service, initially it's important as well, and I think providing that education upfront would be important.

Ms. Welsh Yeah. Thank you, Colonel Reid.

I'll ask the same question to Meg Kabat about stigma.

Ms. Kabat Sure. So I agree with everything that the colonel just said, and, certainly, that ethos doesn't dissipate when folks transition to become veterans, and this notion of taking care of one's family is so important and, really, something that is true for all of us, even those not in the military.

So I think for VA and, unfortunately, the individual veterans and their families who are experiencing food insecurity they often also have other issues. They're housing insecure. They may not be homeless yet but they don't have stable housing. Or they have mental health issues and concerns and symptoms that keep them from fully integrating into their communities. So it's stigma building upon stigma building upon stigma.

So for VA the way that we approach that is to, first of all, really embed peers throughout a lot of our mental health programming and our homelessness programming. I hope we can do more of that around this particular topic. And also to just make access to other resources simple and easy, so the food pantries and making sure that all of our staff are aware of how to access SNAP so that they can easily assist a veteran in applying for SNAP, or their family member if the veteran themselves isn't going to do it, making sure that a spouse or an adult child can help take care of that particular application.

And then, you know, the last thing I'll say about stigma is just really talking about it so to – you know, you quoted Secretary Austin earlier – just how important it is to kind of come clean and talk about how this is an issue that faces veterans and their families and, therefore, we need to do some things about it.

And there's a lot going on at local community levels, and so the more that we can make sure that those local communities are thinking about the veterans in their community as well in these issues the easier it is for veterans to access those services.

Ms. Welsh Thank you.

I'd like to turn to another question for the panel and this has to do with economic security trainings. Some inside and outside the military community will blame food insecurity on – simply on a lack of financial literacy among military families. Our research and research from others

shows that this is not the case, of course. But trainings – but financial security trainings can also play an important role in ensuring economic security and food security.

Perhaps, Colonel Ngo, can you speak a bit about this?

Col. Ngo

Yes. So in the military back when we had a lot more financial classes, right. We had programs that soldiers could go to and access this free education on finance, and over the years those resources have been less and less available. Money is going elsewhere, and so a lot of these programs have been cut.

If we bring back a lot of these financial programs, and not just a quick class for the soldier but also for the families because it's a family financial decision most of the time for all different areas, then they'll at least have the baseline to begin with to understand how to structure. And yes, you know, people sometimes think you can't handle your money and that's why you're food insecure and that's not the truth.

Things happen in your life – emergencies, et cetera, and you're helping extended family members. We don't know about people's families. So what was said earlier about communication, we have to make sure that we have this discussion with our service members and then to point them in the right direction. And so giving them the education and getting to know our soldiers enough. When we see that more and more not just the junior enlisted members are being food insecure, but more of the senior enlisted members, then you know that there's a larger issue. And if you don't have that conversation, you can't help them fix it.

Ms. Welsh

Mmm hmm. Thank you. Thank you very much for that. I'll turn to one or two more questions, and then I'll ask for final comments from our panelists.

I'd like to read a question that we received from the audience. And this person asked: It's understandable, though still unacceptable, that veterans can be food insecure. They can, sadly, fall through the cracks. But how are active-duty service members and their families food insecure? Why are we, the U.S. taxpayers, not paying these service members, as Representative McGovern said, a living wage? And I'll add another question on top of this. Would increasing base pay be a more effective way to target this issue? What are your thoughts here? Colonel Reid, can I start with you?

Col. Reid

Yeah, absolutely. I do think that the – you know, like, there's a number of algorithms and things to do with the financial organizations that feed the rates that military members get. And they are statistically supposed to be rooted in, you know, national mean averages of different communities. You know, in some cases – and I think the report does a great job talking about how one can get more, you know, financially supplemented in Los Angeles

versus if you were at Ford Benning and qualify for a basic needs allowance therefore, or not at Fort Benning. So, you know, sometimes circumstance matters.

If you looked at the mean average for rent, for example, in some locations – they actually have locations right on the base that are off limits to those members because of security reasons and things like that. There are areas like that. So a lot of the data is sometimes flawed in how we set things up. I do think that, you know, rates as a whole, that's always a topic that I think Congress is looking at, how to maintain against challenges like inflation and challenges like the housing market going up extremely high.

So those are my thoughts. You know, I think that some more qualitative thought needs to be put into certain locales over others. And a lot of the – a lot of the form-fitting we have done across the nation and across the world doesn't exactly fit every site like it should.

Ms. Welsh Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, Colonel Reid. One final question and then I'd like to turn to final remarks from the panelists. This is a question about the importance of food security in military families to the next generation of military members. Colonel Ngo, I wondered if you can speak to this for us.

Col. Ngo Thank you. So most of – nowadays, you see that the preponderance of new military members have a relative or a parent that was a military member previously. And so if the families now can't provide healthy food for their families, then in the future those children are going to grow up to be our future recruits. And if they can't join the military because they're obese or whatnot, then, I mean, right now 80 percent of the people who try to enlist in the military are denied because of various factors. And so it's going to be even harder to get new recruits in the future, and those recruits are not going to be as healthy as the servicemembers we have today.

Ms. Welsh Great. Thank you so much, Colonel Ngo.

I'd like to turn to our panelists against for final remarks. Meg Kabat, final remarks from your position at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Ms. Kabat Well, thank you very much for including me and the VA in this really important topic. I think from my perspective, I want to make sure that we continue to talk about families of veterans and how important that is. And really identifying ways during transition but even outside of transition, well beyond transition. And we have, if you do the math, several million veterans who are older, who are caring for their grandchildren. And so we really need to be thinking about veterans more holistically, and looking at the policies and the laws, the authorities that allow us to care for the entire family, so

really we can get that veteran the care that he or she needs beyond just that very narrow scope that we have done.

Ms. Welsh Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, Meg.

Colonel Reid.

Col. Reid Yeah. I'd like to hit on a couple of points that were just made. In respect to the tradition of handing down military service, I think that's really, from a value perspective, what I'd like to offer for my closing remarks. That is a national treasure as well. You know, when you talk about, you know, things that drive our nation and the things that have driven us to success in the past, like our industrial base, military service as a – as a handed-down profession is a – it's a very similar qualitative value. And I think that we write a lot of that with respect to how we take care of our veterans, how we take care of active duty when they're in uniform.

But the military member cares about two things. They care about service to their country and service to their family. And if they can't do the second one, look, they're going to – that's going to impact quite a bit what they think about handing that service down to their family. So we have to get this right, you know. And we have to – we have to make sure that there's reasoning and qualitative stuff put behind the data. And I do also – one last point I would just say that understanding where we are in the – like the report mentioned – having open sharing of data, and having an evaluation of where we're at on that spectrum as a report card is an extremely high national security concern.

So whenever folks tell me, hey, thanks for your service, I really just want to bring my family in and say, you know, give the thanks to them, quite honestly. Because from my perspective, again, it's not just about the country, but it certainly started there. But how I serve my family is huge.

Ms. Welsh Thank you, again, Colonel Reid. Thank you for joining us from Nevada for today's conversation.

Colonel, Ngo, final remarks.

Col. Ngo Yeah, I think the military does a great job at, once they understand that there's a problem, to try to find ways to fix it. But what I really like about your brief is that you focus on long-term solutions and not just Band-Aids. And that's really important, because it's really easy to turn, say, OK, let's start this program here, start this program there. But without the metrics behind it, and without following it for a long time, and without bipartisan support for that oversight, it's going to be really difficult to do. So thank you so much

for putting this all together and making this issue to the forefront. So thank you so much.

Ms. Welsh

Great. Thank you, again, for joining us today. And we do hope that our policy brief is actionable for policymakers.

I'd like to thank all of our panelists, again, for joining us today. And once more, I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to the research that informed our final brief, including from the CSIS Defense Budget Analysis Program, the Michael DeBakey VA Medical Center, Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, the USDA Economic Research Service, and the CSIS International Security Program.

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