



# **Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Building on Our Progress**

**Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness  
U.S. Department of Defense**

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# Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Building on Our Progress

## Contents

Message from USD(P&R) .....	3
Introduction .....	5
Outlining the Issue .....	5
Progress Updates and New Actions .....	6
LOE 1: Increase Access to Healthy Food .....	6
LOE 2: Enhance Spouse Economic Opportunities .....	9
LOE 3: Review Service member pay and benefits .....	11
LOE 4: Reinforce Financial Resources and Awareness .....	12
LOE 5: Encourage Service Members and Families to Seek Available Resources and Services .....	13
LOE 6: Expand Data Collection and Reporting .....	15
Way Forward .....	17
Food Security Resources .....	18

## Message from USD(P&R)

### A Message from the Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness



Nothing is more important to the Department's senior leaders than Taking Care of Our People. Our Service members and their families are the foundation of America's military strength, and their health and well-being are paramount. Food security is an essential component of health and wellness, and no amount of food insecurity within the Force is acceptable. In recognition of previous economic conditions and possible financial strain for some of our Service members, the Department established a strategy and roadmap to drive a whole-of-DoD effort, encompassing multiple levels of effort.

Since the publication of the food security strategy and roadmap over a year ago, the Department has taken many actions to increase food affordability and accessibility, as well as bolster the financial readiness of Service members and their families. The Department has:

- Implemented the Basic Needs Allowance, and increased the Basic Allowance for Housing and the Basic Allowance for Subsistence;
- Increased savings for Service members shopping at commissaries;
- Expanded child care options and announced a new child care fee schedule that will significantly reduce fees for many military families;
- Implemented a 4.6% basic pay raise for our troops;
- Introduced a Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot; and
- Initiated a qualitative study, to be completed in 2024, to better understand the causes of food insecurity among junior enlisted Service members.

Additionally, the Military Services have conducted reviews of their dining facilities and implemented other actions such as increasing food accessibility and availability including the use of kiosks and food trucks on installations throughout the U.S. and globally.

This *Strategy and Roadmap* Progress Report reinforces our commitment to support our Service members and reflects what we have learned through our actions in the past year. We must continue efforts underway and expand our efforts to understand and meaningfully address the many factors that impact food security. Food insecurity is symptomatic of challenges in many areas, such as financial security and readiness, spousal employment, child care, and convenient access to healthy food options. Because food insecurity does not have just one cause, our efforts must be holistic, multifaceted, and address the variety of family, living, and employment situations that exist across the Force.

The Department employs a number of different mechanisms to capture data and insights regarding military life. When it comes to food security, the data we have today points to a number of contributors that the Department has a responsibility to reinforce.

One of the most significant is the food and nutrition environment on military installations. Data indicate that our most junior, unaccompanied Service members living on DoD installations are not always

accessing, or are able to access, meals offered at government-funded dining facilities or galleys. This is an area of special focus moving forward.

Data also point to potential underutilization of federal nutrition assistance programs, like SNAP. Receipt of such program benefits could improve food security among eligible Service members. As such, the Department must ensure its members are able to access any benefits to which they are entitled.

These initiatives rest upon a foundation of Department efforts to continue expanding the Total Force's financial security, educate on healthful meal options that can be prepared at home, facilitate access to child care and dependent care, and remove barriers to military spouse employment.

This *Strategy and Roadmap* remains an evolving document that reflects continuous learning and represents a collaborative effort across the Department and Services. We will continue to update it as we learn more about the challenge and gain experience from implementing solutions. Our efforts to bolster food security are essential for mission readiness, and we will not waver in our support for the Total Force and their families.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ashish S. Vazirani', written in a cursive style.

Ashish S. Vazirani  
Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel  
and Readiness

## Introduction

In July 2022, the Department released its inaugural food security strategy, *Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Strategy and Roadmap*. Using an overarching framework inclusive of six lines of effort, the Department's *Strategy and Roadmap* outlined evidence-informed actions designed to bolster the food and economic security status of our Service members and their families.

Since the publication of the *Strategy and Roadmap*, the Department has completed or made substantial progress on many of the original actions to enhance Service members' access to healthy food. The Department has also continued to explore the root causes of food insecurity and identified new opportunities to expand on our existing efforts.

This progress report provides an update on the Department's actions targeting food security while also outlining how the Department intends to move forward in addressing food security in the force. As noted in the original *Strategy and Roadmap*, strengthening food security in the force requires a whole-of-Department approach, thus underscoring the need for continued, active engagement of all parts of the Department.

The Department's work is part of the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health released in September 2022, which is a whole-of-government roadmap to ending hunger and reducing diet-related diseases in the U.S. by 2030.

### Outlining the Issue

Food security encompasses aspects of both physical and economic access to nutritious food. As noted in the 2022 *Strategy and Roadmap*, the Department aligns its food security definitions with those used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA):

- Food security: access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.
- Low food security: reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- Very low food security: reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

When a household reports characteristics that qualify as low or very low food security, the USDA classifies that household as food insecure. Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Food insecurity, however, does not necessarily mean that members of that household are "going hungry." Hunger is a physical condition caused by the lack of food itself, while food insecurity is defined as a lack of access to certain qualities and quantities of food.

The Department of Defense has used several methodologies to assess the food security of U.S. Service members and their families. For several years, this has included targeted questions in our annual Status of Forces Survey (SOFS). Beginning in September 2023, it launched an initiative, *Qualitative Data Collection on Access to Food on and Near Military Installations*, to use focus groups and interviews with enlisted Service members and spouses to glean insights into the lived experiences of our Service members and families, and our goal is to leverage this information to inform policy and programmatic decisions. Department leadership also uses routine Service member and family engagement and installation visits

to identify specific concerns related to food security. As the Department looks ahead to 2024, it is reassessing its survey methodology with the aim to ensure the most accurate and timely collection of food security data to better understand this complex issue.

Information gleaned to date suggests there are two sub-populations requiring particular focus for improved food security. First is our most junior, unaccompanied Service members living on DoD installations. Data suggest they are not always accessing, or are able to access, meals offered at government-funded dining facilities or galleys. Second is large, single-earner enlisted military households, as these larger families with limited resources, but many children or other dependents, may be eligible for federal food assistance programs.

## Progress Updates and New Actions

The July 2022 *Strategy and Roadmap* outlined six lines of effort aimed at strengthening food security in the force. Each line of effort included actions that, when taken together, address holistically the myriad factors affecting Service members' food security status. Moving forward, the Department will retain these six lines of effort and expand actions under each to comprehensively tackle the threat food insecurity poses to the force.

### LOE 1: Increase Access to Healthy Food

To be food secure, Service members and their families must have consistent access to healthy, affordable food. At times, the demands of a military lifestyle may make this challenging; the 2022 *Strategy and Roadmap* outlined actions aimed at improving Service member access to healthy foods. The 2022 survey found that dining facility utilization was low by single active duty Service members living on base, with these Service members only eating an average of 4.8 meals per week at a dining facility or galley.

### Update on Progress

#### Dining Facility and Meal Card Program Reviews

The Department of the Army completed its dining facility and Meal Card Program review. Efforts to address the disparity in access to food include the implementation of 26 Army food trucks, 11 operational kiosks, and 3 bistros that are programmed and budgeted. The Army continues to re-evaluate these modernization efforts and evaluate food deserts to determine the best places to implement these capabilities. The Army established an Army Food Program Board of Directors to address and synchronize Food Service insecurities and capabilities on installations Army-wide. Army is establishing additional resources on Fort Cavazos, TX, and working with DoD agency partners to allow Service members to utilize their meal entitlements in relevant moral, welfare, and recreation (MWR) and other locations on installations.

#### HIGHLIGHT FROM LOE 1

*The Military Services are continuing to assess access to healthy food options at installation dining facilities and meal card usage to better meet the nutritional needs of Service members.*

The Navy and Marine Corps have annual assessment processes to evaluate dining facility performance and adherence to Service policy and guidelines for healthy meals. At the time the food security strategy

was first published in July 2022, the Navy and Marine Corps lacked the ability to calculate meal entitlement utilization; however, both Services are working with payroll processing offices to establish a method to calculate meal entitlement utilization.

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) leveraged programs such as Go 4 Green (an easy visual to designate a food on a scale from green (most healthy) to red (eat in moderation)) and strategic menu placement in dining facilities to influence the food choices made by Airmen and Guardians.

Registered dietitians embedded within the 62nd Medical Brigade at Joint Base Lewis-McChord identified food insecurity affecting health and readiness of Service members and families, so they created a food pantry. Both single Service members and those with families have access to this resource. Having a food pantry on site makes it convenient for members to donate and pick up needed items; it also fosters community and resilience. Other units are seeking to emulate this initiative. In addition, community/non-profit partners at some installations also distribute food/provide for food pantries both on and off the installation for Service members and families.

#### Other Supporting Actions

Since July 2022, the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) has piloted grocery delivery at nine locations and is working to expand, at an increasing rate, to other CONUS locations. DeCA has increased access to on-the-go, ready-to-eat, economical, and healthy food options via delis and 174 fuel (food) stations in commissary stores, which focus on providing easy access to convenient and nutritious foods.

DeCA has a statutory mandate to offer a baseline savings as compared to relevant competitors for a market basket of goods. In accordance with current DoD policy, as expressed in the "Taking Care of Our People" memoranda and associated program, DeCA is delivering savings well above this statutory baseline, including savings on products critical to commissary patrons such as fresh meat, poultry, and seafood. As mentioned earlier, Consistent with Secretary Austin's September 2022 "Taking Care of Our Service Members and Their Families" memorandum, the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) reduced prices 3 to 5 percent and is providing at least a 25 percent savings globally on groceries as compared to local market basket averages, directly placing money back in the pockets of Service members and families.

The Hawaii Food Insecurity Working Group, which includes representation from the Military Services, National Guard, DeCA, and community partners, is attempting to address immediate needs through their support, including donations to food banks, financial counseling, and emotional/psychological support. This is a bridge to support the member/family member until they can get on stable ground; it includes events like monthly food drops at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam. The working group focuses on prevention by educating and creating an environment that allow members to be self-sufficient. Long term aid involves connecting members with government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), School Aid Breakfast/Lunch, and Summer Programs that can help stretch the member's dollar to maintain local economic security. The group also focuses on foods during disaster preparedness and response. The working group actively supported the National Guard during the Maui wildfire event, within the parameters proscribed by their respective statutory authorities and missions.

## New Actions

Moving forward, the Department is pursuing the following actions:

### Department of the Army

- Department of the Army will provide strategic communications messaging to encourage spouses and other dependents of enlisted personnel in pay grades E-1 through E-4 to patronize dining facilities at the discount rate. Information tables with food assistance programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC, National School Lunch Program, food banks, etc.) and other resources (to include installation financial counselors) will be available. The Financial Readiness Program's economic security video is available OCONUS via American Forces Network as an additional potential resource.

### Department of the Navy

- The Marine Corps will continue efforts to transform the Nonappropriated (NAF) food environment to better support healthy eating and educate on proper performance fueling by partnering with the Consortium of Health and Military Performance (CHAMP) and will execute a healthy eating research pilot aboard MCB Camp Lejeune in 2024. The CHAMP Research team will explore the feasibility of implementing a performance nutrition program in the NAF military environment, along with the relationship between nutritious options, diet quality, and metrics of health and performance.
- In partnership with the HQ USMC Performance Dietitian, the Marine Corps will execute a pilot program to expand USMC Fueled to Fight color coding used in Mess Halls to the NAF food environment. An MCX24 (unmanned Micro Mart) at Camp Pendleton is phase one of the pilot.
- The Marine Corps Exchange is implementing the "Better 4U" assortment of items in stores, which are healthier items labeled with in-store signage and communication.
- In FY25, MCCS will have the ability to create recipes and label menus which meet FDA guidelines for healthy and nutritious foods in direct run restaurants on each installation. The Marine Corps' goal is to have 25% of menu items meeting these guidelines.
- Navy Exchange Command (NEXCOM) is increasing access to "Better For You" food products through its Fleatery food truck and Outpost entity. These entities provide food service in strategic locations to enhance the availability and quality of food in problem areas.
- NEXCOM is increasing access to food options by adding the GrubHub "Avoid the Line" application. This option allows patrons to place food orders, and vendors will have them ready for pickup by the patron, which allows for faster food access and improved productivity and customer experience. Longer term, NEXCOM will explore ways to possibly support traditional GrubHub delivery on base.
- NEXCOM is expanding its NAF food service portfolio to locations where there are demonstrated requirements and the business model can be supported. NEXCOM opened or remodeled over 20 food concepts in FY22 and works with base leadership to identify food service gaps on bases.
- NEXCOM is exploring ways to enhance access to "Better For You" food products such as healthy snacks and fresh-food products through Micro Markets. Micro Market locations provide grab-and-go options in areas that previously had few food options, including areas within barracks/unaccompanied housing, Navy Lodges, Navy Gateway Inn and Suites, hospitals, within the controlled industrial areas of public shipyards, and potentially private shipyards. NEXCOM currently has 70 Micro Markets open on 35 installations, which process over 7.5M transactions

per year. Micro Markets within the public shipyards at Puget Sound, Washington, and Kittery, Maine, are due to open by end of CY 2023.

- NEXCOM is exploring “hybrid” mini marts which allow continuous 24/7 access to food. These unique locations will operate as a manned convenience format during normal hours, with gates to secure a portion of the store while allowing 24/7 access to an automated Micro Mart area. The first location, at Naval Air Station Oceana-Dam Neck Annex, Virginia, is targeted for opening by January 2024.
- NEXCOM is upgrading Ships Store onboard large vessels to allow automated 24/7 access to food options, creating a Micro Market Afloat. These are now operational on USS SAN ANTONIO and USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER.

#### Department of the Air Force

- The DAF will be increasing access to healthy food locations and hours of operation that are convenient to customers through the DAF campus dining system, which allows meal card holders to eat at a variety of venues, and by ensuring that at least 25 percent of food options at those locations are healthy choices.
- In FY23, two additional Air Force installations implemented the DAF campus dining system (Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, and Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona) for a total 28 installations. Additional projects are being considered for FY24/25.
- DAF also continues to explore automated merchandizing capabilities to increase access to nutritious food options at convenient locations. In April 2023, DAF launched a pilot to assess the effectiveness of autonomous retail merchandising at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, with three units being deployed in support. This pilot seeks to explore the sustainability of a kiosk capability. DAF is capturing lessons learned to inform possible expansion of the pilot.

#### HIGHLIGHT FROM LOE 2

*Launched in December 2022, the **Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP)** program provides career-ready military spouses with paid 12-week fellowships at employers across various industries and locations. As of October 2023, more than 300 spouses have participated in the fellowship, converting greater than 80% of program graduates from fellow to employed.*

#### LOE 2: Enhance Spouse Economic Opportunities

The Department recognizes that spouse unemployment is a longstanding challenge for Service members and families. Data from the 2022 SOFS-A corroborate previous findings and support the correlation between spouse under/unemployment and food insecurity. Additionally, the Department recognizes that for many military spouses, employment is not feasible unless stable, affordable child care is readily available. Given these challenges, the *Strategy and Roadmap's* second line of effort includes actions targeting both spouse employment and child care availability to address food insecurity more holistically. This approach mirrors the strategies underpinning Executive Order 14100 “Advancing Economic Security for Military and Veteran Spouses, Military Caregivers, and Survivors”.

## **Update on Progress**

In January 2023, the Department launched the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP). MSCAP is a competitive, paid, 12-week fellowship which places military spouses directly into industry with the goal of converting spouses from fellow to employed. As of October 2023, the Department had facilitated more than 300 spouses participating in the MSCAP fellowship, converting greater than 80 percent of those completing the program from fellow to employed.

In October 2023, the Department continued to increase the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), expanding the membership by more than ten percent, with the induction of 70 new traditional employer partners and the induction of the first-ever class of more than 60 MSEP Small Business Partners.

Five occupational licensure compacts (covering teaching, cosmetology, massage therapy, social work, and dental/dental hygiene) have been completed and are available to the states for adoption. One compact (teaching) has reached the threshold for implementation with adoption by ten states.

The Department launched a rapid expansion of Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS, or MCCYN-PLUS, to increase access to quality civilian providers when on-installation child care is unavailable to military families. As of November 2023, MCCYN-PLUS is offered in Arkansas, Colorado, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Miami-Dade County, Florida.

To boost capacity of installation child development programs (CDPs) and better serve military families, the Department standardized a minimum 50 percent employee discount for the first child of CDP direct-care workers. This initiative is intended to improve staff recruitment and retention and reduce capacity challenges caused by staffing shortages.

## **New Actions**

Moving forward, the Department is pursuing the following actions:

- To recruit and retain qualified, professional Child Development Program staff, many of whom are military spouses, the Department focused efforts on reducing staffing limitations and maximizing capacity at Child Development Program facilities. OUSD(P&R) created a Recruitment, Retention, and Compensation Task Force in August 2022 to conduct a bottom-up review of current pay grades; qualifications and training; recruitment and retention initiatives; employment transferability across all Services; and management and classroom staffing standards.
- In September 2023, the Department hosted a DoD Child Care Summit in Alexandria, Virginia, with Department of Defense and Military Department service providers and subject matter experts to discuss the child care landscape, challenges, lessons learned, and best practices. The Department is reviewing the recommendations from the Summit as it continuously seeks to improve the affordability, accessibility, and quality of child care options for military families.
- The Department has facilitated the development of occupational licensure compacts for dietitians and school psychologists, two career fields in which many military spouses work. The National Center for Interstate Compacts reports that these compacts will be ready for states to consider before the 2024 legislative sessions. Additionally, the Department participated in the official kick-off for the development of the respiratory therapist licensure compact in October 2023.

### LOE 3: Review Service member pay and benefits

While food access is one component of food security, economic security and financial wellbeing are also critical. Data from the 2022 SOFS-A revealed that those whose financial condition had worsened over the past 12 months, and those with a lower financial wellbeing score, were more likely to experience food insecurity than their counterparts. While we have a competitively and well-compensated force, as confirmed by a recent Congressional Budget Office study, there are opportunities to improve the financial stability for some Service members. As such, the Department remains committed to reviewing Service member pay and benefits and maintaining a fair and competitive compensation and entitlement system.

#### Update on Progress

Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts (DCFSAs) for Service members are on track for implementation. DCFSAs offer eligible military families with another financial option for reducing the burden of the cost of dependent care, ultimately bolstering military readiness, as they provide accounts that allow Service members to set aside up to \$5,000 per household in pre-tax earnings for qualified dependent care expenses. Qualified expenses include child care, preschool, and before and after school programs for dependents under 13 years of age, care for incapacitated family members of any age, and other eligible dependent care expenses. The care must be required to enable Service members and spouses, if married, to work, look for work, or attend school full-time. Enrollment will occur during Open Season from November 13 through December 11, 2023. Accounts for enrolled Service members will be active as of January 1, 2024. The Department is conducting an educational outreach campaign to raise awareness of this new benefit via various channels to include webinars, social media, and web content.

#### HIGHLIGHT FROM LOE 3

*Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts (DCFSAs) will have their first open season from November 13 through December 11, 2023. These allow participants to contribute up to \$5,000 per household per year in pre-tax income to pay for dependent care expenses.*

The Department increased dislocation allowance rates for members in pay grades E-1 through E-6 effective October 1, 2022, to reduce out of pocket expenses during a Permanent Change of Station move from one duty station to another.

In January 2023, the Department implemented a 4.6 percent basic pay increase for all Service members and increased the non-taxable Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) an average of 12.1 percent, addressing significant increases in rental housing costs across the country. The Department also increased the non-taxable Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS) by 11.2 percent. On January 1, 2024, a further 5.2 percent basic pay increase will go into effect for all Service members. The Department is further holistically examining the components of Service member pay through the 14<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC). As directed by the QRMC charter, the holistic assessment will include an evaluation of military compensation from a military family perspective, including examination of military spouse unemployment, the impact of frequent military moves and periodic separation, as well as childcare access and cost.

The Basic Needs Allowance program was updated July 1, 2023, to provide a monthly allowance for Service members who voluntarily apply and whose gross household income and household size place

them below 150 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines. The threshold was changed from 130 percent and was completed six months ahead of the congressional deadline.

### New Actions

Moving forward, the Department is pursuing the following actions:

**HIGHLIGHT FROM LOE 4**

*The Department of Defense's **Financial Well-Being Assessment Tool** allows Service members and families to **quickly evaluate their financial health** and helps them identify areas to improve, connecting them to tailored resources to help enhance their economic security and financial well-being.*

- Each year the Department issues annual DoD Child Development Program (CDP) fee policy based on total family income (TFI). Historically families in lower income categories paid a higher percentage of their annual TFI for child care. To provide greater equity and in alignment with E.O. 14095, "Increasing Access to High-Quality Care and Supporting Caregivers," the School Year (SY) 2023-2024 CDP fee policy adjusts the percentage of annual TFI paid for child care fees to reduce the burden on lower income families. Additionally, the fee policy increases the community-based fee assistance caps for both civilian and military-certified Family Child Care providers

to \$1,800 per month/per child (up from \$1,700), and for the first time, provides a maximum of \$100 monthly allowance for child care food costs if food is not covered in the provider fee for families receiving fee assistance. The Military Departments will implement the School Year 2023-2024 CDP fee policy no later than January 1, 2024.

### LOE 4: Reinforce Financial Resources and Awareness

In addition to reviewing Service member pay and benefits, the Department also recognizes the importance of equipping Service members and families with the knowledge and skills needed for personal financial decision making. As such, the Department committed to enhance and drive awareness of critical financial education and counseling resources.

### Update on Progress

The Financial Well-being Assessment Tool (FWBA) fully launched in July 2022. The FWBA is integrated into each Military Service's financial readiness program and continues to be in the top 10 of visited pages on the Office of Financial Readiness website.

Once respondents complete the 12-question assessment, they receive a breakout of their score with resources on areas that may need to be addressed along with a recommendation to visit a financial counselor to learn more.

The Navy added the Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit, the financial well-being assessment (FWBA), and Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) information to its MyNavy Financial Literacy and MyNavy Family Apps, providing a convenient way for Service members and families to access resources.

During FY23, Navy provided five enterprise trainings and town halls with installation Personal Financial Managers concerning assessing, providing support, appropriate resources for families experiencing financial insecurity including food, housing, overall financial well-being, Basic Needs Allowance changes, and Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts (DCFSA) initiatives. Training is recorded and available to site PFMs for reference.

The Marine Corps made the FWBA available to all civilian Personal Financial Managers (PFMs) and uniformed Command Financial Specialists to be used as an additional assessment tool during financial counseling sessions. PFMs are encouraged to use the assessment as needed to help clients understand their current financial well-being status.

### **New Actions**

Moving forward, the Department is pursuing the following actions:

- The Department of the Army is considering ways for Soldiers to complete the OSD-developed Financial Well-Being Assessment during in-processing at duty stations and conduct an eligibility screening for Federal Assistance Programs (Basic Needs Allowance, WIC, SNAP, Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance, free/reduced school lunches).
- The Department of the Air Force is exploring ways to enhance the capability of its Delayed Entry Program application, which is currently used by Recruiting Services and provides new recruits with valuable information prior to entering the Service, such as how to prepare for initial entry, fitness, nutrition, and finances.

LOE 5: Encourage Service Members and Families to Seek Available Resources and Services For Service members and families to stay well and thrive, they must have awareness of and access to high-quality resources that support them in times of need. Therefore, the Department committed to reinforce the availability and utility of such resources, with a focus on financial resources due to the correlation between financial well-being and food security. Furthermore, because only a small percentage of Service members reported utilizing SNAP, WIC, and the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, the Department will also reinforce the availability of these Federal nutrition assistance programs to Service members and families who may be eligible to receive benefits.

### **Update on Progress**

Consistent with Secretary Austin's September 2022 "Taking Care of Our Service Members and Their Families" memorandum, the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) reduced prices 3 to 5 percent and is providing at least a 25 percent savings globally on groceries as compared to local market basket averages, directly placing money back in the pockets of Service members and families.

DeCA has been aggressively managing a “known value item” (KVI) strategy focused on offering greater savings to our patrons on the items that they shop the most (ground beef, chicken, eggs, milk, etc.). DeCA is also piloting online WIC payment with the State of Nevada. If the pilot is successful, DeCA will explore the feasibility of expanding patron use of WIC benefits for online purchases throughout DeCA CONUS locations that have state-administered WIC programs, decreasing the potential stigma of in-store use. DeCA’s evaluation metrics for this strategy include total sales, total transactions, and savings on KVIs monthly.

Through a Department of Defense partnership with USDA, OneOp, an online learning platform, offered the Military Family Readiness Academy (MFRA) series, *Military Families and Food Security: A Call to Action*, to help educate and support Service providers working with military families. During FY23, 2,195 users engaged with OneOp’s food security programming across OneOp’s live and on-demand platforms. To date, OneOp certified 1,009 continuing education credits through food security programming. Finance professionals have earned 436 continuing education credits, dietetics professionals have earned 432.5 continuing education credits, and additional professionals serving military families have earned 140.5 continuing education credits across various social service agencies. One hundred percent of attendees who responded to post-learning course surveys reported having a better understanding of the prevalence of food insecurity among military families. Ninety-eight percent of respondents feel more knowledgeable about policies, programs, and initiatives that address food insecurity. Ninety-six percent of respondents felt better prepared to refer military families to local, state, and federal resources when they are experiencing food insecurity. 96% of respondents felt better prepared to connect people and organizations to support military families’ food security.

The 99<sup>th</sup> Medical Group (MDG) at Nellis AFB, Nevada, identified food insecurity among patients served. The team of dieticians, discharge planners, and social workers developed a robust list of local resources—both military and civilian—to ensure patients leaving the hospital could get help obtaining food. The emergency department also distributes the list of resources to patients seen in that environment. The Nevada 2-1-1 (United Way) resource as well as “Three Square” (an app with a zip code search for hot meals and food banks) are included, along with federal programs like WIC and SNAP, as well as Military OneSource and the local Military & Family Readiness Center.

#### HIGHLIGHT FROM LOE 5

*Through DoD’s partnership with USDA, OneOp offers the Military Family Readiness Academy (MFRA) series, a free virtual multi-disciplinary learning opportunity for military family service providers. Between the 2023 MFRA and OneOp’s Food Security in Focus programming, **2,195 professionals around the world** engaged with OneOp’s food security programming in FY23. Over 1,000 financial, dietetics and other service providers earned continuing education credits, and after attending programs, **98% reported feeling more knowledgeable about policies, programs, and initiatives that address food insecurity.***

## New Actions

Moving forward, the Department is pursuing the following actions:

- The Defense Health Agency (DHA) has developed a Clinical Practice Recommendation that will provide an overview of food insecurity as a social determinant of health and will introduce a validated food insecurity screening tool (“the Hunger Vital Sign”) within MHS GENESIS, DoD’s electronic health record, and provide guidance for and recommend its use. The recommendation will suggest possible approaches to address food insecurity when it is identified, with emphasis on local program development. It will also present a list of food assistance related resources and recommend active collaboration between military treatment facility personnel and installation helping agencies. Metrics will include frequency that screening is documented in an episode of patient care, frequency that members/households are identified as at risk for food insecurity, frequency that at risk households are offered services, and frequency that at risk households state they are already receiving services. DHA signed this practice recommendation in October 2023.
- Concurrent to the development of the Clinical Practice Recommendation, DHA is expanding screening capabilities present in the Electronic Health Record. Current screening capabilities exist for all adult admissions, for adults under a wellness registry (ages 18 and over), and for children under the age of 6. DHA is adding screening to a pediatric wellness registry (ages 7 - 18) and also to the maternal registry to screen pregnant women.
- The Department of the Army is pursuing adding a Mandatory Screening Process for any Federal Assistance Program (e.g., BNA, WIC, SNAP, FSSA, National School Lunch Program) during Soldier Readiness Processing and require a financial appointment for positive screenings. This will allow the Financial Readiness Program staff to provide necessary counseling and education to assist Soldiers and families with resources.
- The Office of Military Community and Family Policy is considering ways to engage military teens around food security such as through Military Teens 4-H Program educational webinars.
- Military OneSource consultants, located in every state, will prioritize food security within their state plan of support and include tangible actions to educate and refer Service members to resources.

## LOE 6: Expand Data Collection and Reporting

To reduce food insecurity in the force, the Department must develop strategically sound solutions with more informative and actionable data collection and reporting. Part of that strategy involves gathering and analyzing data and using data to inform evidence-based actions. As outlined in the 2022 *Strategy and Roadmap*, the Department’s sixth line of effort encompasses actions aimed at developing a robust set of data to inform the Department’s food security work moving forward.

## Update on Progress

The Department has formalized a food security collaboration with USDA’s Economic Research Service through a memorandum of understanding. The Department completed its Status of Forces Survey data collections in October 2022, and in September 2023, it launched a new qualitative study examining food access on or near military installations. The Department is reassessing its current survey tools as it looks ahead to 2024.

## HIGHLIGHT FROM LOE 6

*Starting in 2024, unit commanders will be able to utilize the new **Defense Organizational Climate Pulse (DOCP) Survey** to better understand climate issues identified in their unit Command Climate Assessment. The DOCP is a **prevention tool providing targeted information on a variety of topics including food security.***

All Military and Family Life Counselors (MFLCs), to include HealthySteps MFLCs in military medical treatment facilities (MTFs), now screen for food insecurity when they meet with Service members and families and provide appropriate support and referrals.

To better identify and address economic insecurity, the Navy's Fleet and Family Support program added food insecurity, housing insecurity, and financial well-being screenings when Sailors or family members seek assistance. During FY23, one percent of individuals seeking assistance reported food security concerns. Sailors and their family members presenting with

any of these issues are referred by staff members to the appropriate services. These services may be specific to an area, like a local food bank, or to address a particular need like an emergency loan from the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society.

As an additional data collection effort that can help inform evidence-based actions, leadership at MTFs can choose to address food security in their efforts to meet The Joint Commission's new national patient safety goal designed to address health care disparities as a quality and safety priority. The Department requires all MTFs to be accredited, and the accrediting body is The Joint Commission. In January 2023, TJC made a leadership standard looking to address health-related social needs, and in July 2023, The Joint Commission made this a national patient safety goal. Providing easily accessible, meaningfully presented data to MTF stakeholders will empower those developing and implementing interventions to know the population level needs, monitor the effectiveness of interventions, and adapt programs as needed in response to trends.

### **New Actions**

Moving forward, the Department will consider the following actions:

- The Department has launched a qualitative study at ten installations around the country to meet with Service members and families, especially those in the junior ranks, to learn more about their experiences and challenges with food security. This effort will help better identify possible root causes to help focus and inform policies and programs going forward that will help the military community address and prevent food security issues.
- The Office of People Analytics will implement the new Defense Organizational Climate Pulse (DOCP) in February 2024. This survey, a follow-on to the DEOCS, includes questions related to food security, enabling leaders to leverage this survey to better understand food insecurity risk in their unit.
- The Defense Centers for Public Health-Aberdeen will determine the distribution and determinants of food insecurity in the military and impacts on individual and unit readiness, retention, and health outcomes at the population level, as well as the demand on resources for community prevention programs and intervention services. The novel collaboration will leverage multiple

data sources across primary prevention, personnel, and health care entities. A baseline metric is to establish the extent of nutritional assistance program enrollment and usage (i.e., SNAP, WIC) among Service members. Then analysts will assess how food insecurity is associated with various personnel as well as physical, behavioral, and social health outcomes including readiness, retention, duty limiting injuries and conditions, medical conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidal behavior), and interpersonal conflict (e.g., harassment, assault, domestic violence).

- Department of the Air Force has contracted with the University of Georgia to evaluate the effectiveness of the Air Force's training program, which includes pre- and post-training surveys and periodic follow-up surveys that will explicitly evaluate Airmen and Guardian growth in financial skills. This evaluation will also assess the training program's ability to measure general financial knowledge, intended financial behavior, financial well-being, and family well-being, as these skills are critical to empowering Service members and families to address challenges associated with food security.
- The Naval Postgraduate School is researching food security to explore ways the Navy can define and identify risk for food insecurity from measures based on pre-existing data, identify characteristics of Sailors who may be at greater risk for food insecurity, and provide contributing factors that influence risk of food insecurity in the Navy.
- The 14<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation is researching the effectiveness of the Basic Needs Allowance, and with that context, is studying the intersection of food security and military pay and benefits.

## Way Forward

The Department's work to combat food insecurity is an ongoing effort, and we remain committed to our holistic approach to addressing the issue. As we move forward, we will invest in building and using data to make evidence-informed decisions at all levels within the organization. We will share best practices across the Department to encourage all to implement the most effective initiatives within their Services, as is feasible. While we acknowledge there are many external factors at play, we can control some important factors, and our intent, as outlined in this Progress Report, is to do everything in our power to address food security challenges among Service members and families.

## Food Security Resources

- Military OneSource Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit:  
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/leaders-service-providers/economic-security/>
- Financial Well-Being Assessment: <https://finred.usalearning.gov/FWBA>
- Military OneSource Nutrition and Fitness: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness/fitness-nutrition/>
- Commissary “Stronger Together” Resources: <https://corp.commissaries.com/stronger-together>
- TRICARE: Food Insecurity: <https://tricare.mil/HealthWellness/HealthyLiving/Food-Insecurity>
- TRICARE: Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Overseas Program: <https://tricare.mil/wic/>
- USDA National Hunger Clearinghouse: <https://www.hungerfreeamerica.org/en-us/usda-national-hunger-hotline>
- Department of Veterans Affairs, Food Security Office:  
[https://www.nutrition.va.gov/Food\\_Insecurity.asp](https://www.nutrition.va.gov/Food_Insecurity.asp)
- USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs
  - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP:  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program>
  - National School Lunch Program: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>
  - Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC:  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic>
  - Summer Food Service Program: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program>
  - Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program for Children, or Summer EBT, for children:  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sebt>
  - Food and Nutrition Service for Military and Veteran Families:  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/military-veteran>