



# Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Strategy and Roadmap

Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel & Readiness  
U.S. Department of Defense

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



We have the finest fighting force in the world, and the Department of Defense (DoD) must always ensure that we support, care for, and empower our Service members and their families to be resilient and ready to face any challenge.

The Department must also be ever vigilant and quick to address any and all threats to the readiness of our men and women in uniform and their families, especially those that would impact their performance, health and wellness, and enduring professional success. One such threat is food insecurity.

As Under Secretary, I am responsible for managing our human capital who protect our national security. My office oversees all kinds of personnel policies but one of the most important responsibilities I have is to make sure our Service members and military families have the support they need to thrive.

This strategy and roadmap represents a whole-of-DoD effort. Its focus is to equip our Service members and families with the tools, skills, and resources necessary to ensure they have access to sufficient nutritious food to meet the myriad demands of the military mission, without having to endure undue hardship or make difficult financial and personal decisions that may impact their quality of life.

Through targeted policies, programs, and initiatives, the Department remains steadfast in its commitment to understanding and addressing both the causes of, and subsequent challenges posed by, food insecurity within our ranks. We will continue to collaborate with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders as necessary to ensure we remain informed of best practices and innovative solutions to best support our Service members and their families.

Our mission readiness depends on a strong and resilient home front. In addressing food insecurity and other challenges, the Department will continue to ensure the readiness of our Force and the strength of our national security.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.'.

Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.  
Under Secretary of Defense for  
Personnel and Readiness

## Introduction

On March 4, 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III released a message to the Force outlining his three key priorities: defend the Nation, take care of our people, and succeed through teamwork. To ensure the United States remains the world's greatest fighting Force, the Department of Defense (DoD) must continue to focus on ways to improve how we take care of our people.

In November 2021, Secretary Austin released a memorandum addressing economic security in the Force, and acknowledged challenges facing some of our Service members and families. Secretary Austin ordered immediate actions to address the issue as an initial step. He approved temporary increases of Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) in high cost areas, extensions for Temporary Lodging Expenses (TLE), and the creation of the Military OneSource Military Leader's Economic Security Toolkit. He also directed actions that will enable the Department to address economic challenges over the long-term, including the development of a strategy and implementation roadmap dedicated to strengthening food security in the Force.

Challenges stemming from economic security manifest themselves in a number of ways, including reports of food insecurity. Food insecurity is commonly defined as when a person or a household does not have enough nutritious food to live an active, healthy life, and can range from relying on cheaper, less-nutritious foods to skipping meals.

This strategy and roadmap outlines a plan to address food insecurity, delivering a holistic approach that starts with an effort to understand the experiences of Service members and their families. These evidence-informed actions address a breadth of issues, and include goals across six lines of effort designed to: **1) increase access to healthy food, 2) enhance spouse economic opportunities, 3) review Service member pay and benefits, 4) reinforce financial resources and awareness, 5) encourage Service members and families to seek available resources and services, and 6) expand data collection and reporting.**

The Department is committed to taking care of our people. The health and well-being of our Service members and their families is a readiness issue and, therefore, key to our mission. Strengthening food security in the Force requires integrated solutions and leadership attention across the DoD enterprise. The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R)) will provide progress reports to the Deputy Secretary of Defense on each line of effort 120 days after release of this strategy and periodically through the Deputy's Workforce Council.

## Defining the Issue: Food Insecurity

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), while most U.S. households are food secure, there are some households that experience food insecurity throughout the year, meaning, "their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources." USDA has defined food security into three primary categories:

- Food security: access at all times to enough food for an active, healthful 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.

There is a distinction between food security and hunger; hunger describes a physiological condition, while food security measures economic access to food rather than the experience of being hungry.

Historically, DoD has used the percentage of Service members enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as the leading indicator for food insecurity. The 13th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, completed in 2020, reported that between 0.08 percent (880 members) and 0.1 percent (1,100 members) use SNAP benefits. With greater exploration of the issue, the Department believes that SNAP usage is not an accurate measure to determine the prevalence of food insecurity in the military. In 2018, DoD incorporated the widely accepted and validated measure<sup>1</sup> that USDA uses to assess national rates of food insecurity into DoD active duty Service member survey instruments. In 2021, DoD adopted the USDA definitions for levels of food security.

DoD included the standardized USDA measure of food security on the 2018 and 2020 Status of Forces Survey of Active Duty Members (SOFS-A) and the 2021 Active Duty Spouse Survey (ADSS). A version of the USDA measure was also included in the 2016 SOFS-A. In 2022, the measure was added to the Reserve Surveys (SOFS-Reserve and Reserve Component Spouse Survey). Status of Forces surveys use rigorous scientific methods, drawing random samples and weighting the results to be representative of the surveyed population. Therefore, results can be generalized to the full population. The Status of Forces survey is executed annually with a rotation of topics on tempo and quality of life in the military. For the SOFS-A administered for 2020, the web-based active duty survey was fielded from October 26, 2020–January 25, 2021, to a random sample of the over 1.3 million active duty Service members across all Services, both in the United States and overseas. This survey was conducted in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> USDA Survey Questions to measure national rates of food insecurity:

- a) The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more.
- b) We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.
- c) In the past 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there was not enough money for food?
- d) In the past 12 months, how often did you or other adults in your household cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there was not enough money for food?
- e) In the past 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there was not enough money for food?
- f) In the past 12 months, were you ever hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food?

Analysis of the 2020 SOFS-A indicates that 76% of total active duty Service members were food secure and 24% of active duty Service members experienced food insecurity at some point in the preceding year of the survey. Of those 24% who experienced some level of food insecurity, 14% reported experiencing low food security and 10% reported experiencing very low food security as defined by the parameters developed by USDA. The 2020 SOFS-A results indicate junior enlisted Service members, who typically have less than four years of service, are at the highest risk of experiencing food insecurity.

Analysis from the 2018 SOFS-A and the 2021 ADSS, which surveys the spouses of activity duty service members, showed similar trend lines across the USDA measures.

DoD is continuing to gather data, develop insights, and conduct analysis of the root causes and impacts of food insecurity. While continued research and analysis is underway, DoD is committed to taking deliberate steps to address food insecurity in the Force through continued efforts by the Military Departments and the execution of this strategy and roadmap.

### Ongoing Efforts to Address Challenges by the Military Departments

In response to Secretary Austin's November 2021 memo, the Military Departments outlined actions underway to bolster economic security in the Force. All Military Departments offer various types of assistance to strengthen food and economic security of their Service members and families through aid societies, chaplains, family readiness centers, programs, and policies.

Below are some highlights from the Military Departments:

**Department of Army:** Army Wellness Centers are hosting "Meals in Minutes" classes to address challenges in preparing nutritious meals by providing tools and strategies to prepare meals quickly, and to create a meal plan in support of health goals. Furthermore, the Army's Dining Facility Healthy Food Option Transformation pilot program is designed to replicate a modern campus-style dining system to support the nutritional needs of Soldiers and the Total Force, optimizing the Soldier food entitlement, and expanding the availability of food options. The Healthy Meal Menu Initiative, executed by Child and Youth Services (CYS), ensures that military children have healthy meals at child development centers by establishing standardized menus for ages 0 to 18 and providing standardized training for CYS staff on food safety and nutrition. The Army also directed a variety of measures to make it easier for Soldiers/spouses to operate home-based businesses on Army installations.

**Department of Navy:** The Fleet and Family Support Program added economic security screening questions to their entry points to capture data on food insecurity, housing insecurity, and financial well-being concerns as reasons for counseling in the information collection database. If Sailors report any issues regarding economic security, this initial screening results in a warm handoff to a Personal Financial Manager as well a referral to the Military OneSource Toolkit. The Navy also launched "Navy Spouses in Transition," an on-demand course designed to address issues related to

military spouse employment. In addition, the Naval Postgraduate School will soon conduct a food insecurity study to identify the characteristics and contributing factors that influence the risk of food insecurity for Sailors and Marines.

**Department of Air Force:** Since August 2021, Airman and Family Readiness Centers (A&FRCs) track Service members who request assistance for food insecurity and provide them counseling on SNAP and other programs. Additionally, as fewer moves lead to less out-of-pocket moving costs and greater opportunity for spousal employment, the Department of Air Force increased geographic stability for Service members and their families by implementing 36-month tour lengths for Unaccompanied First Permanent Assignment Airmen (enlisted/officers) in certain overseas locations. Airmen and Guardians also take the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) Financial Well-being assessment as part of mandatory financial readiness training. The Airman Leadership School implemented a new Virtual Experience Immersive Learning Simulation to assist all new Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) in developing their personal and leadership financial readiness acumen.

While Military Departments have already taken action to address economic and food insecurity, this strategy and roadmap will assist the Department in maintaining focus and advancing progress on this critical readiness issue.

### **USD(P&R) Strategic Approach to Strengthening Food Security in the Force**

While the Department continues to gather and analyze data to better understand the challenge of food insecurity, current findings require action. There are various factors contributing to food insecurity in the Force and the solution is as complex as the issue. The following lines of effort (LOEs) seek to strengthen food security in the Force through a holistic approach: 1) increase access to healthy food, 2) enhance spouse economic opportunities, 3) review Service member pay and benefits, 4) reinforce financial resources and awareness, 5) encourage Service members and families to seek available resources and services, and 6) expand data collection and reporting.

To inform these LOEs, the Department hosted eight virtual town hall and listening sessions with Service members, families, service providers, and leadership to better understand concerns related to food insecurity. Participants provided feedback on the increased cost of living, conditions of dining facilities, quality of products in the commissary, and availability of government resources.

DoD cannot solve this issue alone. Addressing food insecurity will require collaboration across the Federal government, with Congress, with Military Support Organizations and Veterans Service Organizations (MSOs/VSOs), other non-Federal entities, and importantly, with local communities. While these initial LOEs are of current focus, as the research, analysis, and landscape evolves, so too must the approach.



## ***LOE 1: Increase Access to Healthy Food***

Access to nutritionally adequate and affordable food is a readiness issue. The Department of Defense Nutritional Committee (DoDNC), which includes representation from all the Services, has two current initiatives to enhance healthy eating. The Military Nutrition Environment Tool (m-NEAT) was developed to help health promotion professionals and commanding officers measure accessibility of healthy food options. The tool assesses and improves the military food environment by measuring food policy/availability, food labeling, and economics on installations. The Go-for-Green Program (G4G) improves healthy food choices in living and working environments by encouraging Service members to choose nutrient-packed, green-coded options to fuel optimal physical and mental performance through education, marketing, and nutritional labeling awareness.

One of the many benefits available to Service members and families is access to commissaries, which provide groceries to military members and their families at a significant savings as compared to local grocery industry competitors. Recently, the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) enhanced the benefit by implementing online shopping and payment, and adjusted hours of operation to increase customer access. Additionally, in spring 2022, DeCA began to offer bulk military unit pick-up or delivery of groceries from commissaries directly to barracks locations to enable increased customer service levels to Service members who have difficulties making it to dining facilities.

Actions to increase access to healthy food:

- DeCA will continue to increase access to on-the-go, ready-to-eat, economical, and healthy dietitian-approved food options via delis and 174 fuel stations within major commissaries.
- DeCA is conducting a 90-day at-home grocery delivery pilot at eight CONUS locations and with agency-wide expansion planned soon thereafter.
- Military Departments will complete a review of dining facility hours and access to healthy options, and evaluate the effectiveness of their meal card programs, to determine their effectiveness of meeting Service member needs, especially those who work non-traditional hours or who may be geographically disparate from a dining facility.
- The Department will continue to participate in the White House Interagency Policy Committee (IPC) on Nutrition and the Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health with goals of ending hunger and increasing healthy eating and physical activity in the U.S.

## ***LOE 2: Enhance Spouse Economic Opportunities***

The Department continues to find ways to bolster the economic well-being of military families and tackle longstanding challenges with spousal unemployment by expanding spouse employment programs, entrepreneurship opportunities, and providing options for reliable and affordable childcare. Among surveyed personnel, those with an

unemployed spouse had significantly higher rates of food insecurity than other married members. For enlisted Service members with an unemployed spouse, 43% reported experiencing food insecurity at some point in the preceding year (Office of People Analytics (OPA), 2020 SOFS-A). Overall, military spouses who were unemployed reported higher rates of experiencing food insecurity (41%) than spouses who were employed (22%) (OPA, 2021 ADSS).

Actions to enhance spouse economic opportunities:

- The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD(P&R)) will categorize job opportunities offered by DoD partners in the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) Program, to help identify gaps, implement strategies to increase employment in specific fields, and better facilitate connections between military spouses and employment opportunities.
- OUSD(P&R) will develop interstate licensure compacts for seven professions (teaching, social work, cosmetology, massage therapy, dentistry/dental hygiene, school psychologists, and dietician nutritionists) to promote licensure portability and reciprocity, which ease barriers for spouses who need to transfer professional licenses or credentials with each permanent change of station (PCS).
- The Department is participating in the White House's Joining Forces Sub-IPC on Federal employment for military spouses that is focusing on connecting military spouses to Federal employment opportunities by improving awareness through the identification of helpful resources and existing authorities to assist spouses, hiring managers, and Federal agency leaders alike.
- OUSD(P&R) will create a task force to modernize the Classification and Pay System for Child Development Program (CDP) staff, and develop an enterprise-wide recruitment strategy and implementation practices to recruit and retain qualified, professional CDP staff, many of whom are military spouses. This effort will ensure DoD is able to reduce staffing limitations to maximize capacity at CDP facilities.
- OUSD(P&R) is expanding the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood PLUS (MCCYN-PLUS) program to additional states with significant populations of military families in need of child care fee assistance. This program increases the pool of local community childcare providers who can receive subsidies in the form of fee assistance on behalf of military families.
- The Department will finalize a near-term agreement with the Department of State to allow military spouses employed as federal civilians to work remotely from overseas locations.

### ***LOE 3: Review Service Member Pay and Benefits***

The Department recognizes that for some, food security is tied to their economic security. In the 2020 SOFS-A, Service members who were experiencing financial difficulty reported significantly higher rates of food insecurity (OPA, 2020 SOFS-A). DoD



provides authorized year-to-year pay raises, adjusted cost of living allowances, and other special pay and allowances for eligible personnel.

In accordance with the directive issued in January 2022 by President Biden, the DoD implemented a \$15 minimum wage for DoD employees in nonappropriated fund activities, which benefited many military spouses. Additionally, the Department has updated policy to allow for partial dislocation allowance to Service members ordered to vacate Government quarters.

Actions to review Service member pay and benefits:

- OUSD(P&R) will implement the Basic Needs Allowance starting in January 2023 to serve as a safety net for eligible Service members and families in need.
- OUSD(P&R) will review options to increase the dislocation allowance that Service members receive to further defray out-of-pocket costs encountered during a move.
- OUSD(P&R) will evaluate the feasibility of implementing Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts for Service members.
- OUSD(P&R) will analyze the Basic Allowance for Housing benefit.

#### ***LOE 4: Reinforce Financial Resources and Awareness***

The Department will enhance and drive awareness of available financial education and counseling resources. Targeted efforts will amplify outreach to Service members to ensure awareness and utilization of financial resources. In the spring of 2022, OUSD(P&R) conducted DoD's annual Financial Readiness Training Symposium, providing installation personal financial managers with essential updates and skills to better support Service members and families.

Actions to reinforce financial resources and awareness:

- OUSD(P&R), in coordination with Services, will launch a self-guided financial well-being assessment tool to help Service members assess and identify resources to strengthen financial well-being.
- OUSD(P&R) will provide assistance and oversight of the Services' implementation of mandatory financial education programs for new recruits and officers prior to their entry to active duty.

#### ***LOE 5: Encourage Service Members and Families to Seek Available Resources and Services***

DoD recognizes there can be structural or perceived barriers associated with asking for assistance. Encouraging help-seeking behavior and increasing awareness of resources is key to the Department's ability to proactively reach out to and assist those who need help. The actions below will aid Service members and families in asking for help, train professionals to assess and discuss food insecurity, and provide front line leaders with

the resources they need. The intent is to build a web of resources and assist Service members and families in finding and utilizing those resources as they navigate the unique challenges of military life. Military OneSource<sup>2</sup> is a critical tool that enables military and local community connections when identifying needs-based information and referral services.

Actions to encourage Service members and families to seek available resources and services:

- OUSD(P&R) will host targeted roundtables with military-connected organizations to discuss food insecurity and leverage relationships to organize Service member and family outreach sessions.
- OUSD(P&R) will further enhance awareness of resources through the execution of the Economic Security strategic communications plan which includes continued collaboration with the White House Joining Forces targeted social media posts, Facebook Live events, meetings with senior spouse groups and senior leadership.
- DeCA will continue outreach and awareness to educate eligible patrons on the commissary benefit and how it saves Service members and their families money.
- DeCA is increasing awareness to patrons who use SNAP and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) entitlements in their local commissary and by providing online shopping and online payment to allow the customers to leverage these important programs transparently.
- OUSD(P&R) will conduct usability studies and review user feedback and usage data for the Military OneSource's Military Leader's Economic Security Toolkit and complete necessary improvements.
- OUSD(P&R) will develop a "Resources at the Ready" campaign to increase Service member and family awareness of all military benefits and quality of life resources available to them.

### ***LOE 6: Expand Data Collection and Reporting***

The SOFS-A/ADSS data are initial steps in identifying the prevalence of food insecurity in the active duty military and the relationships with other factors. The Department also recently received the results from a RAND study on food insecurity and is using those results to inform ongoing efforts. However, more data and analysis are necessary to fully understand the scope and contributing factors of the issue in order to calibrate solutions.

DoD has implemented proactive screening in order to identify those at risk of being food insecure. In fall 2021, the Survey of Well-Being for Young Children was added to intake forms/protocols for MHS GENESIS, the Military Health System's new electronic health

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<sup>2</sup> Military OneSource is the Department's gateway to trusted information, resources, and confidential help, available 24/7/365 at no cost to Service members and families. Available at [www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil) and 1-800-342-9647.

record, to streamline documentation. Parents complete a set of screening questions addressing aspects of the child's family context including food insecurity.

Actions to expand data collection and reporting:

- The Department will execute qualitative research, such as interviews and focus groups, to provide clarity on installation-level insights on food insecurity.
- The Department will enter into a formal data sharing agreement with the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) in order to engage ERS experts on food security and support analyses of DoD surveys.
- In line with the requirements of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, the Department will commission a study on food deserts and impacts on food security.
- OUSD(P&R) will analyze food insecurity data collected on the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey measuring household experiences during the coronavirus pandemic, as completed by the U.S. Department of Commerce.
- OUSD(P&R) will administer the 2022 Reserve Component Spouse Survey and the Status of Forces Survey of the Reserve Component (SOFS-R), both of which will feature the USDA six-question measure of food insecurity.
- The Department will continue to co-chair the Joining Forces Sub-Interagency Policy Committee (IPC) on food insecurity focusing on creating a collaborative research slate across federal agencies to determine the severity, determinants, consequences, and potential ways to address food insecurity within the military and veteran populations.
- The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) will also enhance the Department's nutrition data evaluation and reporting capabilities. The 2021-2022 NSCH includes questions involving food sufficiency, early childhood nutrition, and consumption of fruits and vegetables.
- All Military and Family Life Counselors (MFLCs), to include HealthySteps MFLCs in Military Medical Treatment Facilities, will screen for food insecurity when they meet with Service members and families.

## Conclusion

Secretary Austin has been clear: our people and our readiness remain inextricably linked, and the Department must continuously improve its care of Service members and their families. This strategy and implementation roadmap is not the beginning of the work by the Department to address the challenge of food insecurity -- it is an opportunity to reflect on the progress already made and strengthen efforts going forward.

## Additional Resources

If you or someone you know is experiencing issues with food security, please reference the additional resources below.

- **Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit:** This toolkit helps leaders and service providers support the economic security of Service members.  
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/leaders-service-providers/economic-security/>
- **MilSpouse Money Mission®** – A resource that helps educate and empower military spouses to elevate their families by making smart money moves.  
<https://www.milspousemoneymission.org/>
- **Food Security Resources for DeCA Benefits** – Learn how commissaries promote food security.  
<https://www.commissaries.com/stronger-together>