

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 16, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Wilkie and Secretary Perdue,

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have unprecedented effects on our nation, including an economic crisis that has doubled the veteran unemployment rate since February 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are not working in tandem to prevent veterans from going hungry during this crisis. We urge you to increase coordination between your agencies and take swift action to keep veterans healthy during this pandemic and to address veteran food insecurity.

In pre-pandemic times, food insecurity impacted between 8 to 25 percent of veterans, and certain groups of veterans fared even worse. Post-9/11 veterans have nearly double the average rate of food insecurity, and veterans under 45 years are nearly five times as likely to be food-insecure than those aged 75 and older. Women veterans, veterans with disabilities, and veterans with serious mental illness are also much more likely to experience hunger than their counterparts, and COVID-19 has exacerbated these disparities.

Equally alarming are findings from a study by Impaq International indicating that among food-insecure veterans who are eligible for USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), less than one-third receive SNAP benefits. Food insecurity should also be a paramount concern for VA because it is associated with detrimental health conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, and depression. While suicide is a complex issue, research has linked food insecurity to worsened mental health and suicide risk. If this Administration is truly serious about tackling the veteran suicide epidemic, the fight to end veteran hunger belongs hand-in-hand.

As the agency responsible for feeding the nation, whether by supporting farmers or executing Federal nutrition programs, USDA has a responsibility to comprehensively address veteran hunger. We ask that you immediately suspend the implementation of USDA's proposed changes to SNAP, which will be particularly harmful to veterans experiencing unemployment or homelessness. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) often touts the work it does to collect information on veteran status without impacting eligibility requirements. However, it does not appear that USDA used this data collection to analyze the impact of the SNAP rules on households with veterans. One way to better gather statistics would be to incorporate veteran status into the survey on "Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Households.” This data should be publicly available, and should be integral to calculating the impact of proposed SNAP changes on veteran populations.

Additionally, although the 2014 Farm Bill created a Military Veteran Agricultural (MVA) Liaison, USDA has indicated that the MVA does not coordinate USDA veteran food insecurity programming in any capacity. This again is a missed opportunity to make use of existing Federal resources to end veteran hunger. Building a stronger partnership and strengthening collaboration between the MVA and FNS will help clarify USDA’s mission regarding veteran hunger and takes the first step in addressing this important problem. We ask you to reexamine USDA’s agency-wide approach to ensuring that no veteran goes hungry, because the current method is missing the mark.

While USDA is primarily responsible for food and nutrition assistance programs, the VA also has an important role to play in ending veteran hunger. Some studies have found that more than 20 percent of veterans using VA health care experience food insecurity. However, the food insecurity screening used in VA health care is only one question covering the last three months, which is inadequate and may allow veterans to fall through the cracks. We ask that VA evaluate the use of an enhanced and validated screening tool, such as the “Hunger Vital Sign” screening, which is only two questions but more accurately identifies individuals at risk of food insecurity over the past year.

Further, if a veteran does screen positive for food insecurity, connecting that veteran to resources is essential. At a January 2020 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs hearing on veteran food insecurity, VA mentioned offering a referral to a social worker and dietician if a veteran screens positive. We request that VA provide data on the percentage of VA medical centers (VAMCs) using the food insecurity screening, the percentage of VAMCs that referred veterans to follow-up care or services for food insecurity, and what services are offered to veterans for food insecurity via VA social workers and dietitians. Given the scope of the issue, VA should ensure that veterans are being screened for food insecurity and referred to resources at all locations across the nation.

As health care is delayed or shifted to telehealth due to the coronavirus pandemic, the VA needs to ensure that veteran food insecurity is still being identified and addressed. Certain veteran groups may be especially vulnerable during this crisis and have trouble accessing and affording nutritious food. We ask that VA explore approaches for addressing food insecurity among homebound veterans, homeless veterans, student veterans, and any other veterans who may be experiencing hunger. Another group of veterans who may be at-risk for hunger includes former servicemembers whose applications for disability benefits are denied or pending decision. These veterans may struggle with financial stability and may be unaware of other Federal programs and services that may be available to them. We request that VA explore the feasibility of including information on non-VA Federal resources, including SNAP, in disability rating notification letters and any other relevant correspondence.

Finally, we ask you to improve the USDA and VA collaborative partnership to tackle this important issue by employing all available Federal and local tools to address veteran hunger. We urge you to explore the possibility of a cooperative agreement between your agencies to allow VA and its extended stakeholder community to do SNAP eligibility screenings and enrollment,

utilizing available data and records for veterans, looking to the example of the cooperative agreement currently in place with USDA and the Social Security Administration. Giving VA the tools to bridge the gap between nutrition counseling and actual nutrition assistance would make the difference for many veterans. The creation of veteran-specific educational materials about SNAP and other Federal nutrition programs represents a simple and effective opportunity for interagency collaboration, as does the inclusion of information about Federal nutrition assistance programs as part of the Transition Assistance Program materials provided to servicemembers preparing to transition to civilian life. We also urge you to make better use of state administration to build a more robust partnership with VA, and explore all opportunities for states to identify food-insecure veterans and enroll them in SNAP.

We request a briefing for our staff to occur within 30 days of receipt of this letter to provide an update on USDA and VA's efforts to reduce veteran hunger during COVID-19 and beyond. Veterans have selflessly served our country, and we must honor that sacrifice by making sure that no veteran goes hungry.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator