



Greetings, Chair and members. My name is Dr. Kristy Janigo, The American Legion Department of Minnesota Legislative Chair, as well as the legislative chair for the Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers. The Commander's Task Force of which the Legion is a member, along with seven other Congressionally chartered veterans service organizations, has unanimously chosen this food insecurity bill HF XXXX as one of their five key legislative priorities this year.

Food insecurity is a growing problem among Minnesota veterans. State lawmakers took a big bite out of the problem in the last biennium, with \$540,000 per year in legislative funding to Metro Meals on Wheels for Hennepin, Anoka, and Ramsey Counties. So first, I want to say thank you. As an assistant county veterans service officer supporting formerly homeless and justice involved veterans in the metro area, I've signed up several veterans for the meals funded under this appropriation. One of my Post-911 veterans was navigating justice involvement in the 4th District Veterans Treatment Court program, as well as severe mental health concerns. After we saved his house from foreclosure through the successful delivery of veteran grants and benefits, we set up the meals on wheels to further stabilize his life. A senior Vietnam era veteran who had been homeless and living out of his van for months finally received an apartment through HUD-VASH, and as early as his first full week there, he had meals regularly brought to his home. This is a near immediate, low barrier, and tangible way to deliver support.

When Senators Howe and Bahr voted against the veterans omnibus bill last year because there was no funding for veterans' food insecurity outside the largest counties, we heard you loud and clear. And we agree, more needs to be done for the remaining 84 midsized, smaller, and rural counties. Geography should not leave some veterans hungrier than others. That's why this bill proposes \$500,000 per year in funding as an increase to the Lutheran Social Services CORE (casework, outreach, referral and education), LSS CORE, budget administered by the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), where the infrastructure is ready to scale up to meet the need.

Some facts about food insecurity and veterans. In 2023, 12-14% of U.S. veterans were found to be food insecure. One in four of food insecure veterans were under the age of 65. Twenty to 28 percent were female veterans. Thirty-five percent were veterans experiencing serious mental health challenges. Almost half of food insecure veterans were or are experiencing homelessness. Rising food prices since the pandemic have driven higher rates of food insecurity for everyone. COVID-19 increased food insecurity among veterans by 40%. And specifically in Minnesota, according to Lutheran Social Services, more than one in five adults living in rural Minnesota with food insecurity are veterans.

There are multiple issues that make food insecurity among veterans even more challenging in rural areas.

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One is the stigma and shame in asking for help in a community where everybody knows everybody. That discourages veterans who are already hesitant to ask for help from reaching out. Transportation is an issue, especially for disabled veterans who may have mobility issues and because of long distances to resources. Many veterans are also not aware of veteran-specific resources available to them, since outreach is lacking in these parts of the state.

Furthermore, the health of the food has been a concern where many of the food resources are dry or canned goods, foods too rich in sugars, carbohydrates, fats, and overly processed. We do have a big problem with type II diabetes in the veterans community, hypertension, and several other conditions that were caused or made worse by their service in certain theaters of duty or military installations, but they are also aggravated by an unhealthy diet. Our VA medical centers and clinics see high levels of these types of issues, and it drives a tremendous cost to treat these conditions.

There is existing infrastructure to deliver food insecurity resources in the veterans community with CORE. That infrastructure would give veterans options, including meals at community dining centers, home delivered meals, food vendor services, diner's clubs where you can pick up a meal at the local restaurant, and meals to go (MTG). I'll let LSS explain more about those in their testimony.

CORE has a long history of operating in rural and outstate Minnesota, of partnership with MDVA as the administrators of the funding, and county veterans service officers as the referring agents. CORE is a trusted program among veterans themselves, my CVSO colleagues, and among the veterans service organizations. Their other services include behavioral health counseling, caregiver support and respite, case management, financial counseling, the homeless initiative, and veterans support group. We think there are additional benefits to tackling this problem with CORE. Food insecurity referrals could be a "way in" to getting veterans other supports they would not otherwise look for themselves. We hope you will all support this funding to scale up the existing CORE program to meet this need among veterans in the rest of Minnesota.

-Dr. Kristy Janigo



Reference: Feeding America. (2024). What is food insecurity in America? Hunger and Health; Feeding America

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