

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 11, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 2030-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write in regards to recent reports that “National guard and reserve soldiers are having trouble feeding their families due to a year of record deployments,” and that “Hunger among Guard members and reservists is more than double the national rate.”¹ This is morally, and as a matter of national security, unconscionable. We must do better by our National Guard and Reserve service members. To ensure that we do so, we request further information regarding the scope of hunger among National Guard and Reserve service members, the extent to which widespread hunger among troops and their families presents national security concerns, and the Department of Defense’s (DoD, or the Department) plans to fix this indefensible situation.

U.S. Census Bureau data from mid-April to early June 2021 revealed that approximately one in five respondents who were National Guard and Reserve service members reported that they were “sometimes” or “often” hungry - more than double the national rate and “more ... than nearly any other group, regardless of household income, education, age or race.”² The situation is even more alarming for spouses of National Guard and Reserve members: nearly one in three respondents reported that they were sometimes or often hungry and “the numbers are even more troubling for National Guard and reserve families with children.”³

This report comes amidst record deployments of National Guard members due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, National Guard members have been deployed to assist with coronavirus testing,⁴ the distribution of supplies at food banks, and the administration of vaccines. Guard members also responded to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol

¹ Washington Post, “The rising cost of being in the National Guard: Reservists and guardsmen are twice as likely to be hungry as other American groups,” Laura Reiley, June 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/06/22/hunger-national-guard-reserves/>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ National Guard, “National Guard vaccinates hundreds of thousands of people,” National Guard Bureau, February 18, 2021, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/2506947/national-guard-vaccinates-hundreds-of-thousands-of-people/>; GBH, “National Guard Has Conducted COVID-19 Tests at 80 Facilities Across Massachusetts,” Jenifer B. Kim, April 9, 2020, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2020/04/09/national-guard-has-conducted-covid-19-tests-at-80-facilities-across-massachusetts>; The Columbus Dispatch, “Ohio National Guard finishes COVID-19 mission serving food banks,” Grace Deng, July 2, 2021, <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2021/07/02/ohio-national-guard-ends-coronavirus-mission-helping-food-banks-statewide/7839783002/>.

building and provided security in Washington, D.C. in the weeks leading up to and following the presidential inauguration⁵ in addition to thousands activated to fight ongoing wildfires and to respond to civil unrest.⁶ These critical emergency efforts have resulted in the longest deployments and periods of activation for Guard members since World War II according to the National Guard Association of the United States.⁷ In 2020, the National Guard was activated for 11 million days of individual work, a more than five-fold increase compared to 2019.⁸

Our concerns about the extent of food insecurity among National Guard and Reserve members is exacerbated by the seemingly dismissive attitude of Guard officials: the Washington Post described a National Guard spokesperson's response to the new reports as saying that he personally had not "encountered service members who have complained of household hunger."⁹

Accelerating deployments can intensify financial pressures on service members and their families as many reservists and National Guard members hold civilian jobs or attend educational institutions while serving.¹⁰ A 2020 survey by Blue Star Families found that, despite existing federal protections, 23% of National Guard and 34% of Reserve respondents reported "negative consequences with their civilian employers after returning from activation, such as losing promotion or training opportunities, involuntary reductions in hours or pay, or loss of employment."¹¹ Adding to the financial burden of deployments, Guard members and Reservists are not compensated for housing at the same rate as active duty service members when serving on orders of less than 31 days, while Guard members on state orders are not compensated for housing at all.¹²

⁵ National Guard, "DOD details National Guard response to Capitol attack," Jim Garamone, January 8, 2021, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/2466077/dod-details-national-guard-response-to-capitol-attack/>; National Guard, "Delaware Army Guard on duty in DC to support inauguration," Capt. Bernie Kale, January 13, 2021, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/2470045/delaware-army-guard-on-duty-in-dc-to-support-inauguration/>; National Guard, "Michigan National Guard remains on duty in DC," Capt. Joe Legros, February 1, 2021, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/2488694/michigan-national-guard-remains-on-duty-in-dc/>.

⁶ National Guard, "National Guard response to civil unrest," press release, January 8, 2021, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/Resources/Press-Releases/Article/2466269/national-guard-response-to-civil-unrest/>; Los Angeles Times, "National Guard and U.S. military helping to fight California fires," Alex Wigglesworth, Susanne Rust, Ruben Vives, and Rong-Gong Lin II, August 23, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-08-23/national-guard-us-military-helping-fight-california-fires>.

⁷ Washington Post, "The rising cost of being in the National Guard: Reservists and guardsmen are twice as likely to be hungry as other American groups," Laura Reiley, June 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/06/22/hunger-national-guard-reserves/>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Blue Star Families, "2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report: Executive Summary," March 2021, p. 5, https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_EXECSUMMARY.pdf; NPR, National Guard Members Struggle to Keep Civilian Careers, Alison St. John, April 22, 2015 <https://www.npr.org/2015/04/22/401025857/national-guard-members-struggle-to-keep-civilian-careers>.

¹² The Balance Careers, "Guard and Reserve Housing Allowance," Stewart Smith, June 9, 2019, <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/fy-2006-military-pay-and-benefits-3353290>; MilitaryTimes, "State orders are a con – federalizing the National Guard should be the go-to for most missions moving forward," Steve Beynon, May 22, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/22/state-orders-are-a-con-federalizing-the-national-guard-should-be-the-go-to-for-most-missions-moving-forward/>.

In contrast to the lack of attention given to National Guard and Reserve families, DoD has responded forcefully to reports of food insecurity among active-duty service members. The Department said that it would include a question on food insecurity in a survey it would send to active-duty spouses this summer,¹³ and as of May 2021, the Department “established a group of key stakeholders within the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the military departments to holistically examine the issue of food insecurity, discuss the factors involved and identify resources to help resolve this challenge. In addition, the Department is exploring the potential impacts [of food insecurity] on both the readiness of the force and the wellness of our service members and families.”¹⁴ But National Guard and Reserve troops, as well as their families, deserve the Department’s attention. This is especially true given the ongoing and vital role that those individuals have played in our nation’s response to the global pandemic.

DoD is responsible for ensuring the readiness, recruitment, and retention of all members of the U.S. military, including reservists and members of the National Guard.¹⁵ As Blue Star Families has highlighted, “[s]ervice members who are not able to maintain appropriate nutrition levels have an increased risk for stress, fatigue, and impaired ability to perform their duties in the short term, with more serious health complications possible in the long term.”¹⁶ Moreover, “[s]ervice members preoccupied with financial and food security concerns are less able to focus on mission readiness.”¹⁷

As members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, we seek additional information to better support efforts to combat hunger among National Guard and Reserve members. Accordingly, we request answers to the following questions by no later than August 25, 2021:

1. Does the Department regularly collect information regarding food insecurity levels among National Guard and Reserve members? If yes, what data is collected, in what form, and how often?
2. The Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act required the Secretary of Defense, no later than May 1, 2020, to submit to Congress “a report on food security among members of the Armed Forces and their dependents.”¹⁸ That report is now long overdue. When will the report be submitted to Congress? Will the report examine food insecurity among National Guard and Reserve service members as distinguished from active duty service members?

¹³ ABC News, “Our troops need more than a salute this Memorial Day. They need food.,” Mary Alice Parks, Matt Seyler, and John Parkinson, May 29, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/troops-salute-memorial-day-food/story?id=77961675>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, “How We Support,” <https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/Inside-M-RA/Reserve-Integration/How-We-Support/>; Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, “About Military Personnel Policy,” <https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/Inside-M-RA/MPP/About/>.

¹⁶ Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report,” March 2021, p. 60, https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULLL.pdf.

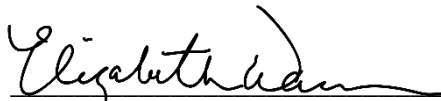
¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, S. 1790, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1790>.

3. Has food insecurity affected the readiness, recruitment, and retention of National Guard and Reserve troops, and if so, how?
4. What actions does the Department plan to take to address food insecurity among National Guard and Reserve members, and what is the timeline for these actions?
5. Congress is currently considering the Military Hunger Prevention Act, which would establish a basic needs allowance for low-income active duty service members.¹⁹ In your view, is similar congressional action necessary to address the needs of National Guard and Reserve members? If not, what unique considerations merit a different approach for National Guard and Reserve service members?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

¹⁹ Military Hunger Prevention Act, H. 2339, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2339/>;
Military Hunger Prevention Act, S. 1488, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1488/>.