

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 23, 2023

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
2310 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2310 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Wicker, Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Smith:

We write to request that the final version of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (NDAA) include Section 621 of the House bill (“Basic needs allowance: exclusion of basic allowance for housing from the calculation of gross household income of eligible member of the Armed Forces”) and ask that the Senate recede with respect to Section 605 of the Senate bill (“Modification of calculation of gross household income for basic needs allowance to address areas of demonstrated need”). This legislation will best address the needs of the substantial number of servicemembers and their families who are food insecure, as identified in recent data and reporting by the DoD.

The BNA program, established by Congress in the FY2022 NDAA, provides a monthly allowance to qualified servicemembers to make up the difference between their gross household income and the income needed for members of the household to attain a modest yet adequate standard of living (currently the eligibility criteria and benefits are aligned with 150 percent of the federal poverty level). This allowance addresses readiness, retention and recruitment challenges resulting from the scourge of food insecurity among our active duty military families, a growing problem that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has prioritized addressing.¹

In July 2022, the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness released a new analysis² suggesting that previous assessments have underestimated the size of the problem and the number of servicemembers enduring food insecurity. Rather than the 0.1 percent of the force previously identified as food insecure, the updated analysis showed that 24 percent of all active duty servicemembers—approximately 286,800 individuals—experienced some

¹ *Secretary of Defense Memorandum on Strengthening Economic Security in the Force*, November 17, 2021.

² *Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Strategy and Roadmap*, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Department of Defense. July 2022.

level of food insecurity during the previous 12-month period, with junior enlisted servicemembers facing the highest risk. Similar rates of food insecurity among active duty military households have been documented in the Status of Forces Spouses Survey, reporting by the RAND Corporation and several different surveys conducted by national military service organizations.

As it is currently implemented, the BNA reaches fewer than 3,000 servicemembers, just a tiny fraction of the 286,000 who are estimated to experience food insecurity. The most significant issue limiting the reach of this program is the counting of the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as income for most servicemembers. Food insecurity is a problem that impacts servicemembers at every duty station in the United States, and BAH should be categorically excluded as counted income for the BNA, as has been recommended with broad bipartisan support in House-passed NDAA bills during the past three cycles. This common-sense adjustment to the eligibility guidelines for the BNA will help ensure the majority of military families who struggle with food insecurity are able to access this critical support.

By including Section 621 from the House bill (“Basic needs allowance”) in the final version of the NDAA, Congress can expand much-needed access to the BNA during a time when hundreds of thousands of servicemembers struggle to put food on their tables for themselves and their families. As such, we request that the House provision to expand eligibility for the BNA be included in the final FY2024 NDAA to strengthen the BNA program and adequately address the substantial need identified in the DoD’s own assessments.

Our servicemembers are our military’s greatest resource. When they experience hunger, we put our national security at risk. We must give members of our military every possible tool to focus on the mission and be ready to defend our Nation when called to action. As you negotiate during conference and reconcile the differences between the House and Senate bills, we urge you to do right by our servicemembers and their families, who sacrifice considerably when they volunteer to serve. Thank you for your consideration of this request, and we look forward to working with you on this matter.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress



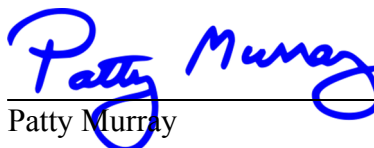
Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Member of Congress



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



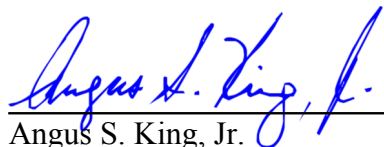
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



John Fetterman
United States Senator



Susan Wild
Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



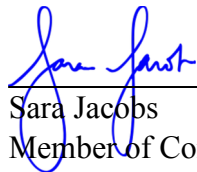
Gwen S. Moore
Member of Congress



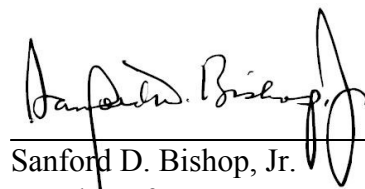
Mike Levin
Member of Congress



Marilyn Strickland
Member of Congress



Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress