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House Armed Services Committee Military Personnel Subcommittee
Horace Larry, Director of Air Force Services ; Lt. Gen. Christopher Mohan, Deputy commanding general of the Army Materiel Command ; Vice Adm. Scott Gray, Commander of the Navy Installations Command ; Maj. Gen. Jason Woodworth, Commander of the Marine Corps Installations Command
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**Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)**

Thank you. The hearing will now come to order. I asked that unanimous consent that the Chair be authorized to declare a recess at any time without objection. So I want to welcome everyone here to this hearing and Military Personnel Subcommittee.

Today's hearing is on military food programs and the duty to feed our service members. I want to thank our witnesses for being with us today. And I hope this hearing provides the opportunity for members of the Subcommittee to have a productive discussion with our witnesses. So let's be clear our men and women in uniform, but everything on the line for this country, they endure the tough conditions and constant demands of military life.

Access to nutritious high quality meals should be a given not a challenge, or a quote unquote, nice to have, especially when money is deducted from junior enlisted members paychecks to pay for it. We vote myself and the Ranking Member when we had our meeting, were taught was talking our initial meeting was we were talking about agreeing on the fact that we want to focus on quality of life issues and this being one of them. Yet, we continue to hear reports about the poor food quality and consistent operating hours and logistical failures that leave too many of our service members without reliable meal options. And that's clearly unacceptable.

And we would all agree on that. Even more concerning fewer than one in three service members regularly use on basic facilities. A take rate, that low signal is a serious disparity between what's being provided and what's actually working for the force. The services have a responsibility to provide accessible meals that meet the nutritional needs of our service members.

However, a lack of tracking and proper oversight of food programs has led to wildly inconsistent standards across military installations. Some bases have top notch dining facilities, while others struggle to serve safely cooked food. According to a RAND study 25% of servicemembers and living in the barracks, report food to be food insecure. Think about that for a minute.

That's just not bad for morale. It's bad for readiness, and frankly, embarrassing and unacceptable for the United States of America. Today, we will hear directly from leaders responsible for overseeing military food programs. I want to know what's broken, why it's broken, and more importantly, how do we fix it and fix it quickly.

This isn't about politics, it's about doing the right thing for and by the people who defend this nation. I look forward to the discussion and working with my colleagues to ensure that every service member, regardless of rank, duty station or shift has access to the quality meals that they need and that they deserve. Before our before hearing from our witnesses. Let me offer Ranking Member Houlahan an opportunity to make some opening remarks.

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.)

Thank you. And thank you all very much for coming. Thank you, Mr. Fallon, for hosting this hearing on such an important quality of life issue for our service members, the access to quality and nutritious food. I believe that this hearing serves as a continuation of much of the good work that we started in the last Congress.

The bipartisan House Armed Services quality of life report highlighted food insecurity as a challenge resulting from poor compensation of service members, particularly those who are most junior. And as a result, we included a historic pay raise for junior enlisted in the last NDAA. And I look forward to taking on the challenge of improving food quality and access across military installations in this NDAA. You know that we all are in agreement when we're both quoting the same source of information in January of 2023.

Congress at Congress's requests, the RAND National Defense Research Institute did publish a study on food insecurity amongst members of the armed forces and their dependents, which included a variety of five findings but amongst them that 25% of all active duty personnel would be classified by the USDA as having low food security. And in addition, that report highlighted that the food insecurity was higher amongst those who lived on post. Since then, a series of news reports have further exposed concerning trends across the services food programs, whether it's the quality of the food being served, or the quantity of options available during meal hours, or both. Both are variables that challenge service members and their access to food and nutritious food as well.

So this is of course also compact, pounded by the fact that service members may find Chow halls closed or kiosk shelves empty when they finally have the chance to eat given their very varied work schedules. Nearly all service members receive a monthly payment which is designed to defray their personal food cost. It's known as the basic allowance subsistence subsistence with Bas and this allowance is provided at a flat rate. However, the funding mechanisms that support on installation food programs have recently come under in increased scrutiny after questions were raised regarding how the services actually spend their basic allowance for subsistence that is withheld from soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen and guardians.

It's also unclear whether the service is consistently and accurately account for those costs of food programs, which also calls into question if and how the services are measuring their own effectiveness to the points of oversight and effectiveness. Last year, the Government Accountability Office recently released a report where it made over a dozen recommendations for the Department of Defense and military services to increase their oversight and evaluation of nutritional efforts in support of service members. And unfortunately, I must report that nearly a year after it's released, all of the recommendations, all of the recommendations remain open, which means that they have not yet been addressed. And that's why I'm very interested in hearing from our witnesses.

How are we modernizing food options? How are we improving access to quality of food, and what additional legislative authorities you might need from us to be able to make improvements to the food security of service members? Mr. Chairman, I am confident that we will and can work together to make sure that the service has turned the tide and increase the quality and quantity of food options. Thank you so much, again to the witnesses here for being here today.

And I yield my time.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you Ranking Member I would like to welcome our witnesses Lieutenant General Christopher Mohan, Deputy Commanding General for Army Materiel Command. Vice Admiral Scott Gray commander of Navy installation command, Mr. Horace HL Larry, Director of services for Air Force manpower personnel and services. Major General Jason Woodworth, Commander for Marine Corps installations command, each witness will have the opportunity to present his or her testimony and each member will have an opportunity to question witnesses for two minutes. We respectfully ask the witnesses to summarize their testimony in five minutes or less your written comments and statements will be made part of the hearing record with that Lieutenant General Mohan General, you may make your opening statement,

Christopher Mohan

Chairman Fallon, Ranking Member Houlahan and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the army Food Program. We appreciate this Subcommittee shared concern for our soldiers welfare. I acknowledge the challenges and our dining facilities that have made headlines, and more recently, the articles and the Army's management of food entitlements. senior commanders are responsible for execution of their food programs at the tactical level on our installations.

And as the Army's senior Sustainer it is my responsibility to provide them the capabilities, resources and support they need to be successful. And I've recognized and I recognize that we have not moved fast enough to make improvements. However, I assure you, the Army is not spending money collected from soldiers entitlements elsewhere, the army pays about $1.9 billion to enlisted soldiers in basic allowance for

subsistence or BAS each year. We then collect 400 million back from soldiers on milk the soldiers that are all meal cards, so we then only request $1.5 billion, which rely on that 400 to pay the annual total BS requirement.

We budget a completely separate pot of money, subsistence in kind to purchase and prepare food in our dining facilities all in we spend nearly $3.9 billion each year to feed soldiers around the world. We must innovate and drive revolutionary change. So 18 months 18 months ago, we stood up the army Food Service Board of Directors, which which reports to me, the board has worked together serving soldiers across the army, implementing the multiple efforts to expand our options right now, including kiosk additional mobile food trucks, grabbing go and meal prep programs. But looking to the future, the revolutionary change that our soldiers want and deserve requires us to totally rethink our strategy.

Which brings us to our campus style dining pilot program. I appreciate Congress's support and the FY 25 NDAA. That directed us to execute this pilot, which enables a contracted commercial vendor to transform traditional dining facilities into college campus style experiences. Our pilot will leverage this industry expertise and and incentivize a contractor to operate a facility where our soldiers actually want it done.

Our ultimate goal is making our dining facilities the venue of choice for our soldiers, so they can be the world's most lethal fighting force. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you General, Admiral Gray, you're now recognized.

Scott Gray

The Davidson window predicts war with China as early as 2027. We must think act and operate differently to ensure we are ready to fight and when in a mere 722 days. Our shore installations are warfighting platforms and the wellspring from which all our warfighting readiness emanates. At the same time the Navy's degraded facilities and infrastructure undermine our ability to deliver combat ready forces and ensure the wellbeing of our sailors and families.

Over recent years, the Navy has lost an estimated $200 million in buying power in their boss accounts alone. And this year, we took an additional $105 million in cuts, which further hobbles our ability to make real change. We got to do better. Our key warfighting advantage is our people.

The Navy has a covenant with our sailors. They dedicate themselves to serve and with all the sacrifice that that entails. And we commit to take care of taking care of them and their families. This covenant fortifies our warfighting spirit and provides us an edge over our adversaries.

In partnership with Congress. Navy leadership has made meaningful improvements in compensation, housing, medical care, child care, improve conditions in our shipyards change policies to better serve our sailors, and made critical investments to improve quality of life and access to healthier food options. We are now broadening our efforts to enhance food quality, and are fully committed to improving sailor nutrition across our over at ashore and 268 a float galleys which serve over 48 million meals annually. Every dollar of bas collected for rations unkind is spent to purchase food period, no bas funds have been mis allocated.

In fact, the Navy supplements bas with additional funding to enhance the quality and quantity of food to better fuel the performance of our sailors. I am taking action to eliminate potential seams between the Navy's food service stakeholders, and I am accelerating our evolving strategy to better attract sailors into our galleys I share your concern. I asked for Congress's support to protect our boss accounts for a trip Food Transformation line item in the budget for additional funding to improve our galley facilities, and to consider an increase in bas entitlement to better facilitate the purchase of more healthy food options for our sailors. The Davidson window is 722 days away by honoring our warrior covenant.

We will keep faith with our sailors and our families. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you. Thank you, everyone. Mr. Larry, you're now recognized. Chairwoman

Horace Larry

Fallon, Ranking Member Houlahan and esteemed members of this Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to engage with you today. And I thank you for your ongoing support. As the Department of the Air Force's witness, I represent both the Air Force and the Space Force.

Together, we stand firm in our commitment to delivering and strengthening our Food Services Program and its contributions to the readiness, resilience and morale of our remarkable airmen and guardians. Our innovative Food Services program took flight in 2010 with implementation of Air Force Food Services transformation. Those transformation fueled by a tradition of care and support, uphold strict accountability and starch execution as its standard business model. While this innovative approach has evolved into what is current and know that known as Pou 2.0, our core purpose principles remain accessibility, quality, nutritional value, and cost.

These four elements are the cornerstone of our foodservice operation and they call him card for our airmen and guardians dining experience. Further, the Department of the Air Force recognizes Food Services role in building and maintaining strong and capable warriors. These members must possess both the mentality and the stay in power to

render the lethality our warfighter commanders are entrusted to deliver for the nation. As such, every dollar farm essential service messages and transaction is used solely for food services.

None of these dollars for members paychecks are diverted elsewhere. As I close, rest assured your Department of the Air Force remains alert to the Food Services Program and the critical role it plays in delivering ready and resilient members fully capable of mission accomplishment. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Committee members. And I stand by for your questions.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you, Mr. Larry. General Woodworth, you're now recognized

Jason Woodworth

Chairman Zeldin, Ranking Member Houlahan and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the United States Marine Corps. The Marine Corps stands committed to maintaining the highest standards of readiness and lethality. We are equally dedicated to ensuring that your Marines are provided with nourishment to remain healthy The and fit to fight.

Money collected for Marines and mess halls is used to cover the cost of food and operating expenses of our dining facilities. These deductions are used solely and exclusively for food services, and not diverted to other programs. As demonstrated by our past two years audit results, the Marine Corps ensures that every dollar authorized and appropriated by Congress is spent for its intended purpose and is accurately accounted for. The quality of the meals we provide is essential to ensuring our Marines are physically prepared to meet the demands of the mission.

We take great pride in offering meals that are balanced and satisfying. The Marine Corps follows the Department of Defense standards to ensure every meal supports optimal performance, overall, and overall wellbeing. We aim to provide food that keeps me Marines prepped, focused and ready for action. at Marine Corps installations command we oversee the quality and consistency of food services across all installations, and strive to continuously improve the dining experience by collaborating with industry partners, and gathering feedback from our Marines.

Warriors readiness begins at our installations, the Marine Corps dedicated to ensuring that every Marine receives the best possible meal to fuel their body for the mission. We're proud of the work we do to support the health and readiness of our force. We appreciate your continued support in these critical efforts. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify for you.

Before you here today. I look forward to your questions.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you very much, Chair now recognize myself for five minutes of questions. What I wanted to start with, in general. Well, and you mentioned about the universities and going up to the standard, do you think that the defects are at that standard now, that can be comparable to a university?

Christopher Mohan

So thank you for the question. Sir, I will tell you that our dining facilities, we have right Ink Spots, have really innovative soldiers who are driving this change at the dining facility level. But because we are an army in motion constantly. And so when we think about a university in our campus style dining pilot, it is to to institutionalize the management and the, in the the operation of our dining facilities at scale, which will bring in a whole nother level of expertise from the commercial industry.

So we're going to commercialize our dining facilities, but again, meeting the soldiers where they are making sure they have healthy, nutritious, nutritious options. And things like expanded hours, more grab and go more, etc.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

And the pilot program is how many locations are the five?

Christopher Mohan

Sir, it's five locations, five different states. The request for proposal is on the street right now. anticipate that we will get our our offers in the next couple of months. We will do the evaluation in the fall, we'll be ready for business.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Admiral Grace, same question. As far as Do you think that Navy facilities would measure up to let's say universities we see across the country?

Scott Gray

Sir, I think we offer very high quality food, nutritious options for our sailors. I agree with you there is variation. But I think the standard across the entire service is good and the and remains high. We do have bright spots of excellence in some locations.

And we're working hard to capture those lessons learned and and raise the standard across our service. Mr. Larry?

Horace Larry

Sir, while we are not there, I have to say I would think we about maybe 70 to 75%. There because of the initiatives that we've had in place since 2010. With food 2.0. And with the partnership we have with universities where we go out and walk the ground, walk the university, talk with the chefs, their food service managers, the dietitians, how do you provide this level of support?

And what it is we can pull from it in partnership to advance our food services operations?

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

That's a lot to be said for best practices and not reinventing the wheel for sure. General.

Jason Woodworth

Thank you, Chairman. I would start by saying that we have moved away from the line style feeding process that you remember from previous years, except for an initial training, and we have more of a diverse option at each of our dining facilities. With two kids in college, I can tell you that two different universities have very different dining quality at our mess halls. We have variations in quality sometimes as well.

And we're working really hard to improve in this next contract that we are currently negotiating to offer better hours, better options in increased quality.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Yeah, I mean, the fact of the matter is when I think the take rate is roughly what do you know what your take rate is General

Christopher Mohan

Services proximately 25% of our soldiers who are ESM and live or Sik live in the barracks,

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Yeah, we found out about 25 30% roughly. So that jives with what we were looking at. And universities take right usually about 60 or 70%. So it's higher, and there's work to be done, I think for sure.

Another very important question is I'd like to go down the line, who is directly what individual is directly responsible for food quality. And they are in the unit United States Army. For food quality

Christopher Mohan

At the institution level, it's me, but but at the unit level, it is unit commanders and we place the responsibility on unit commanders all the way up to the installation, senior commanders. But I am response so you were more than when

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

That hat though you do a lot of other thing. Yes, sir. I do. Okay.

Same question for that role. Sir.

Scott Gray

We have multiple stakeholders, but I am the Navy's Quality of Service lead under the Vice Chief of Naval Operations. So I take responsibility for the delivery of quality food at our installations.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Fair to also say, though, Admiral, you have a lot of other hats and jobs that you're I do have many hats.

Scott Gray

Yes, sir. Mr. Larry,

Horace Larry

Likewise, sir, I have many hats, but I am that oversee and then accountability, quality leader down through a services center with an O six, provide an outreach is a bullet to all of our installation to zero in on that quality?

Jason Woodworth

General. Thank you, Chairman, I am responsible for the quality of the food service provided, is that the only

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thing you do for the United States Marine Corps? Absolutely not. Yeah. And I think you'll see the theme and what we're, we want to talk to some very smart people and maybe have a bullet for specifically that that's how important this quality of life issue is.

And I want to thank you all for your company answering the questions. And I now recognize Ranking Member.

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.)

Thank you, Mr. Chair. When I'm just going to ask each one of you when was the last time you ate at one of your dining installations? And would you recommend it to a friend

Christopher Mohan

So the last time I had done a facility man was that it for Cavazos at the hub within three cores footprint, and I absolutely would recommend it to a friend and when was that? It was probably about four months ago. Excellent was there for warfighter exercise Admiral?

Scott Gray

Just about two weeks ago out in Fallon, Nevada. And yes, it was quality experience. I enjoyed it very much. And I was happy walking out that we were delivering the right service to our sailors, Mr. Larry.

Horace Larry

Last month, ma'am at Dove F was the Delaware as part of our food 2.0 dining operation. Great experience. And I come back to my response to represent throughout Chairman Fallon, about 70% 75% We about there. We're working hard at it.

We are ramping up, but a good experience.

Scott Gray

Excellent in general.

Jason Woodworth

Thank you, man, a dining facility about a month ago here in the Quantico area will tell you that previously in the fall eat net one that did not meet the standard. We sent in an inspection team. We closed that dining facility for three months to get it back up to speed. Thank you.

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.)

I appreciate your your candor. And I grew up in a military family and my father would always take me into the mess hall to eat with soldiers and sailors. And I also was in the military myself and having experienced some diversity of of efforts across the world. I will say that there are hits and misses.

And I'm grateful that we're focusing on this. General Moen, my question to you is I'm confused. It sounded like that you got authority to do this test in 2023. And now it's 2025.

And we have we're still out with the RFP. Is that my correct understanding? 25 NDAA? Oh, 2025.

Okay, so that makes more sense. And so at this point, you're not you haven't gotten anywhere other than the RFP and you expect results in the fall besides

Christopher Mohan

The the rollout of additional initiatives like kiosk, food trucks. Meal prep programs have been extremely popular, but from a contractual standpoint is we're, it's the RFP.

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.)

Excellent, excellent. I look forward to the results and plan for rapid rollout if you have success with it, which I anticipate you will. Admiral? Do you have any visibility into the food program cost data at the installation level?

I know there's been some kind of confusion and drama about which different accounts are you know, hitting the BAS line or not? Do you feel as though you have good transparency and good accountability and good accounting in that area?

Scott Gray

In the aggregate, yes, ma'am. I mean, we know we do a good job budgeting for our accounting each year. As a matter of fact, we go typically go over budget for the last five years we go over budget. As I stated in my opening statement, not only do we collect bas for those who get rations and kind, the Navy supplements that to provide additional funding so overall you we do have good visibility I coordinated with the other stakeholders in the Navy and in preparation with this here.

And I was satisfied with the information I was provided. Thank

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.)

You. And with the remaining time that I have general, regarding the Marines, I'm interested to find out that there are only two vendors that you all rely on. And that just seems like a vulnerability. Is there any thought to diversifying your vendor fleet so that we don't end up in a vulnerable position?

Jason Woodworth

Ma'am, currently we are in negotiations to renew our contract right now. We expect to have that completed by the end of the FY. I will take that back and look at it, man, whether we can diversify more, as you know, currently, we are really down we are with one single source down to one Yes, ma'am. Okay, so yeah,

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.)

Good diversification. I am a supply chain person is definitely important. And lastly, with Mr. Larry, on the Air Force, where I served, you all have been working on transformation in food system changes since 2010, is my understanding. But it seems as though implementing those changes across all installations still has not been completed.

And we're obviously in 2025. What are the delays to those installation changes,

Horace Larry

Part of the delays may I mean, it's just working on across different leadership's as our installation, leadership changes every other year, about every two years. The other part I would say, would be the funding how much funding we have, how quickly we can get after it, how many staff we have on to go out and not only do it man, but do it correctly. Because we think of it within the concept of struct or like an entity, our operation is one thing to open it. But it's another thing to keep it open this way is one thing to say we have gone in upgraded, but we want to make sure that is done correctly, and done in a manner that meet the needs and desires of our military members.

So we'll pick up the pace. But we've been working pretty hard,

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.)

I need to yield back. But I would argue that when it's become almost the point when we have another 18 year old who wasn't born when we started, that it's going a little bit too slow. In terms of the pace, I yield my yield back. Thank you.

Thank you.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you. And I just want it for the record Fallon, Nevada is my favorite town and that state. Chair now recognizes my good friend from Florida, Mr. Mills.

Rep. Cory Mills (R-Fla.)

Then he was Chairman, Jim. And I appreciate you all coming here today and for your continued service. But I really look for transparency at this point. As you're well aware of the recently reported funding challenges and the defects or Chow halls across 11.

Army installations was certainly of concern for me as a military combat veteran. The biggest concern is the cost associated these programs if they're fully funded, at $50. As per soldier, our service members should be eating steak and lobster. And instead they're investing in yields, investing in things that yield poor quality and inconsistent hours that leave our soldiers, sailors, Marines, Guardians lacking gender Mohan.

I believe that accountability, I think we all understand the difference between responsibility and accountability. Responsibility is I'm sorry, my fault, my bad. Accountability has been removed from your position being downgraded, or actually having someone else come in and do something about it. So I just want to be clear, I believe in accountability at all levels of our service, not just for our junior enlisted, or our junior officers.

So who is ultimately responsible for the management and oversight of defect operations within the Army?

Christopher Mohan

Sir, thank you for that question. And from my standpoint, at the at the army level, for our future strategy, and our current operations, the person is me.

Rep. Cory Mills (R-Fla.)

And what measures have you enacted in order to correct these failures to include logistical failures at Fort Carlos,

Christopher Mohan

The the first is meeting the soldiers where they are finding out what they want. And we've learned some tough lessons when we rolled out initiatives that have that have gone almost better than what we had, like for kiosk, meal prep programs. And so we had to make adjustments both in our vendor base and the way we operate those kiosks. But our future that we have an RFP on the street right now is to totally change the way that we feed soldiers.

So we get the quality that we get the the corporate level, people who do this for a living to feed our soldiers, while we focus our 90 to golf or our food service personnel on being soldiers and being prepared to sustain soldiers in combat.

Rep. Cory Mills (R-Fla.)

On Monday, the Pentagon released a memorandum entitled workforce acceleration and recapitalization initiative organizational review. This memorandum states that all functions that are not inherently governmental retail sales, recreation such should be prioritized for privatization. Do you believe that the essential messaging would operate

more efficiently predictability and effectively if its management was handed over to the private sector?

Christopher Mohan

With proper oversight? Yes, sir. Which adduction of sorry, with the exception of I'm sorry, our overseas deployed operations that needs to be soldier led I'm an executed Vice Admiral.

Scott Gray

I do believe we would benefit from privatization, we do have a challenge, though. I mean, we've got a lot, we can't privatize on a ship on your way in a combat zone, for example. And so while we do have opportunities in CONUS, and potentially even at some overseas locations, we got to be careful the people who do CSS who do work on aboard ship, we need somewhere for them to rotate ashore and serve. And so we got to balance that with our, you know, the career path and the challenges that we have associated with that.

But I am a fan.

Horace Larry

Sir, on the surface, I would think so it's just a matter of as emigre stated, how will we model that readiness in that combat element to make sure that we have that right, because having been an on scene commander downrange at all mass intensity operations, we had better have it right. So we'll step away from it within the look. But my boat is not in yet

Rep. Cory Mills (R-Fla.)

Have to work it. I like that Major General Woodworth.

Jason Woodworth

Thank you, sir. I will start by saying all of our CONUS Ness halls are operated by our contract. So we have not quite taking this step all the way to privatization. But we do have a private company that we contract with to do those.

Oh, CONUS is still all Marine Corps. We will take the question back and look more detailed at whether privatization is a good option for us. Obviously, there are some significant benefits, but I would bet that the cost would go up for us. So something to consider.

Thank you.

Rep. Cory Mills (R-Fla.)

Well, you know, in my experience, what I've found is that privatization actually ends up being cheaper. Because the one thing that the government does well is spend money, we don't necessarily spend it efficiently or effectively. But we're very good at spending money. I think $36.7 trillion in deficit right now would prove that.

My whole thing is though the commissaries are basically almost all privatized at this point, whether it's for money, the cashiers and the actual systems itself, or whether it's stocking the shelves, or whether it's actually selecting vendors to try and get it on the thing. So I hope that you do look into the privatization or at least a private public partnership of some sort. And hopefully, in our next meeting, if the Chairman does decide we can try and see what kind of updates we have. With that.

I yield back.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you, Chair now recognizes a friend from Washington,

Rep. Marilyn Strickland (D-Wash.)

Mr. Gray. Thank you, Chairman Fallon, Ranking Member Houlihan, I have the honor of representing Joint Base Lewis McChord. And I think about people that age, the choices they make when they're getting food, especially the people live in the barracks.

And so I think about barriers that they may have. So can you talk to me about some of the feedback you've received from people that you've surveyed? How easily is it accessible, especially given their schedules? How far are the dining hall facilities from the barracks that they stay in?

What type of off what? What type of offerings are they getting? And then also to you know, how you get how you ensure that nutritious food is what's on the menu as well. So I'll start with you.

General Mohan.

Christopher Mohan

Thank you for that question. I was stationed at at then Fort Lewis several years ago. And we had a network of dining facilities. The the the landscape has changed somewhat.

And so what we've, what we've seen the army do, and senior commanders against senior commanders program is to layer transportation on top of food service, and offer a the Rainier Express, which is an Uber like, an Uber like app where soldiers can get picked up where they are, particularly in times of a high up tempo, when we might have our our

dining facility personnel deployed to the field, or out in the Pacific on an exercise to shuttle and move those soldiers around. As far as the nutritious food in the in the, in the dining facilities. All of our recipes are approved by dieticians, and come from a process of oversight that comes from our joint culinary center. And so so they operate off of those those recipe cards, I will admit that kiosk had been somewhat of a challenge.

Because when we had catastrophic success in a couple of places when we rolled them out, again, not realizing how exactly properly it would be. And so we lean on our partners in the Defense Commissary Agency to basically upscale the the the food that we have in our kiosk to meet the demand that we have at our installations.

Rep. Marilyn Strickland (D-Wash.)

All right, Vice Admiral Gray.

Scott Gray

Thank you for the question, ma'am. Yeah, I first and foremost, I would say i i am very frustrated by the low utilization rate by our sailors. It's breaks my heart, frankly, to know that we, you know, we take their entitlement, and then we see them oftentimes using UberEATS or going to McDonald's or, you know, five guys on the base. So we're essentially paying twice for the food and for these young folks who don't have a lot of money.

It's a crusher for me, right. And so, you know, I will tell you that we do a great job I think In providing healthy options for nutrient dense foods, the barracks are typically in the vicinity of the galley. Many of our ships work aboard whenever our sailors work aboard ship, and so they can eat on the ship or they can choose to eat off the ship on the galley. So there are options.

From a health perspective, we follow, as all of us do the DOD 1338 instruction, which outlines the food options that we have to make, you know, for example, we typically do a minimum of three entrees, one of them is a vegetarian, you will have multiple fruit options, three to four cereal options, a hot cereal option, vegetables and starches, etc. And all of those menus that our dietitians review as well are reviewed to ensure that they meet the USDA criteria. So we offer it, it's available to them there. But we got to do a better job at getting them in the door and making them and making them want to take advantage of their entitlement.

Rep. Marilyn Strickland (D-Wash.)

Mr. Larry?

Horace Larry

Yes, man, we think you do a pretty decent job with this one, especially in terms of the way that we've structured our menus, and continue to work in the UK to have like, we used to be at a 14 day cycle, I mean, us night, we had a 28. And what that does is it's laid out for the whole month virtually you can then remember what see what he or she going to have for meals when they go in that dining facility. And that's been very, very popular. The other part of that is when you look at it from a nutrition of value perspective, we go back to OSDs construct of gold for green, we have been really zeroed in on that very heavily.

And also with our friends and then Army and Air Force exchange, what percentage of your products and these facilities or healthy items? And how are they coded so when a novice person like HL Erica walk in, I don't have to read, every element in the menu is coded so I can see this is healthy. This is the least least nutrient, etc. And I know what I'm looking for.

And we also make sure we have those nutrient items up front. So that pick those before they see the others.

Jason Woodworth

Thank you Major General Woodworth. Thank you for the question, ma'am. And I would start by saying the most important thing we need to do is to make it taste better.

Rep. Marilyn Strickland (D-Wash.)

I was gonna ask you all season the food?

Jason Woodworth

Yes, ma'am. There are recipes, of course. But yes, absolutely. We need to make it taste better.

If we want more people to come there. We have a program called Field fuel to fight, which is essentially a marine nutrition education program that we're working real hard on, we need to provide more hours more Grab and Go options, and more. better tasting food. Thank you, man.

Rep. Marilyn Strickland (D-Wash.)

All right. Well, thank you very much for all of your hard work with this. We do appreciate it. And we appreciate your attention to quality of life for those who are serving.

Thank you so much. I yield back. Mr. Chair.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you Chair now recognizes gentleman from California. Mr. Cisneros.

Rep. Gil Cisneros (D-Calif.)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you all for being here. I think I'm in a unique experience here are because of my previous experience, right, I used to be Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel readiness. Every time I visited a base I made sure I I ate and a dining hall.

And plus, I used to be a food service officer too. So I'm always, you know, there has to kind of go and the quality of the food, I will always stand up for cooks, or miss specialists or culinary specialists as we call them there and all the services and the job that they do. I think they do provide quality food. And I always say used to say sailors this sailors need something to complain about.

And the easiest thing for them to complain about was the food on the ship. But that being aside, I don't think the quality of the food is really the problem. And I will tell you that just from my experience when I would go it was always access. Right?

If they were working on the flight line, or you know, the galley wasn't near the flightline they didn't have a vehicle to get to the other side of the base where the the chow hall was or the galley. If they were working crazy hours if they were like at, you know, a medic or a corps corpsman, they're at the hospital. And they they didn't have they weren't able to go to the gallery because the gallery was closed during the hours that they work. So that was more of the problems that I ran into that I saw that I experienced that when people came to me and kind of were telling me about the food wasn't really that much.

I don't I'm not gonna say never heard about the quality of the food. But it was it was more access there. And I will say visiting Camp Pendleton. I would say if you haven't been there, they have some galleys over there.

Camp Pendleton I think are phenomenal and should be an example for all the services. As far as the diversity of the food that's available. They were all able to the Marines were able to get as much as they wanted to eat. I remember we went there and served Thanksgiving dinner dine time with my family.

I had one Marine that must have came up 12 times for all the turkey nuts Get all the turkey that that was available to him. And I think it's a great example. The problem there though, was sometimes Camp Pendleton being so big, all of the galleys always weren't open all the time. And so sometimes they had to travel a great distance in order to get to one that was open.

So I would say and just to kind of set the record straight, DECA is not run by contractors. Now, it's it's still run by deck on that kind of used to follow under me. But I will say the thing that they did to change the commissaries was they actually put a lot of emphasis in there. And they tried to make it a better experience for the customers kind

of going into their, I mean, I remember when I was in the Navy, you had to follow the line, go the route.

And now it's more like just like going into any other supermarket. And I think they, they really put a big emphasis on that and really trying to change that. And so I think that's where we kind of need to go with, you know, I think with our Chow halls, or galleys, or whatever we call them in various services, is really kind of focused on the the quality and the access and ensuring that our service members can get there. And so in general, Mohan The one thing I do worry about with the Army's experiments in the is that I, my alma mater, and I will say they will go unnamed here got actually got rid of their dining halls, and they went to a thing, where you could just basically get, you would have money on the card, and you could go eat anywhere in the vicinity.

Most of them ran out of money before the semester was even Oh, and I worry about our service members kind of having that same experience that they're going to the place where it's a little bit more expensive, here and there. And then halfway through the month, they're out of money. So how's the army going to deal with that?

Christopher Mohan

And so sir, thank you for that question. And the way we're dealing with it is, is one, we're not there yet, as far as you get a loaded car that you can go and go to anywhere on the installation. We have talked about it, we've done the necessary electronic transactions to prove that we can do it and testing. But right now we're focused on our campus style dining facilities, that has those things that you that you mentioned, vastly expanded hours, grab and go programs, and we've even in the RFP we've authorized offers to offer an option to do meal delivery.

And then layered on top of that transportation services, only installation like we have at JBLM, and also at at Forca vossos. to larger of our larger installations. So, so we do not intend to, in the current construct of the contract to to change things for so if you're an ESM soldiers live in the barracks, you go to the dining facility, you swipe your card, you eat what you want. And that's where we're headed.

Rep. Gil Cisneros (D-Calif.)

Thank you for that answer. And thank you all for being here. And I yield back.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you Chair now recognizes from California, Ms. Jacobs.

Rep. Sara Jacobs (D-Calif.)

Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. And thank you all for being here. I represent San Diego and in San Diego alone, our food bank serves nearly 40,000 servicemembers and

their families every single month. It's clear that the military is falling short and ensuring that our servicemembers and their families are food secure.

Right with those high numbers. Vice Admiral gray Major General Woodworth, I know you both know San Diego, well, how are your services planning to address this issue, specifically in high cost areas like San Diego where Bas is often not enough to cover food costs? And what if anything do you need from Congress to be able to address this problem?

Scott Gray

Well, thank you, man. For the question. In my opening remarks, I did mention that I think with a high cost of food and the rise in inflation, I do think it's prudent that Congress takes a look at the rate of bas not only to provide adequate quantity, but the quality of food, you know, fresh fruits and vegetables are more expensive than processed foods and vegetables yet, that's exactly what we we want our sailors to eat those nutrient dense foods. So I would encourage that, I think I think the work that Congress has done with the basic needs allowance is is an important work to to put up an appropriate floor, ensure that our youngest sailors get adequate resources they need to feed themselves and their families when appropriate.

Right now, those numbers are very small in the military. And then in the Navy, I think 22 people. But that threshold is being raised from 150% to 200 in the new near future, and I think that will add a significant number to the role. So I appreciate the work that the Congress has done in that manner.

Jason Woodworth

Thank you for your question, Congresswoman. I would argue that the best place for them to eat if their meal card eligible is the dining facility for $13.30 a day is the cheapest food that they're going to get. Now that doesn't solve the problem. about families that I know is in your mind as well.

I think that the pay rate change that we just in the last NDAA that's in effect now, I think will have a positive impact there. I also think that there, we need to potentially take more advantage of a tool, we already have the basic needs allowance, which which offers an additional stipend per month for Marines in the lowest earning levels. So thank you for your question.

Rep. Sara Jacobs (D-Calif.)

Absolutely. Well, thank you guys for bringing up basic needs allowance. I was really proud that we were able to expand it in last year's NDAA to 200% of the federal poverty line. Admiral, I know you said there were 22 people in the Navy who currently receive BNA.

Could the rest of you share in each of your services? How many people are currently receiving BNA?

Christopher Mohan

Ma'am, I will tell you that I don't know the exact number I know that is it's a low number. And we were trying to to ensure commanders understand what those limits are and do the financial education that is necessary not only from a soldier level, but also a leader level so we can point soldiers to those avenues of support. Thank you.

Horace Larry

Same here, ma'am. I do not have that number with him. But I know it's a low number and we will follow up. Okay, thank you.

Jason Woodworth

Thank you, Congresswoman. The number that I have is four. So we will look to expand that.

Rep. Sara Jacobs (D-Calif.)

Okay. And I guess my next question you might not have the answer to so if if not, you can take it back. But how many do you estimate are eligible for BNA but are not receiving those benefits?

Christopher Mohan

Ma'am, I need to take that one for the record and come back with you with the exact answer. Sure.

Scott Gray

It's a good question. You know, as General Mohan alluded, alluded to, those benefits have to be applied for based on the circumstances. So I really don't have any way of knowing whether or not the system is adequately informing commanders and informing sailors at the lowest level to ensure that they are there, they get the benefits that they're eligible for. But we do work hard within our our personnel system to identify those people that we do make the criteria that meet that criteria, and then reach out to those commanders to proactively encourage them to, to apply for those benefits.

Horace Larry

I will follow up and may I just say, by the Department of the Air Force, that is one that we consistently try and assess. But it is very, very difficult for one reason for the people

who may be food insecure. They don't have to talk to any senior leaders. I go back to our senior enlisted leaders all the time that did a year ago.

How many of you think of there and how many may need help? And it just not aware because what they do is knowing that they're not going to come in and ask for help I have it. Then we say if you do need help, here are the resources available to you. And we try to approach it that way.

But I will get you a definitive answer and follow up. Thank you, General. Thank

Jason Woodworth

You, Congresswoman. b&h, a program that I've learned more about during preparation for this testimony and something we will continue to push. We have 1100 Marines, approximately they're eligible. And as I said, we only have four that are taken, and so we got some work to do.

Thank you. I appreciate

Rep. Sara Jacobs (D-Calif.)

That. I look forward to working together with you all on addressing this issue. And Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

Thank you Chair now recognizes gentlelady from Hawaii, Ms. Tokuda .

Rep. Jill Tokuda (D-Hawaii)

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I know that this hearing was partially inspired by concerns regarding the military's allocation and use of the basic allowance for subsistence. I had a good conversation with General Mingus, about this issue last week. And while he assured me that the dollars are being fully spent in support of soldiers nutritional needs, I emphasized that the complexity of the accounting in the J box is another unaddressed part of the problem for all of the services.

It's very frustrating, because it's not clear that it adds up. And the reality is that as much as a quarter of service members still as we've been talking about experienced food insecurity, which only makes the situation worse. And so I do want to reiterate that point here and encourage all of you to streamline the accounting for the BS. So it's clear to all of us and to our servicemembers, especially as to how this money is being spent in the right way and getting directly to them.

So thank you very much for being here today. I want to touch upon a few things. I know many of the questions were, were already asked. One is talking about the culture and stigma around food insecurity.

And a major challenge that has been mentioned in both the recent RAND study and in other places is the culture surrounding food insecurity in the military. There are various ways that this issue is described, although one variation is that food insecurity is linked to a stigma of poor financial management, which can make it harder for service members to get promoted, or get security clearances they need for career advancement. And so what is clear to me is that there's a cultural challenge, that stigma that makes it hard for servicemembers and their families to talk about Food and hunger, this only makes it harder to tackle the root problem and the root causes of food insecurity in this unique subset of our population. Now understanding that for many of our young service members, this might be the first time they're living away from home.

For some, they might get a plastic card loaded with some cash, and, as was just mentioned, by my colleagues could be spent before the month is well over because they're making poor decisions, perhaps fiscally. So how are you, you know, working to reform and improve the military food system, but also dress and tackle? What are some fundamental cultural challenges to create a healthier dialogue about food, nutrition and financial management amongst our service members?

Scott Gray

Ma'am, I'll take that, it's a great question. A lot of sailors leave their Mama's and come to us and their mom has did everything for them. And so they don't know how to do the most simple things, they don't have to cook for themselves, they don't know that you don't pour kitty litter down the toilet, or it clogs up I mean, so you know, the basics. Oftentimes, it's just basic life skills.

And so we do have through our fleet and Family Service Centers, you know, those educational skills, financial management, we can get to counseling, you know, planning for baby, all of these courses that we offer. I think, first and foremost, I'll speak for myself, but I think this applies across the breadth of all the services is knowing and understanding and understanding those things. It's so important at the unit level, and at the chief level, or the division officer level, that people know, their sailors, and that they interact with their sailors and they ask questions of the sales because you're right, people get embarrassed, you know, they they overextend themselves, on their bills, and then they don't want to highlight it by coming to say, I can't afford food, and then they suffer in silence. And oftentimes, we will only find out about it a month after or you know, when they're really now in crisis.

And so the connection at the lowest level is so important to ensuring that we're taking care of our folks. And that that intrusive leadership in their lives to ask them the questions is just critically important. Thank you.

Rep. Jill Tokuda (D-Hawaii)

Anyone else want to?

Christopher Mohan

I'd like to jump on this one, as well. So we see as a multifaceted approach. The first is, is Admiral Gray said, look, the the first line leaders have to know their soldiers and have to be involved in their soldiers. And again, intrusive leadership is a term that we use as well, we layer on top of that financial training echelon, not only for our young soldiers, and our young officers as well, in order to teach them how to manage the, you know, the money that they have, but also from a leadership perspective, how to direct soldiers to the right place to get that, that financial resource help.

And then we offer a variety of options. And we spent $30 million a year on just the financial readiness program, we also have a virtual program, that, that so for soldiers who are maybe a little bit hesitant, that has virtual skills, and virtual training that it can take to manage that money. And, and then for the actual, you know, teaching them how to live I hate to use that term. But we've had some innovative units, again, driven by junior leaders that have said, okay, the meal prep program, because in your dining facilities or in your barracks, we have cooking facilities, your meal prep program is going to be in some cases ready to cook food.

And so they teach them how to cook. And which I think is really important. And then finally, as we envision our future state of our campus style dining facility, look, the the end in the contract is the ambiance, the modern restaurant feel. So it's a place where where families can also come really focused on our junior enlisted soldiers that live in the barracks, but also, as a as a bonus is a safe place.

It's a good place, and it's a quality place at a reasonable price for soldiers to bring their families to. Okay.

Rep. Jill Tokuda (D-Hawaii)

Thank you very much. I know my time has elapsed. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

I want to thank all the witnesses. I think a really good really good hearing very informative work to do. I think we'll all agree there would encourage you probably already doing that. Best practices in talking to one another and my experience in the Air Force.

I always liked the missile personally myself, you know.

Rep. Pat Fallon (R-Texas)

I would like to thank the witnesses again at providing for their testimony this afternoon and for their future attention to this matter as well as present. There being no further business. This Subcommittee is adjourned. [END]