Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 4, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We write to express our concern about the Department of Defense's (DOD) apparent underinvestment in food options for members of the military. Recent public reporting in military.com highlighted that DOD spends far less on food items for servicemembers who are afforded subsistence-in-kind than would be given directly to those servicemembers in Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS) if they were not eligible for government-provided meals.[1] Previous reporting also highlighted DOD's challenges in providing healthy food for servicemembers.[2] This reporting underscores the ongoing challenges the military services have in ensuring our servicemembers have access to high-quality and nutritious meals.

Current law states that most servicemembers who receive basic pay are entitled to receive BAS to help them afford the cost of food. It also gives the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Service Secretaries, the ability to prescribe policies regarding the use of dining facilities.[3] Current DOD policy requires most servicemembers who receive government-provided meals to pay for their meals, including through BAS deductions managed by Defense Financial Accounting Service. The current policy delegates the use of those collected funds to the military services.[4]

The report noted that many installations' current spending on DFAC operations represented only a small percentage of the BAS collected from servicemembers serving on those installations. The findings, which include 2024 financial records from eleven of the largest Army installations, show that more than $151 million of the $225 million in BAS collected from servicemembers on these installations was not spent on food costs. That figure does not include the additional garrisons under the Army's control, nor does it include spending at installations managed by the other military services suggesting the issue may be much more widespread.

Congress provides servicemembers with BAS to help them afford meals. If BAS is taken from servicemembers for meals the government gives them, then that funding should be used to cover the costs and investments needed to serve those meals. Additionally, for Congress to effectively conduct its oversight responsibilities, it must be fully apprised of how the funding provided is appropriated and must ensure open transparency on behalf of the services.

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[1] Steve Beynon, *Over $151 Million Taken from Soldiers' Paychecks for Food Costs Spent Elsewhere by the Army*, Military.com (Feb. 14, 2025), https://www.military.com/daily-news/investigations-and-features/2025/02/14/over-151-million-taken-soldiers-paychecks-food-costs-spent-elsewhere-army.html

[2] Steve Beynon, *The Army Is Going All-In on Food Kiosks as Base Dining Facilities Struggle,* Military.com (Feb. 29, 2024), https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/02/29/army-going-all-food-kiosks-base-dining-facilities-struggle.html

[3] 37 U.S.C. § 402.

[4] *DoD 7000.14-R Financial Management Regulation*, Volume 7A, Chapter 25, paragraph 2.4.7

The article also found that a lack of nutrient-dense food, shortages, and inconsistent adherence to the Army's nutrition policy negatively affects junior enlisted servicemembers specifically because they often live in unaccompanied housing on installations. These junior enlisted servicemembers are also disproportionately affected by the loss of their BAS as it represents a significant portion of their overall compensation.

Through your experience as a junior officer, you can empathize with the importance of a reliable, nutritious dining facility, and its importance to morale. You are now ultimately responsible for the welfare of these servicemembers, and we request your prompt response to the following questions by April 31, 2025:

1. What elements of DOD funding are used to provide meals to servicemembers?
    a. How do the military services program through the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) to fund food service operations?

2. How do the military services make decisions regarding investments in their on-post food service operations?
    a. How do you consider including nutritious options on their menus?

3. Are there barriers to the military services providing healthy and nutritious meals to servicemembers living in unaccompanied housing on military installations?
    a. If so, what are they?
    b. Does the Department or the military services require additional resources or authorities to provide healthy and affordable food options to these servicemembers? If so, what are they?

4. How do you plan to improve the quality and nutrition of food at dining facilities and other food service providers across the Joint Force to meet the needs of the modern warfighter?

Our servicemembers are the best among us and expect fair compensation from their government. If a servicemember is losing money from their paycheck because they are being given a meal, it is reasonable for them to expect that funding will be used only to cover the costs of providing it and to ensure it is of the highest possible quality. We trust you will move expeditiously to answer our inquiries. Thank you for your earnest attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Raphael Warnock
United States Senator

Jen A. Kiggans
Member of Congress

Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Jon Ossoff
United States Senator

John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

SETH MOULTON
Member of Congress

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Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress

Abraham J. Hamadeh
Member of Congress

Don Bacon
Member of Congress

John J. McGuire III
Member of Congress

Lance Gooden
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Donald G. Davis
Member of Congress

Mikie Sherrill
Member of Congress

Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress