



Military Dependents School Meal Eligibility Act

In 2018, 62 percent of military families reported feeling stress from their financial situation,¹ and nearly one in seven – or 14 percent – reported being food insecure.² A new bill led by Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA) and Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA) would help remedy this and bring additional resources to active military families with dependents.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, almost 19,500 active service members – or only about 1.5 percent of the active force – received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in 2014,³ 12.5 percentage points less than those reported being food insecure in 2018. Many food insecure military families are ineligible for federal food assistance because, under current law, a servicemember's housing allowance is counted as income. This inflates incomes on paper, disqualifying servicemembers in need from receiving federal food assistance and their children from receiving free or reduced school meals. Additional barriers to enrollment in federal food assistance program include their high relocation rate, as military families move on average every two to three years,⁴ as well as administrative burdens like paperwork.⁵ As a result, thousands of service members around the country are struggling to feed themselves and their families. In fact, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger reports that charitable food pantries operate on or near military bases across the country.⁶

The *Military Dependents School Meal Eligibility Act* would authorize the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to send information from its Personnel and Pay System to the state agencies that oversee school meal programs to directly certify child dependents of eligible active duty military members in school meal programs. Under this bill, state agencies would automatically enroll child dependents of active military families who make up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line in the free and reduced lunch program and notify relevant local education agencies to add them to their approved student list.

At 185 percent of the federal poverty line, almost all children of E-1, or entry-level, active servicemen would qualify for school meals through the program, as well as many children of servicemembers up through ranks E-6. Ensuring children of low-income servicemembers have access to school meals will help reduce hunger in military families and stress on our soldiers. This in turn would benefit our military's readiness while improving health and academic outcomes of military children.

This bill would help protect military families from food insecurity so servicemembers can focus on protecting our nation's security. By allowing the DOD to work with state agencies to directly certify the children of our military servicemembers, we can ensure we take care of the families of those who fight for our country.

¹ Blue Star Families, https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018MFLS-Comprehensive-Infographic_v2.pdf

² The Military-Baylor Graduate Program and the Brooke Army Medical Center

³ American Community Survey (ACS), <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/library/publications/time-series/acsbr.All.html>

⁴ United Service Organizations (USO), <https://www.uso.org/stories/2277-5-things-to-know-about-military-families#:~:text=Most%20military%20families%20move%20every,what%20happens%20in%20the%20military.>

⁵ Food Research and Action Center, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/direct-cert-improves-low-income-school-meal-access.pdf>

⁶ MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, <https://mazon.org/inside-mazon/watch-mazon-testify-before-congress-2>