October 2, 2021

The Honorable Mike Levin
Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
364 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Levin:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity hearing "Ending Veteran Hunger: Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecurity."

211 San Diego is one of the nation's leading referral and information resource agencies and 211 systems, and for more than 15 years, we have been proud to serve the residents of San Diego. 211 San Diego is a nonprofit organization that is the region's trusted source for community, health, social and disaster information and for connection to resources and programs. As San Diego has a distinguished and rich military and veteran history, 211 is especially proud to pay close attention to the region's community of military, veteran, their families and care takers. Our organization is not only led by a U.S. Army veteran, President and CEO William York, we offer the Courage to Call program, an integrated program that is funded by the County of San Diego and operated by 211 San Diego, Mental Health Systems, Inc. and Veterans Village of San Diego. Courage to Call is a free, confidential, helpline staffed by veterans and family members that provides 24/7 peer advocacy to military, veterans, their families and care takers by providing navigational support to specific needs that impact this particular community.

For more than a year now, 211 San Diego has been on the front lines of the region's response to the COVID-19 pandemic serving more than a million people using 211's services. We have worked in partnership with our local and state governments, community organizations, corporate businesses and the philanthropic community to ensure that San Diegans have equitable access to testing and to vaccinations, while also helping individuals and families connect to critical and essential services and basic needs – such as food resources, rental and housing support and financial and health assistance.

While COVID-19 elevated and shed a spotlight on many community gaps and needs, food insecurity has been one of the areas of greatest impacts in our region for decades. The pandemic has severely increased this issue, with many households experiencing food shortages that have driven them to food banks, food drives and other resources. It's never been clearer than now that food insecurity has cut across all demographic lines of the diverse region we serve, and it has particularly impacted our friends and neighbors serving in the military and those who are veterans.

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Our knowledge and experience in this space, combined with our robust data and informatics systems have captured the nutrition challenges posed by the pandemic. For example:

- At a national level, veterans experiencing serious mental illness have a food insecurity rate 10 times higher than those without serious mental illness; and veterans who reported fair or poor health were about three times likely to be food insecure than those who reported to be better in health. Additionally, studies consistently find higher rates of food insecurity among certain sub-groups of veterans, including Black, Latinx, and other non-white veterans (according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies).
- Here in San Diego, we have seen low CalFresh application submission numbers. The year prior to the pandemic (3-1-19 through 3-1-20), 211 San Diego completed 13, 891 CalFresh/SNAP applications. Of those, 1,113 were for veteran households (8%). During the COVID-19 pandemic, 211 San Diego has submitted 28,019 CalFresh applications. Of those, 3,020 applications were for veteran households, representing 10% of submitted applications.
- Mental Health System's Courage to Call program, in whom we partner with and refer to, has been facilitating food distributions to active military and veterans in partnership with Feeding San Diego since 2017. It has served over 11,000 households between 2017 and 2021.
- Our front-line staff have reported that many callers seeking assistance through our Courage to Call program do not know about CalFresh or report incorrect information regarding eligibility, such as not wanting to take the benefits from someone else. Misinformation may be a reason why there are less eligible, veteran households participating in these programs. Our data indicates that 32% of veteran callers were not knowledgeable at all of the food assistance programs or nutrition resources in the community, and 53% percent of clients skipped a meal or ate less because there wasn't enough money for food. Increase information of available food resources upstream may help ensure that veterans know such resources exist.
- Another factor that contributes to food insecurity among veteran households is low household income. According to Blue Star Families, prior to the pandemic, unemployment rates among military spouses was 24%. Additionally, 42% of military spouses who had been employed prior to the pandemic reported they stopped working after March 2020, largely due to layoffs.
- At 211 San Diego, data indicates that of veterans who called between March 13, 2020 through August 31, 2021, 31% reported being disabled and unable to work; 32% reported being unemployed and 24% reported not being in the labor force or retired. Of these clients, 73% reported 30% or less of the Area Median Income. Eighty-three percent of our veteran callers reported not having enough money to buy food. 211 San Diego requests that the House Committee on Veterans Affairs support our recommendation to increase access to important food resources and awareness of available programs to the military community in a way that is upstream and stigma-free by funding existing agencies providing these services to expand capacity.

Again, thank you to the Committee for its efforts to address this critical issue. 211 San Diego stands ready to assist our courageous veterans.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Karla Samayoa
Director of Safety Net Services
211 San Diego