

GAO Report to Congress on Active-Duty Servicemembers' Use of Food Assistance Programs



The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report to Congress on July 15, 2016, [***“DoD Needs More Complete Data on Active-Duty Servicemembers’ Use of Food Assistance Programs.”***](#) The report states, "Although included in the military compensation system as a non-cash benefit, DOD commissaries can be considered a food assistance program in that the commissaries provide servicemembers an opportunity to purchase food at reduced cost."

The GAO findings strengthen the argument for supporting active Congressional oversight of the proposed commissary changes and providing additional appropriations to preserve the savings levels and benefit.

Why GAO Did This Study:

“According to the Defense Commissary Agency, servicemembers on active duty spent over \$21 million in SNAP benefits at commissaries from September 2014 through August 2015. This suggests that people serving our country may be having difficulty making ends meet. House Report 114-102 includes a provision that GAO review food assistance programs available to servicemembers. This report assesses, among other things, the extent to which (1) active-duty servicemembers and their families have access to food assistance programs and any variations in eligibility for these programs, and (2) DOD has identified the servicemembers’ use of these programs. GAO reviewed information on government and charitable food assistance programs and policies. GAO also interviewed DOD and service officials at four installations that were selected based on size, cost of living, and presence of food assistance programs.”

What GAO Recommends:

“GAO recommends that DOD (1) revise surveys of servicemembers to collect and analyze more complete data and, if warranted, implement actions such as assigning department-level responsibilities for monitoring food assistance; and (2) coordinate with USDA to access its usage information. DOD concurred with the first recommendation and partially concurred with the second, stating that it has tried to coordinate with USDA. GAO continues to believe the recommendation is valid, as discussed in this report.”

ALA Concerns and Recommendations:

- DoD needs to understand how many military are currently accessing food banks, food stamps, and other types of food assistance.
- DoD should determine how many additional users will access these food assistance programs if commissary prices increase or privatization materializes.
- Not a good idea to move to privatize or risk raising commissary prices without metrics and review procedures before fielding pricing experiments.
- The commissary benefit is more important than ever with all of the changes to BAH, BAS, etc.
- The report only addressed active duty and does not include the full range of eligible commissary beneficiaries (retired, reserve, Guard, survivors, etc.).

- There are a multitude of food assistance programs but eligibility and access are confusing at best.
- With changes to the commissary benefit, awareness of food safety nets are more important than ever.
- We want to work with DoD family assistance folks to work through the confusing maze of food assistance programs and make it easier for people to understand and access these food sources.
- GAO says that service members are embarrassed to access food assistance programs and feel “stigmatized.” Commissaries are not stigmatized.

What GAO Found:

"Although included in the military compensation system as a non-cash benefit, DOD commissaries can be considered a food assistance program in that the commissaries provide servicemembers an opportunity to purchase food at reduced cost. Active-duty servicemembers receive a compensation package that includes cash compensation, non-cash compensation, and deferred compensation. Non-cash compensation includes various types of benefits such as health care, child-care centers, educational benefits, and access to subsidized commissaries (i.e., grocery stores)."

"Many of the food pantries we examined were local operations intended to meet emergency needs; however, at one of the military installations we visited there were four food pantries operating on the installation that provided food routinely once a month. Table 1 provides further details about some of the different types of food assistance available to active-duty servicemembers and their families."

"Based on the 2013 survey—the most recent results available—DOD estimated that 2 percent (about 20,000) of active duty servicemembers or their spouses had received income or financial support from SNAP in the previous 12 months and 9 percent received income from either WIC and/or Temporary Assistance for Need Families (TANF)."

"According to results from the 2013 U.S. Census Bureau’s annual Army Community Survey, about 23,000 active duty servicemembers received SNAP benefits in the previous 12 months."

"Specifically, an official with Army Emergency Relief told us that the organization provided \$2.3 million in food assistance to active-duty servicemembers in calendar year 2015, \$2.7 million in calendar year 2014, and \$1.8 million in calendar year 2013. According to an official with the Air Force Aid Society, the organization provided \$300,000 in food assistance in fiscal year 2015, and \$600,000 in each of the previous two years."

"During our site visits, we also visited volunteer-run food pantries and food distribution operations of varying sizes that were started to address a locally-identified need. For example, during our site visit to Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma, we visited a pantry that provides free food to anyone in need, but it does not track the number of individuals served. We also visited a food pantry on Fort Hood in Texas that Army officials told us responded to 508 separate requests for food from active-duty servicemembers, retirees, and their family members in fiscal year 2015. Of the four military installations, Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in California had the largest and most organized of the food distribution operations that we visited. Specifically, during our visit to the base in December 2015, we identified four food pantries that distribute

food on specific days of the month around Camp Pendleton. The manager of one pantry told us that its operation alone provides food assistance each month to an average of 400 to 500 military families on Camp Pendleton. Without coordination with USDA, and considering outreach to other organizations that have data on servicemembers' use of food assistance, DOD will miss the opportunity to collect more complete data and information on the needs of its servicemembers."

"Military service officials at all four of the military installations that we visited described challenges that servicemembers may experience when seeking food assistance benefits, and stated they have been addressing the challenges by continuing to refer interested servicemembers to potential assistance from government food assistance programs and charitable organizations. Some of the challenges mentioned during our group interviews at each of the four military installations that we visited were: (1) limited awareness of some food assistance programs (2) stigma associated with receiving food assistance; and (3) misconceptions about military compensation and the ability of a servicemember to qualify for food assistance."

"Military service officials who assist servicemembers and their families at all four of the installations we visited generally had knowledge of some food assistance programs administered by USDA, such as SNAP and WIC. However, we found that some of the military officials at three of the four installations we visited were not aware of the FSSA food assistance program even though it is administered by DOD. Those who were aware of FSSA said that they had not referred many servicemembers to the program because it is more difficult to qualify for than SNAP. For example, at one military installation, the officials told us that no applicant has been able to qualify for FSSA. In addition, the military officials told us that they assisted servicemembers who were also not aware of some food assistance programs, such as foodbanks, SNAP, and particularly FSSA."

"Military service officials at three of the four selected installations we visited stated that they believe a societal stigma exists generally for those who use food assistance. Officials at one installation added that the self-sufficient culture of the military can make these stigmas even more pronounced for servicemembers who receive food assistance from, for example, SNAP, and to a lesser degree from charitable organizations and food pantries. In contrast, these officials said that there seems to be no stigma with regard to receiving WIC benefits, which suggest that WIC is seen as more of a health and nutrition benefit rather than a program for those with financial and food assistance needs. Officials added that WIC is advertised more than other food assistance programs; in some cases there have been proactive efforts to promote the program by including WIC representatives at military briefings to inform and encourage servicemembers to apply if they are expecting or have small children."

"FSSA program data for calendar year 2014 showed that the E-4 paygrade was the most frequent paygrade to receive this allowance, suggesting that personnel at this paygrade have a need for assistance."