

Addressing Food and Financial Insecurity in the Army Community

By Chet Curtis, Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness

The military has the strategies, policies and resources to support food and economic security, as well as the well-being of our service members and their Families. However, we must address these issues holistically, which was the key takeaway from the Total Force Fitness webinar, *Strengthening Health, Wellness and Financial Security Through Total Force Fitness*, part of the [2024 Military Family Readiness Academy](#).

The Total Force Fitness framework is a detailed blueprint to help the military community optimize their health and performance across eight life domains. This webinar, focused on economic readiness and military Family well-being, was attended by more than 200 people across the Department of Defense on Aug. 29, 2024. Participants learned about initiatives to support financial readiness and food security.

Joanna Reagan, public health nutritionist with the Defense Centers for Public Health, explained how low food security affected almost 13% of the country in 2022 and why this issue is critical within our units.

“That’s 17 million individuals, and if you add in children, that adds up to 17.3% of households in the U.S. [that] are food insecure, or 6.4 million individuals. Since the military mirrors the civilian population, this becomes a military issue,” she said.

That’s where the data comes in, and the figures don’t lie. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food-secure household as one where everyone can access enough food for an active, healthy life. Reagan mentioned that from 2018 to 2022, the USDA found that 15% of all active-duty personnel lived with insufficient food security, and another 10.4% had very low food security.

According to Reagan, a 2023 RAND report, *Food Insecurity Among Members of the Armed Forces and Their Dependents*, found that 25.8% of Army, Navy, Marines and Coast Guard personnel experienced food insecurity. The report also identified the high cost of living, lack of spousal employment opportunities and difficult-to-find assistance programs as contributing factors to food insecurity in the military.

“It’s important to [ensure] you know where to go for resources,” said Reagan. We want to make sure we point our service members to the right locations to help them know where there are local resources, like food pantries, and if they are eligible for SNAP benefits.”

Opening dialogue between leaders and service members can help. Reagan believes we should strive to better understand the underlying issues and ensure that if service members identify or share that they are having challenges, we know how to help them out.

“It’s OK to be able to talk about this at town halls,” said Reagan, emphasizing the importance of one-on-one conversations with service members. “We need to be able to ask, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’”

Financial Fitness and Economic Security

Financial fitness and economic security play a significant role in TFF. According to Robyn Mroszczyk, the Army Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness Financial Education program manager, many of the causes of food insecurity in the military are directly related to finances.

“We can see in the TFF framework that if we don’t have financial fitness and we don’t have economic security, all the other domains of the TFF start to fall apart,” said Mroszczyk. “They’re all interconnected, but if we reinforce available resources and put all programs into place that support healthy food access, we’re more likely to have a ready, resilient force.”

Since food insecurity has no single cause, efforts must be inclusive and multifaceted. According to Mroszczyk, we must address the various needs of all Families across the force.

“Data shows most junior unaccompanied service members living on DOD installations are not always accessing or able to access the meals offered at the government-funded dining facilities, and this is an area of special focus moving forward,” said Mroszczyk.

She noted that data also points to a potential underutilization of federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP, WIC and school lunches, suggesting that receipt of such program benefits could improve food security among eligible service members.

Data from the 2022 Status of Forces Survey shows a correlation between spouses underemployed or unemployed and food insecurity, according to Mroszczyk. Additionally, the DOD recognizes that for many military spouses, employment is not feasible unless they have stable, affordable child care.

“While we have a well-compensated force, which was confirmed by a recent Congressional Budget Office study, there are opportunities to improve financial stability,” said Mroszczyk.

Mroszczyk wants to remind the Army community that [personal financial counselor services](#) are available for free. All active-duty, National Guard and reserve service members, their Family members and survivors are eligible to receive no-cost financial counseling. This includes mandatory trainings as well as individual and group counseling.

“These services include education and counseling to provide service members and Families with the knowledge and skills needed to develop individual strategies to achieve financial goals and maintain financial well-being,” she said.

The 2024 Military Family Readiness Academy is a series of events and initiatives designed to enhance the readiness and well-being of military Families. Learn about [upcoming events](#).