



U.S House Committee on Rules

“Rules Committee Roundtable on the Issue of Military and Veteran Hunger”

Testimony of J. Chad Morrison
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Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Rules, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony to you today. I greatly appreciate the elevation of this critical issue of hunger among our military and veteran populations.

Mountaineer Food Bank is a private non-profit organization located in Gassaway, WV committed to feeding West Virginia’s hungry. The food bank is a member of Feeding America, a nationwide network of 200 food banks and over 60,000 food pantries meal programs across the United States. We provide food to over 200,000 individuals in 48 counties in West Virginia, including children, seniors and veterans.

I am testifying on the current capacity, needs and barriers to addressing the issue of food insecurity among military families and veterans. We are in favor and support all measures that increase food access to military families and veterans by increasing resources and removing barriers to accessing food.

Since 2016, Mountaineer Food Bank has been involved in partnerships with local VAMCs to address veteran hunger, providing food boxes to 1,000 veterans monthly. These programs have not only proven effective, but quite necessary to fulfill the nutritional needs of veterans and to help them overcome the many barriers they face in having healthy lives. Many veterans struggle with transportation, food access, and connections to resources and employment due to the broadband connectivity. Additionally, limited or non-existent funding opportunities create barriers of resources for food programing that targets veterans.

Mountaineer Food Bank was created in 1981, for the purpose of providing food and other resources to community organizations such as food pantries, shelters, and soup kitchens. Food banks began to be established in the late 1960’s in Phoenix, AZ and were replicated in the 70’s and early 80’s. Food banks initially worked through food waste initiatives, sourcing surplus and outdated foods from food producers. Food banks would work with local and regional food manufacturers to bring donated

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loads of food into their service area, which could then be re-distributed to smaller organizations, mostly food pantries.

Today, the Feeding America network, formerly America's Second Harvest, maintains relationships with almost all major food producers and retailers, driving donated food items to local food banks and food pantries. Since 2008, almost all major retail grocers have developed and maintained retail donation programs that contribute donations locally of close dated product. Our food bank receives almost 9 million pounds of donated product annually.

In 1983, the federal government established the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which became integrated into the operational models of most food banks across the country, including Mountaineer Food Bank. The purpose of TEFAP was to utilize government-held agricultural surpluses to address hunger. In 2020, TEFAP made up almost 50% of the foods distributed by Mountaineer Food Bank due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Trade Mitigation responses, though in typical years it accounts for 30% of foods distributed.

While donations and commodities make up significant portions of available food, they consistently fall short overall in filling the gaps of food needed to feed our communities. Food banks operate significant purchasing programs to supplement food items that just are not available through other means. While corporate donors create efficiencies and secondary markets, food banks see less product donated. In 2020, Mountaineer Food Bank purchased over \$4 million dollars' worth of food to meet the needs of our food pantries and programs.

Over the last 40 years food banks have evolved in many ways. Many food banks started as small community action programs, but have developed into highly efficient scaled operations with warehouses, truck fleets, and skilled professional staff to ensure donated dollars are used as efficiently as possible. Food banks have also evolved in other ways, including scope and operational programming.

Food banks services generally service the needs of counties, with data reflecting the inputs of food and overall food insecure populations based on county-level analytics. This has been the norm for decades, but in the past two years, Mountaineer Food Bank has begun the shift from a county-centric model to a community centric model using zip-code data on poverty, food insecurity, employment, home ownership and other socioeconomic data. This shift has allowed us to focus on the most vulnerable communities and populations in our service area to make sure that even small communities have the food access that they need to thrive.

Over the last six years, we have emphasized growth in programs funded and operated by the food bank. Again, historically, we had focused on providing food to other 501(c) three nonprofit feeding programs. These programs generally target specific vulnerable populations including children, seniors and veterans.

The food bank has developed several programs targeting childhood hunger including Backpack Programs, Summer Feeding (SFSP) and Fresh Initiative Kid's Markets. Backpack programs traditionally



provide small bags of food to elementary age students on the weekend. We currently work with 80 partners and 122 schools to feed almost 8,000 children weekly through this program. The SFSP is operated in coordination with the West Virginia Department of Education to provide summer meals to students. Our Kid's Market program is unique, in that it, combines access to local fresh produce, nutrition education and agricultural connections to elementary age students in a farmer's market style distribution. The Kid's Market is intended to not only provide food access, but to connect children with community resources, educational tools and reduce stigma about needing a helping hand from a food bank.

In 2017, West Virginia became the 47th state to become part of the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), a commodity food program dedicated to meeting the nutritional needs of seniors. West Virginia accepted a caseload of 5,000 boxes split between the state's two food banks per month, Mountaineer and Facing Hunger Foodbank in Huntington, WV. While preparing for the program, the food banks realized that almost 30,000 seniors in the state would qualify. Over the past four years, both food banks have consistently maxed out their allocated resources and in 2021, was awarded their request of additional food boxes, bringing the total to 10,000 per month in West Virginia.

In July 2016, we were approached by Feeding America to participate in a new initiative, the Veteran Pantry Pilot. We were one of seven food banks solicited in our network to creating partnerships with our local VA medical centers (VAMC) and design a program that would address the food insecurity needs of veterans accessing the services of VA centers. At the time, Feeding America could only offer support services in the form of staff, not resources such as funding for food purchases, warehouse and operational costs.

We joined the pilot cohort and were quickly connected with the Social Work department at the VAMC in Martinsburg, WV, who had volunteered to coordinate the project design and possible implementation. After discussing the opportunity, the Martinsburg VAMC felt that they could easily reach at least 50 veterans receiving services that were struggling with hunger. While the food bank had no dedicated resources or funding for this project, we immediately decided that the urgency of the need and the population that we were trying to reach was so critical, that we needed act without delay and make the path by walking.

The food bank reallocated general funds to target this pilot program to get it off the ground. In October 2016, Mountaineer Food Bank became the first food bank as part of this pilot project to actually hold a food distribution on-site, providing food to a little over 50 veterans at the Martinsburg VAMC.

The food bank's hope was to create a physical space, a pantry, on the VA center grounds that could be accessible by veterans at any time during the month regardless of when their appointment was. However, due to space and storage limitations, our first distributions were held in a 'mobile' style with a refrigerated box truck outside. Participants received fresh produce, frozen foods and shelf stable meal items that could be taken home and prepared. Over the coming months, the program was refined, developing a shelf stable food box that was then delivered to the VAMC center and stored for access as



veterans needed it. The unfortunate tradeoff was that due to storage limitations, the center could not store items that required refrigeration or cold storage.

Development of the Veterans Table

In January 2017, a partnership with the Beckley, WV VAMC was established and in February 2017, 71 veterans were provided food. At Beckley, the distribution started outdoors at an on-site picnic shelter using the same model as the mobile distribution in Martinsburg. The Social Work department at the VAMC was the lead contact on-site, with social workers helping to identify, sign up and communicate with veterans that could be helped by the program.

Standard operating procedures had been developed including registration forms, screening tools and communication methods to reach participants. Throughout the partnerships with the VAMC's, Mountaineer Food Bank has attempted to keep registration data minimal to basic information and intentionally eliminated the need for income verification for this population. While income verification is required for federal programs such as TEFAP and CSFP, this being a privately funded program gave the food bank the opportunity to eliminate a barrier for veterans that may live on the margins or just struggle with temporary hardships and be in need of a helping hand. The VAMC staff assist with verification of veteran or active statuses.

As the program continued to grow, Mountaineer Food Bank realized the need to pursue funding opportunities from private and corporate donors. Through the pilot program through Feeding America, we were advised that there was no available funding at the time through Feeding America or the VAMC for this program. At the end of 2017, the food bank had branded and created program guidance, partner agreements and communication tools for the Veterans Table, a program dedicated to providing food to struggling veterans in West Virginia. Our hope was the program could continue to grow to all VAMC, clinics and throughout our service area to reach all veterans in need.

In May 2018, a partnership was created with the Clarksburg, WV VAMC, providing food boxes to 56 veterans at an adjacent Veteran's Memorial Park next to the medical center. The distribution was held in a mobile style, but incorporated shelf stable food boxes, dairy and produce since the refrigerated truck provided storage capacity. The VAMC supported the distribution by providing staff, volunteers and coordinating partnerships to do SNAP outreach for veterans that were eligible. Staff was coordinated through the VAMC Homeless Program.

The distribution at the Beckley VAMC had moved off-site to a local church parking lot due to space and traffic issues. The distribution had grown from 71 veterans to almost 200 veterans in 2018. Beckley VAMC also began coordinating their Community Based Out-Patient Clinics (CBOC), while Mountaineer Food Bank provided food boxes to staff for these sites. CBOC's could reach an even more vulnerable sub-population of veterans that may lack transportation, be homebound, or live in rural communities so far away from the VAMC to make it unfeasible.



The Veterans Table Today

The Veterans Table has continued to grow in service and in scope. The original site in Martinsburg continues to serve 50-75 veterans per month. The social work team triages and distributes boxes to veterans as needed. The VAMC has local VFW's and American Legion groups that assist when needed.

The site at Clarksburg VAMC doubled to 180 and then doubled again during peak COVID-19 responses to over 400 veterans per month. Mountaineer Food Bank, the Clarksburg VAMC and Feeding America recently partnered on a social impact software called Advantego to enhance the registration and client data tracking process. The overall target of this software is to assist with identifying evidence based practices using technology to address social determinants of health for short and long-term health outcomes. This partnership is continuing and includes the VA Research arm.

The site in Beckley, WV also continued to grow and now serves between 400-450 veterans per month. The mobile distribution remains off-site, but the food bank still works closely with the Beckley VAMC. At this VAMC, Voluntary Services is the main liaison between the food bank and VAMC. This partnership allows 11 counties to be served and 200 food boxes are delivered to the most vulnerable veterans through a home delivery program. Voluntary Services coordinates with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to establish teams of volunteer drivers with DAV vehicles to deliver food boxes into the most rural, remote parts of West Virginia. DAV's primarily transport veterans who are at the lowest income level below poverty to medical appointments. Most of the drivers are elderly themselves, but feel that it is their duty, honor, and privilege to continue this service.

Beckley VAMC is located in Southern West Virginia, Congressional District 3 (WV-3). Southern West Virginia has the highest food insecurity rate in the state at 16.4% and some of the highest poverty rates in Appalachia. This area has continued to lose population, jobs, and funding over the past two decades due to massive declines in the coal industry and the loss of severance taxes that accompanied. Coupled with a massive substance abuse epidemic, the challenges to Southern West Virginia are massive at this time. According to staff at the Beckley VAMC, of the 13,000 veterans receiving services annually, almost 10%, 1,300 veterans would greatly benefit from the food boxes if available.

In order to reach underserved populations of veterans, Mountaineer Food Bank began partnering with clinics and veteran minded community organizations including resource centers and VFW's. We now have partnering sites in Morgantown, Westover, Gassaway and Charles Town, WV that serve an additional 110 veterans each month.

In 2021, two AmeriCorps VISTAs were on-boarded and placed in Martinsburg and Beckley to help continue the growth of the program and develop community "roots" for on-going operations. The VISTAs will be tasked with developing additional resources that the VAMC or community organizations can connect veterans with, advocate locally for the program and foster the network of support for struggling veterans in the area.



Barriers to Food Access

While there are many barriers for those struggling with hunger, transportation and food access are key. In most parts of West Virginia, there is little or no access to public transportation. In the most rural parts of the state, those resources dwindle further. For programs like the Veterans Table, veterans rely on voluntary services or other means including rides with friends and home deliveries to access the food they need. The lack of transportation has led to veterans eating less and eating less nutritious food as they may not be able to access food frequently enough to have fresh, healthy options and instead rely on foods that may not meet their dietary needs.

The distance to get to food is also a major driver of food insecurity in rural West Virginia. For many in the state, especially in Southern West Virginia, a trip to the grocery store may be 1-2 hours round trip, if not more. Food access in rural communities is often limited to small discount stores or gas stations, leaving those populations with little opportunity to purchase healthy foods, while driving up the costs for those foods that they can purchase. A dollar spent at a small rural grocer just doesn't carry the same weight as one spent in denser areas.

Food access dramatically influences food choices, as when individuals do have the opportunity to purchase foods they need, they are much less likely to purchase foods that could spoil or thaw quickly. We have many scenarios, including those with veterans, where the homes do not have utilities such as water or electric and are completely off grid. For these individuals, healthy options are less an option.

Information access and broadband continue to be issues in all parts of West Virginia, and individuals suffer the worst access in rural areas. Services such as telehealth and accessing online directories to resources, are near impossible for those living even 5-10 miles outside of a major population center. The connection rates and speeds are so low, that developing additional industry and attracting service providers is minimal, as the overall barriers to being connected in rural areas are so high. These all lead to less workforce opportunities, less funding for social service projects and higher poverty rates.

Additionally, due to the lack of technology and broadband infrastructure, organizations like Mountaineer Food Bank struggle with collecting valuable data to continue to reach into communities to meet their needs. It is difficult to go beyond the generalized census data, when consistent avenues of learning about the populations be served are not available. Solutions to software are being developed by Feeding America, including a service insights platform that will enable food banks to be able to dive deeper into the populations they serve. Connectivity to high speed internet will likely threaten the effectiveness of this software in rural areas.

The barriers for organizations to provide services are primarily rooted in continued funding sources and staffing. For Mountaineer Food Bank, the Veterans Table is privately supported by charitable donations, meaning no state or federal funding is available for this type of work. The food



bank works with corporate sponsors and individual giving campaigns to meet the \$350,000 annual budget of the existing program. Currently, an average of 1,000 veterans receive boxes each month, which cost \$25-\$30 each delivered to a community site. In order to add the additional 900 veterans estimated by the Beckley VAMC alone, Mountaineer Food Bank would need an additional \$324,000 in funding that currently does not exist.

Closing

In closing, I greatly appreciate the committee's interest and commitment to addressing military family and veteran hunger in the United States. West Virginia's population is home to almost 95,000 veterans, with thousands of those struggling with hunger. Many of those individuals have retired, come home and are now facing health issues that challenge them and the communities they live in.

Programming to address military and veteran hunger has a tremendous impact on those participants. Through partnerships in the non-profit and governmental sectors, we are able to reach veterans that otherwise would have fell into the gaps. In order to continue these programs, collaborative partnerships and resources such as funding for food and transportation are needed to address the high need for this vulnerable population.

There needs to be continued work on the collection of data and dispersion of resources into smaller communities where many veterans live, beyond the centric primary models of access to resources. By widening our focus to include these smaller areas, we'll open the door to reaching the most fragile and struggling individuals in our country.

Again, I fully support all measures that increase food access to military families and veterans by increasing resources and removing barriers to accessing food. I am leaving you with some quotes and testimonies from veterans that have participated and volunteers that work within this program. I am happy to provide more details on the program and what we've learned through this operations.

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Testimonials from the Veterans Table Program

"Many of the veterans, due to PTSD issues, have difficulty being among crowds or are often times wary of people they do not know. Having their food delivered fulfills two mission: 1) it gets food to our at risk veterans and 2) the veterans know the drivers of the vans and have already established rapport with them, so they'll accept the food from people they know." –Volunteer Driver



“Many of our live completely off grid and some are homeless. Some have mental health issue and have a difficult time distinguishing what are good food choices. Mountaineer Food Bank provides much needed food there veterans.” - Volunteer

“No transportation, no family to rely on. Also, to them, there is a difference between standing in line for food and having others watch them than having someone deliver the food to their home. It is less stressful for them and they will accept it.” – Volunteer Driver

“Your Veterans food box has helped me save precious resources since the end of my food stamps. They have fed me multiple nutritious items that have kept me moving forward in life. Thank you for providing these monthly boxes as they have helped me tremendously.” –Veteran participant

“That is what is so incredibly special about the veterans table. We can participate and get the food needed, but since it is not “income based”, they feel better about themselves. They see other veterans at the mobile pantry and see that all veterans can sign up for this program. It is viewed more as a thanks to them for what they did for our country, rather than a hand out.” – Volunteer/Participant

“I don’t know what I would do without this food. My children left their kids with me and my wife. I am 75 and she is 78. We don’t make enough on retirement to take care of us all.” – Veteran participant