

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.

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MILITARY PERSONNEL

DOD Needs More Complete Data on Active-Duty Servicemembers' Use of Food Assistance Programs

What GAO Found

Active-duty servicemembers and their families have access to food assistance through various government and charitable programs, but use of these programs varies, in part, on their ability to meet specific eligibility criteria. In an April 2010 report, GAO identified 18 government programs that provide food assistance to low-income households. Servicemembers may apply for and, if they qualify, receive benefits from any of these programs. However, servicemembers' eligibility for these programs can vary by program and location. For example, GAO found that it might be easier for servicemembers to qualify for Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) than Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) because WIC allows state agencies to exclude portions of a servicemember's pay when determining eligibility and SNAP does not. Also, charitable organizations, such as food pantries, are available to servicemembers in need of food assistance.

The Department of Defense (DOD) has some data on servicemembers' use of food assistance programs it administers, but it does not know the extent that servicemembers use such programs because (1) it is not fully collecting or analyzing such information within the department, and (2) it has not coordinated with organizations such as U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to access their data on servicemembers' use of their programs. *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that management should use quality information to achieve its objectives. DOD has data on the number of servicemembers' children receiving free and reduced-price school meals at DOD Education Activity (DODEA) schools in the United States. For example, DODEA data for September 2015 showed that 24 percent of children in DODEA schools in the continental U.S. were eligible for free meals and 21 percent were eligible for reduced-price meals. A DOD survey also provides some information on servicemembers' use of food assistance programs such as SNAP. However, this survey is of limited usefulness in part because it does not inquire about other food assistance programs used by servicemembers such as National School Lunch Program; also no office within DOD is monitoring food assistance needs such as through survey data. Without more complete survey data, DOD will not understand the prevalence of need among servicemembers to effectively target its support and determine if it should assign department-level responsibility for monitoring food assistance needs.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government also state that management should communicate with external parties to obtain needed information. USDA has access to data on servicemembers' use of food assistance programs, but none of the DOD officials with whom GAO spoke were aware of efforts by the department to coordinate with USDA to access these data. For example, USDA administers SNAP benefits that, according to a 2013 U.S. Census Bureau survey, were used by about 23,000 active-duty servicemembers in the previous 12 months. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 included a provision to address the sharing of SNAP data between USDA and DOD; however, DOD does not have a coordination effort underway to access such data. Without such coordination, DOD will miss the opportunity to collect data on the needs of its servicemembers.