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VA's Work to Ensure Veterans' Food Security

Dr. Christine Going*

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is uniquely positioned as the nation's largest integrated health care system, serving 9 million enrolled Veterans each year, to successfully embrace the power of an interdisciplinary team designed to meet the needs of Veterans challenged by food insecurity. The scope of the VA system supports large-scale innovation and sharing of best practices at a national level, keeping the Veteran at the center of everything we do.

In collaboration with the whole of government approach to ending hunger, VA is addressing food and nutrition security. The Food Security Office within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) was established and has representation from nutrition, social work, and nursing focusing on the causes of food insecurity among Veterans. VA's Food Security Office and the Nutrition and Food Services Office lead efforts aligned with the White House's strategic initiatives shared at the White House Conference on Hunger, Health and Nutrition.

The Food Security Office is built on three pillars: partnerships, data management and research and education. By placing the Office under the umbrella of health care, VA has signaled its commitment to the importance of managing social determinants of health as part of its Whole Health approach to care. VA's Whole Health approach centers around **what matters to the Veteran**. This means a Veteran's health team will get to know the Veteran as a person before working with them to develop a personalized health plan based on their values, needs and goals.

The Food Security Office's first pillar is partnerships. Internal partnerships allow the agency to harness the depth of talent and knowledge within VA, as well as collaboration among clinical teams at all levels of the organization. The Office also provides support on policies and pilot initiatives that enable innovative approaches to care. Such initiatives are implemented at medical centers nationwide.

External partnerships allow VA to expand its reach and innovation and provide valuable information and resources to

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support the Food Security Office. Partnerships help to establish projects and research opportunities. One example of this is ongoing studies on the impact of produce prescription programs and medical nutrition therapy on Veteran populations. This therapy allows for a registered dietitian to apply nutrition care which focuses on the management of specific diseases. Another project looks at the impact food box delivery with medical nutrition therapy has on Veterans with substance use disorder.

Partners also provide insight into policy initiatives and data from other populations. VA and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) offer regular educational seminars for staff to ensure Veterans are aware of the many programs, like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), to supplement their needs.

The second pillar, data management, is centered around the information we obtain from screening Veterans during their visits to VA medical centers. As of FY 2022, more than 10 million Veterans have been screened since 2017 for food insecurity. These screenings include data such as age, period of service and other relevant clinical information for providers and enable the Food Security Office to assist each VA facility to better support their vulnerable populations.

Like many organizations, VA has a set of strategic goals to guide the organization.¹ The VA's current strategic goals prioritize food insecurity. The specific goal states: VA identifies Veterans and transitioning Service Members at-risk for food insecurity and connects them to resources, assistance programs and education to improve their health and well-being. With this as the guidepost, the goal of ensuring Veteran food security is then translated in several coordinated ways. For example, efforts to align with the VA Strategic Plan are further strengthened through the collaboration between the Food Security Office and Nutrition and Food Services. Nutrition and Food Services represents clinical dietitians and diet technicians, as well as food service staff that care for and feed the inpatient population, and Veterans in Community Living Centers and Residential Care Programs across the country. Together, these offices are committed to increasing food security awareness by participating in a variety of activities throughout FY 2023, to include opening onsite food pantries, holding healthy teaching kitchen

¹ *Fiscal Year 2022-2025 Veterans Health Administration Long-Range Plan Framework*, U.S. DEP'T OF VETERAN AFF. (Last Visited Apr. 10, 2023), <https://www.va.gov/VHASTRATEGY/Docs/FY2022-2025VeteransHealthAdministrationLong-RangePlanFramework508.pdf>.

programs focused on microwave recipes, how to shop on a budget and more.²

The third pillar, research and education, rounds out the approach to support both Veterans and staff in understanding the different interventions that impact both food and nutrition security. The Food Security Office serves as the point of contact and resource on issues related to food and nutrition security, coordinating national education opportunities, maintaining an environmental scan of research on related topics and facilitating the sharing of lessons learned across the enterprise, which are key to its forward development.

Ultimately, an integrated approach to health care, with a focus on Veteran-centered care, proves our greatest asset. The VA system allows for seamless communication through the electronic health record to ensure that once a Veteran is identified as food insecure, the entire health care team has awareness and provides unified, coordinated care which is Veteran centered.

As VA cares for the needs of Veterans and shares lessons learned in the hunger relief community, we look toward a future where no Veteran experiences food insecurity.

² *Nutrition and Food Services – Food Security*, U.S. DEP'T OF VETERAN AFF. (Last Visited Apr. 10, 2023), https://www.nutrition.va.gov/Food_Insecurity.asp.