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Poll: Veterans Looking for Food Help

By LANA BORTOLOTT

About one in four New York City households with military veterans has trouble putting food on the table, according to a poll commissioned by the nation's largest food bank.



Ramin Talaie for The Wall Street Journal

Army veteran Percy Fleming outside St. John's Bread and Life.

Veterans in such households are eating less frequently and choosing to pay other living expenses—rent, utilities, medical care and transportation—over food, which they get more frequently from food pantries and via government assistance, according to the poll by the Marist Institute for Public Opinion.

The poll randomly contacted 827 households by phone, of which 92 were households with veterans. The veterans data has a 10.2% margin of error, which pollsters said was common for a subset of information.

The survey "paints the picture of what survival looks like," said Margarette Purvis, president and CEO of the Food Bank of New York City, which commissioned the poll. "Survival was

supposed to be about getting them home to their families. But their second level of survival is how to be fed and have dignity."

Set to be released publicly on Thursday, the study is the first conducted by a hunger organization to look at the food problems of veterans, said Áine Duggan, head of the city food bank's research, policy and education. There had been little previous research, making it difficult to draw conclusions about whether the problem is growing for veterans.

The results portray veterans as worried about their ability to buy food, with nearly one in three concerned that they will have to turn to food stamps or government assistance. About one in 10 didn't have enough money to buy food in the past year, the report said.

Of all city households having trouble affording food, 9% were veteran households.

Veterans advocates said military men and women are particularly vulnerable to being unemployed upon their return home.

In the past year, 15% of Iraq War veterans in New York state were unemployed, while in New York City, veterans aged 18 to 34 had a 13% jobless rate, according to federal statistics.

"Anecdotally, our members are reporting these issues," said Matt Gallagher, a former Army captain who served

15 months in Iraq and now works at Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "Unemployment has been our top legislative priority, but there have been reports of hunger concerns and it's on our radar."

Naadira Muhammad, a 27-year-old Navy veteran, has relied on a combination of food stamps and the St. John's Bread and Life pantry in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn since a series of personal problems—a car accident, loss of her immigration card and caring for a sick family member in Georgia—led to her being unemployed.

"I couldn't find work for what I wanted to do and what I was trained in and had to settle for working from scratch," said Ms. Muhammad, a Trinidadian immigrant who was discharged as a Navy medical specialist in 2006. "And in this economy, you're working to live or you're living to work."

The survey comes as organizations serving the poor have begun tracking the number of veterans they serve. At St. John's Bread and Life, 22% of those who use the soup kitchen are veterans like Ms. Muhammad, said Anthony Butler, executive director at St. John's Bread and Life.

The River Fund Food Pantry in Richmond Hill, Queens, has seen the number of veterans it serves jump to 17% from 10% in 2009, said the pantry's program director, Otto Starzmann.

The Northport Veterans Affairs Medical Center created the Hero Hunger Health Project, distributing more than 2,400 privately funded gift cards for shops that serve food since 2006.

The Harry Chapin Food Bank in Freeport on Long Island set aside Tuesday afternoons for military veterans.

"They come back with a sense of pride," said Paule T. Pachter, executive director of Long Island Cares, which administers the food bank. "Here, [they] don't have to mingle with others, feel embarrassed, they're here with their brethren."

Advocates said they are bracing for an influx of veterans as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars wind down. About 8,700 troops from New York state are deployed in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to the Department of Defense.

"A year down the pike, you'll see people hitting these services," said Mr. Butler of St. John's Bread and Life. "The military offers some good enlistment packages, but folks who are a little more marginalized to begin with will have a hard time when they come out."

Percy Fleming, a 46-year-old Army veteran who gets food from St. John's Bread and Life, said the pantry is helpful, but veterans need long-term help.

"I think our vets will come home to a lot of issues," Mr. Fleming said. "They are going to come home after seeing all that death and destruction—and they can't find a job."

Christine Quinn, speaker of the New York City Council, said the council would take up an initiative to connect veterans to food organizations.

"Surprise or no surprise, this needs to be a call to action and connect veterans with jobs and immediately with food support programs," Ms. Quinn said.

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