

For troops, commissaries are still a valued benefit

Survey: Despite cutback talk, many say on-base grocery stores are essential



About 65 percent of the roughly 2,100 active-duty troops who responded to a Military Times subscriber survey said they shop at their commissary once a week or more. (Defense Commissary Agency)

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Even with the increasing encroachment of low-cost “big box” stores, commissaries remain a highly valued benefit for active-duty members — especially enlisted troops — and their shopping habits bear that out, according to a subscriber survey conducted by Military Times.

About 65 percent of the roughly 2,100 active-duty troops who responded said they shop at their commissary once a week or more, and 75 percent said they spend 50 percent or more of their monthly grocery budgets at commissaries.

Eighty percent of the total of more than 5,900 active-duty, retiree and spouse readers who responded ranked commissaries as a “high” or their “highest” priority.

“The commissary helps us make ends meet,” an Air Force staff sergeant said bluntly.

For his family of three at Hurlburt Field, Fla., he spends \$100 to \$150 on each of their twice-monthly payday trips. Without the commissary, “we probably couldn’t afford our mortgage

payment. We have everything planned with the money. We use the commissary so we can at least save money.”

They drive 17 miles, although other stores, including a Wal-Mart, are closer. It’s hard to say how much they actually save, he said, “because some things cost double what they do in the commissary ... meat prices are one-fourth to one-half the prices of anything off base. Produce is cheaper and dry goods are cheaper.”

Overall, 30 percent of subscribers said their family needs the commissary to make ends meet. Among enlisted troops, that number rises to 37 percent. A slightly lower percentage of retirees — 27 percent — reported that necessity, but 52 percent of retirees said it offers substantial cost savings that provide extra spending money.

Location, convenience important to military shoppers

Location, location, location.

The most common reason for shopping in civilian stores is convenience, in both store hours and location, Military Times readers say.

Overall, 53 percent shop at off base stores because of location, and 55 percent said a grocery store or big-box store is less than 10 minutes from their assigned base.

The big box stores, especially Walmart, have made a specific effort to target military customers, with many stores sprouting near military bases. Readers are split down the middle when it comes to where they shop outside the gate: about half shop at large supermarket chains, half at big-box stores.

But the split is wider among active-duty enlisted: 61 percent shop at big-box stores, 39 percent at name-brand grocery chains.

By and large, shoppers aren’t going off-base stores because of price, with just 13 percent citing that as a reason.

“What drives them to the big box stores is convenience, not savings,” said Karen Golden of the Military Officers Association of America. “We know the commissary is a savings. This confirms what we hear from active duty and retirees.”

Army wife Brandy Cooper said she goes to Walmart, Sam’s Club or other stores when she can’t get to the commissary during its open hours, or if she needs to go on Monday, when the store is closed.

Her husband is a recruiter, and they live near Great Lakes Naval Station, Ill. She tries to budget between \$300 and \$400 a month for their family of five — going on six — and figures she saves an average of 40 percent to 50 percent by shopping in the commissary, which is five minutes from her home.

Walmart is about 15 minutes away. If she does go to the big-box stores, she buys generic brands to save money.

Not surprisingly, retirees generally are willing to drive farther to shop at a commissary: 16 percent said they'd be willing to drive more than an hour, compared to 4 percent of active-duty members who would drive that far. — *Karen Jowers*

A majority of service members highly value the commissary benefit, but that support is even higher among troops who have ever used the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

More than 85 percent said they ranked their commissaries as the “highest” or a “high” priority, as a basic benefit, and 68 percent said they shop at their commissary once a week or more.

Some 43 percent spend 90 percent to 100 percent of their monthly grocery budget in a commissary, and more than 84 percent of WIC recipients spend 50 percent or more of their monthly budget in on-base stores.

Nearly half, 48 percent, said they need the commissary to make ends meet.

In our survey, about 18 percent of the respondents reported having ever used WIC, or 1,064 people. In addition, 4 percent, or 244 people, report having ever used what is now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the food stamps program.

WIC provides food and nutrition education for pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants and young children. It is not known how many military families are on WIC nationwide; military families also redeem their benefits in civilian stores. The overseas WIC program, administered by DoD, counts about 16,000 beneficiaries. In fiscal 2013, more than \$29 million in WIC benefits was redeemed in commissaries.

In 2012, defense officials reported 421 military families who qualified for the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance program, a voluntary program intended to boost a service member's income above a level that would qualify them for the SNAP program. Income guidelines for WIC recipients are higher than SNAP requirements, so more military families qualify.

WIC recipients gave their commissary even higher marks than others surveyed: 71 percent rated their commissaries as better than any store off base, compared with 63 percent of all enlisted members and 59.5 percent of all active-duty members.

“The commissary is one of our basic benefits as service members,” wrote one Marine corporal whose family has been on WIC and SNAP. “Getting rid of it would be like getting rid of our medical benefits or our annual leave.”

'Not surprised'

“We're not surprised,” said Steve Rosetti, director of government affairs for the American Logistics Association. “The data from the Military Times survey explodes the myths being

promulgated by opponents of the commissary that it's mainly used by retirees and that it's not a valued benefit.

"This is good news for the Defense Department," Rosetti said. "It shows they can deliver a high-quality benefit to the troops at a very low cost."

A smaller proportion of retirees, about two in five, shop at least once a week at commissaries, although members of that demographic may not live near a commissary.

Retired Army Reserve Col. Jim Griffiths travels about an hour each way to the commissary at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., and spends about \$600 on each trip.

When he and his wife moved to a home about a quarter-mile from Fort Monmouth, N.J., to be near their children, they didn't anticipate the base would close. He and his wife's aide usually pile up two baskets in their commissary outing, which includes about \$100 worth of supplies for his ill wife. He saves an estimated \$150 to \$200 per trip, and comes out ahead even with the costs of gasoline and wear on his vehicle.

DoD: No closings planned

Those surveyed are well aware that the commissary benefit, like everything else in the Defense Department, is being scrutinized for cost savings.

"We have two opponents here, our military leaders and Congress," wrote one Navy lieutenant commander in survey comments. "Both are claiming to 'support the troops,' but both are acting deliberately to screw us. Somehow they seem to think that the sole place to solve our national financial problems is on the shoulders of soldiers."

The commissary system receives about \$1.5 billion in taxpayer subsidies each year, to allow the stores to sell at an average discount of 30 percent compared to civilian stores.

Among the cost-cutting options that have been floated to reduce or eliminate the taxpayer subsidy is to increase the surcharge, currently 5 percent; consolidating stores with exchanges; or closing some or all stateside stores and keeping only the overseas arm. One option that also hasn't been ruled out: no changes at all.

Defense officials had little to say about the issue. "No commissaries have closed, and no commissaries are about to close," said a Pentagon spokesman, Army Col. Steve Warren.

As DoD "faces an increasingly constrained budget environment, we are reviewing all programs to identify cost-cutting and money-saving opportunities," he said. "We have a process ... to finalize and announce budget decisions, and right now, we are assessing all options. No decisions have been made."

The Joint Chiefs has not specifically asked the Defense Commissary Agency to come up with a contingency plan to close all U.S. commissaries, a senior military official emphasized.

Seeking range of options

Joint Chiefs Chairman Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, during a Dec. 5 Facebook town hall event, also insisted there is no plan in the works to close commissaries.

“However, we did task the Defense Commissary Agency for a range of options, including how they would operate with less or no taxpayer subsidies,” Dempsey said.

“You may know that military exchanges operate without being subsidized by your taxes,” he said. “The same potential exists with commissaries, but we haven’t made any decisions. We’ve got to drive toward greater efficiencies, and this is just one of the potential areas.”

Those surveyed were given four options from which to choose in answering the question, “Would you be willing to accept the closure of your local commissary if ...”

They included if commissaries and exchanges were consolidated to keep a partial commissary benefit, probably with less of a discount; if some commissaries remaining open at larger or more isolated bases; if military leaders promised that other pays and benefits would remain unchanged; if the military provided an alternative cash benefit in the form of vouchers or a shopping allowance.

About 52 percent of those who responded overall would support cash — with that number rising to 64 percent among active-duty respondents. The voucher has been mentioned as an option for the active-duty community, but not for retirees.

About 11 percent of respondents skipped that question, indicating they may not have been happy with any of the options.

Candace Wheeler, spokeswoman for The Coalition to Save Our Military Shopping Benefits, said that organization was concerned about the survey question.

“You do not provide participants an opportunity to say, ‘Leave my commissaries alone, find saving elsewhere.’ This is disingenuous and skews the results of your survey,” she wrote in a letter to Military Times editors.

About 83 percent of spouses and retirees who responded to the survey put a higher priority on the benefit; and 73 percent of active-duty respondents ranked commissaries as their “highest” or “a high” priority.

But there’s a marked difference in officer and enlisted responses: 78 percent of enlisted rated the commissary benefit as their “highest” or “a high” priority, compared to 66 percent of officers.

An Army lieutenant colonel at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla., said he literally walks past the commissary every day to get to his car. While he valued the commissary when stationed overseas, and thinks it’s a necessity there, it’s not worth his time now.

“It’s overrun by retirees who fill up baskets and baskets,” he said. “I’ve waited 30 to 45 minutes to get through the line. It seems like any savings is negated by the surcharge and the bagger tips. ... I don’t see much of a savings.”

He knows some retirees are driving 150 miles or more to the commissary. “Maybe there was a time years ago when it was worth it. Maybe they take for granted it’s the best deal,” he said.