TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

"Examining Access and Quality of Care and Services for Women Veterans"

April 30, 2015

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Brown and distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of National Commander Mike D. Helm and the 2.3 million members of The American Legion, we thank you and your colleagues for the work you do in support of service members, veterans and their families. The American Legion commends you for holding this hearing to address women veterans' health care needs.

Women veterans are the fastest growing demographic that is serving in the military[1] and need a robust and comprehensive healthcare system to be there when they transition out of the service. Over the years, the Department of Veterans (VA) has made improvements in the advancement of women veteran's health care in VA Medical facilities nationwide. However, there is still much work to be done to meet the overall health care needs of women veterans. Even though the military has seen a significant increase in the number of women veterans joining the military, the number of women veterans enrolling in the VA health care system still remains relatively low when compared to their male counterparts.

Despite the many improvements that VA has taken to improve their health-care programs for women veterans, there are still numerous challenges and barriers women veterans face with enrolling in the VA including:

- Women veterans often do not identify themselves as veterans,
- Women veterans are often not recognized by VA staff as being a veteran,
- Among women veterans, there can be a lack of awareness, knowledge, and understanding of their VA benefits,
- There is a stigma associated with the VA healthcare system as a being an "all male" healthcare system.

As a result, The American Legion, through its Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division, advocates ensuring that women veterans are receiving the highest quality of care from the VA for their injuries and illnesses incurred from their military service.

In 2010-2011, The American Legion conducted a Women Veterans Survey with 3,012 women veterans in order to better understand their healthcare needs through VA. The survey found while

[1] "The number of women Veterans using VHA nearly doubled in the past decade, from 200,631 in FY03 to 362,014 in FY12 (an 80% increase)" – VHA Sourcebook Vol. 3 Women Veterans in the Veterans Health Administration, FEB 2014

there were improvements in the delivery of VA healthcare to women veterans, challenges with service quality in the following areas remained.

The survey addressed the following service qualities: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, access and understanding. Since, the survey was completed The American Legion continues to utilize the results to advocate for improvements on how the VA delivers timely access and quality health care to their enrolled women veterans.[2]

In 2013, The American Legion through "System Worth Saving" Task Force Program conducted 15 VA medical center site visits nationwide in order to evaluate the quality of care as well as access to care that is provided for women veterans. The goals and objectives of the report were to understand what perceptions and barriers prevent women veterans from enrolling with VA; determine what quality of care challenges women veterans face with their VA health care; and to provide recommendations and steps Congress and VA can take to improve these access, barriers, and quality of care challenges.

During these site visits, the Task Force met with each facility's executive leadership team, women veterans program manager, patient advocate, enrollment and business office, mental health staff, homeless veteran's coordinator, military sexual trauma coordinator, suicide prevention coordinator and women veterans' health committee, and reviewed the environment of care.

Throughout the course of the visits, the Task Force observed many VA best practices in its care of women veterans, as well as receiving positive comments from women veterans about their care and services. However, the VA still has work to do to meet the overall health care needs for our women veterans.

In the 2013, *"Women Veterans Health Care Task Force Report"*, the following areas were identified as challenges and barriers to women receiving quality health care:

- VA medical centers do not currently have baseline, one-, two- or five-year outreach and marketing plans on how to close the gap between the numbers of women veterans in their facility catchment areas and those enrolled;
- Additional research is needed to determine the purpose, goals, and effectiveness of the three models of care on overall outreach, communication and coordination of women veterans health services;
- Women veterans do not receive their mammogram results in a timely manner; and VA needs to extend or make permanent the child care pilot programs.
- While VA has improved outpatient care and services, there is a need to increase the number of inpatient mental health treatment programs (e.g. military sexual trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, etc.) for women veterans and ensure these programs are available within each Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) and at

[2] The American Legion Women Veterans Survey Report-March 2011: http://www.legion.org/documents/legion/pdf/womens_veterans_survey_report.pdf

VA medical centers with a high demand for women veterans specialized inpatient mental health-care services.[3]

Since the systematic failures revealed in the VA Access to Care scandal in 2014, The American Legion continues to be active visiting locations and setting up Veterans Benefits centers (VBCs) to assist veterans who are experiencing long-wait times for health care or having difficulties in receiving their VA benefits. From the first Crisis center in Phoenix, Arizona in June 2014 to the most recent VBC in Memphis, Tennessee April 20-23, 2015 The American Legion has held 16 centers nationwide and helped thousands of veterans receive benefits and understand how to address access obstacles.[4]

In Fayetteville, NC and in West Los Angeles, CA, the Crisis Centers provided direct help to homeless women veterans;[5] the number of homeless women veterans has doubled from 1,380 in FY 2006 to 3,328 in FY 2010.[6]

In Bay Pines, Florida, the major concern for the clinic was the Cardiology grant proposal for the prevention of cardiovascular (CV) disease in women. The three components consisted of screening by primary care physicians to identify women veterans who are intermediate or high risk for CV disease through an easy-to-see Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) tool; referral to the women's preventative cardiovascular clinic to discuss individual risk factors and possible modifications; participation in group health education classes about cardiovascular disease and stroke, nutrition exercise, stress management and other cardiovascular health related issues.

In Philadelphia, The American Legion staff met with VA staff to discuss issues and concerns regarding the Women's Clinic. The major issue at that facility was the need for more space to accommodate the growing number of enrolled women veterans. The facility currently clinic is open on Saturday to accommodate the busy practice and to maintain the continuity of care.

Conclusion

American women have been great patriots, warriors, and healers for this Nation's military efforts. They have served in many capacities from the time of the Revolutionary War to the present. American women have answered the call to serve with the same honor and integrity as their male counterparts, but often do not identify themselves as veterans. The American Legion is working to change this. While things have improved over the past few years, there is much that remains to be done in getting these veterans the services and treatment they need and deserve.

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[3] The American Legion System Worth Saving 2013 Women Veterans Health Care Report: http://www.legion.org/sites/legion.org/files/legion/publications/2013-SWS-Report-WEB.pdf

[4] "From Crisis to Confidence" http://www.legion.org/sites/legion.org/files/legion/publications/American%20Legion%20-%20From%20Crisis%20to%20Confidence.pdf

[5] Ibid

[6] National Coalition for Homeless Veterans http://www.nchv.org/images/uploads/HFV%20paper(1).pdf

As always, The American Legion thanks this committee for their diligence in addressing the care of women veterans.

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