

Testimony for Public Hearing
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health
November 17, 2015

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Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs
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H.R. 1603 - (House Veterans Affairs Committee) – An Act Concerning Healthcare for Military Sexual Trauma Survivors

Good afternoon. I am Heather French Henry, Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA). I come before you today in support of the Karen Tufts Military Sexual Assault Victims Empowerment Act (SAVE).

As the Commissioner, I am responsible for the health and wellbeing of more than 330,000 veterans within the Commonwealth of Kentucky including approximately 24,000 women veterans. While we don't operate the VA Medical Centers within our state, we are responsible for 4 Veterans Nursing Facilities, 5 State Veterans Cemeteries and statewide programming staffed by more than 740 employees in 120 counties. We are also responsible to resolve complaints regarding the negligence of veterans, especially when it comes to access of their healthcare. As the daughter of a Vietnam Veteran who suffered for many years with co-occurring issues with PTSD and substance abuse I take my job personally. My father came home with physical wounds as well as spiritual wounds. As Miss America 2000, I came before this committee on numerous occasions addressing the issues facing our homeless veterans and in 2001 the Heather French Henry Homeless Veterans Assistance Act was passed. Today, once again, I want to address this committee in support of those veterans who have suffered silently from Military Sexual Trauma.

According to the Department of Defense, 19,000 service members endure sexual assault while in the military. Most of those are never reported. Of those that are reported, most offenders are never prosecuted. Therefore, survivors do not feel confident our system will provide them with the protection and services they require.

Of Kentucky's 330,000 veterans, 24,000 of who are women, we are unaware how many may be survivors of Military Sexual Trauma. As these cases go unreported and veterans choose to suffer in silence rather than come forward.

The VA Health Care system is rightly lauded by both medical professionals and the veterans who use it. But as we reach out to MST survivors and persuade them to get help, their needs are proving overwhelming for the VA health care system.

Appropriate care for MST survivors is available from private medical providers throughout Kentucky. Preventing these veterans from getting care from available private providers adds to the burdens they already shoulder as MST survivors.

KDVA strongly supports the Karen Tufts Military Sexual Assault Victims Empowerment Act, the SAVE Act.

With SAVE, KDVA's Women Veterans Coordinator and field staff can reach out to MST survivors throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky with confidence that these veterans will be able to access appropriate care close to home.

KDVA agrees with Congressman Barr that we need to "put MST survivors in control of their own healthcare. MST survivors have unique needs and it is important that they feel comfortable sharing this emotionally painful and very personal life-changing experience with professionals who are trained and have the expertise to properly handle these complex cases."

Veterans are our greatest asset. Today, with so many pressures on our local communities, we need our veterans to work and to lead. To do that, they must be healthy both physically and mentally. And to make and keep them healthy, we must remove the barriers they face in getting health care.

On behalf of Kentucky's veteran community and veterans across this nation, I urge you to pass the SAVE Act. Nothing less will fulfill the commitment our country made to them in return for their service and sacrifice.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Heather French Henry
Commissioner
Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs