

Statement of Lory Manning
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Before the
House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health
For the Hearing on
Cultural Barriers Impacting Women Veterans Access to Healthcare
On May 2, 2019

Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Dunn and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Servicewomen's Action Network (SWAN), I thank you for the opportunity to share our views and recommendations regarding the cultural barriers to women veterans' access to healthcare at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In the past years, VA has made hard-won improvements in the quality and comprehensiveness of women's care, but all that improvement is for naught if women encounter barriers when trying to use this healthcare. I'll discuss two of these barriers today: 1.) sexual harassment and 2.) the invisibility of women veterans.

Sexual Harassment at VA Facilities. Over the years, we at SWAN have heard many complaints about groups of male veterans getting together to harass women veterans on VA grounds including at the Washington, DC VA hospital. An academic study and a newspaper article both published this year elucidate the problem. The first, done by Ruth Klap, Ph.D. and others, called "*Prevalence of Stranger Harassment of Women Veterans at Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and Impacts of Delayed and Missed Care,*" appears in *Women's Health Issues*, published by the Jacobs Institute of Women's Health. ([http://whijournal.com/article/S1049-3867\(18\)30194-4/fulltext](http://whijournal.com/article/S1049-3867(18)30194-4/fulltext).) The second, by reporter Jennifer Steinhauer, was in the March 12th edition of the *New York Times* and headlined "Treated Like a 'Piece of Meat': Female Veterans Endure Harassment at the VA".

The Klap study sampled women veterans who used 12 different VA hospitals and found one in four of those sampled reported receiving catcalls, derogatory comments, propositions, and denigrations of the women's veteran status from male veterans on the hospital grounds. The New York Times article recounts how an "entrenched, sexist culture at many veterans' hospitals is driving away female veterans."

SWAN believes that what women veterans want, and warrant, is for VA leaders at all levels, with oversight from Congress, to stop the harassment now and to foster a VA culture in which women veterans are treated with the same respect, appreciation and dignity as male veterans.

Invisibility: Women veterans report to SWAN that they feel invisible to the office staffs of VA facilities and to the American public. And they are; it begins with the VA motto "To care for him who has borne the battle, his widow and his orphan". SWAN, while appreciating Lincoln's historic words, is among those veterans' organizations which support changing that motto.

According to DVA's February 2017 Report "*The Past, Present and Future of Women Veterans,*" only 22.4% of all women veterans use VA healthcare making them a mere 7.5% of total VA healthcare users. Women veterans are irked when they are asked for their husbands' social

security numbers at the check-in desk or are refused free coffee provided at some VA facilities with the admonition that the coffee is only for veterans. These slights seem minor, but they can accrete over time leaving women veterans frustrated and disheartened.

Their invisibility becomes more damaging when the gender-specific needs of women veterans are ignored, as happens, for example, when they are sometimes issued prosthetic devices designed for men; this should never happen.

And major damage can be done, if women veterans are invisible to those, at any level, making tough decisions on healthcare resources if the decision makers either don't understand the need for women's programs or conclude that reallocation from these programs helps many while hurting only a few.

SWAN believes leadership at all levels must take great care when initially allocating—or later reprogramming—resources to or from women's healthcare programs that they have a clear understanding of the effects their actions can have on these programs. SWAN, additionally, entreats Congress to exercise its oversight responsibilities to ensure the needs of women veterans and other special focus populations are not unduly sacrificed when such actions are necessary at the national level.

Madam Chairwoman let me say how deeply I appreciate the opportunity to offer SWAN's views on these critically important matters. Thank you for your time and attention.