



**STATEMENT OF
GINGER MILLER, PRESIDENT, AND CEO
OF
WOMEN VETERANS INTERACTIVE
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
"CULTURE BARRIERS IMPACTING WOMEN VETERANS ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE"**

MAY 2, 2019

Chairwoman Brownley and members of the subcommittee, as the President and CEO of the national nonprofit organization, Women Veterans Interactive, I am grateful to present my testimony regarding the Culture Barriers Impacting Women Veterans Access to Healthcare.

To understand the cultural barriers impacting women veterans' access to healthcare, one must first understand the climate in which we exist.

THE WOMAN VETERAN COMMUNITY CLIMATE (A HOSTILE TAKEOVER)

Women veterans are trying to stay afloat in a culture that has been male-dominated for centuries, and now we are competing to stay relevant in a culture that insists we downgrade our service to run parallel with that of a commitment made by a military spouse to her husband. Women veterans are uniquely different from military spouses, and it's time that this country stops lumping us together, not to mention being overshadowed by the caregivers.

Women veterans are existing in a climate where we have become good for business but not good enough to do business with and even more unfortunate, women veterans are living in a culture where our voices are only heard in a celebratory fashion when we achieve something great or when we hit rock bottom and become good for press.

I'm here to testify this morning in an effort to change to the climate and culture that has become the norm for women veterans. Our noble service to this country is worth more than a story, our sacrifice as women veterans are worth much more than a tick mark on outdated, one-sided

surveys conducted by male-dominated VSO's who may happen to have a few women veterans on staff.

Women veterans are more than objects, and we don't need another survey; we need action. We don't need another national portrait campaign; we need a national outreach and engagement. Women veterans don't need another male-dominated VSO to represent us at the table, we need to have a seat at the table, and if we can't have a seat at the table, we will continue to build our own.

For women veterans, the environment in which we are expected to thrive in after serving in the military has become hostile and at times volatile to say the least because our voices are not being appropriately heard and we do not have accurate representation at every level of government.

Women veteran nonprofit organizations are grossly overlooked and underfunded if funded at all, our volunteers are overworked, and for some, the outlook is bleak, and yet we continue to hold out and hope against hope. Hope for inclusion to have a seat at the table where our voices will be heard and hope for much-needed funding to deliver proper services to the population we serve.

WHY WOMEN VETERANS INTERACTIVE EXISTS

I started Women Veterans Interactive because I became homeless after faithfully serving in the United States Navy. During my time as a homeless woman veteran in the early '90s, I was also the caregiver to my husband who suffered from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and mother to our son who was a toddler at the time. Instead of being a victim, I became a victor by working three jobs and going to school full time to pull my family and me out of the deadly jaws of homelessness.

After that horrific experience, I dedicated my life worked to support veterans, and in 2009 I formed the nonprofit organization John 14:2, Inc. In 2011, I formed Women Veterans Interactive as a division of John 14:2, Inc. Due to the growth of WVI, in 2018 we applied to IRS to become a standalone 501 c3 nonprofit organization and was approved in 15 days.

Women Veterans Interactive (WVI) is a solutions-driven nonprofit organization focused on outreach and engagement. WVI delivers a positive impact in the lives of women veterans through a holistic, proactive approach that is grassroots in nature.

Mission Statement

The mission of WVI is to meet women veterans at their points of need through Advocacy, Empowerment, Interaction, Outreach, and Unification to break down the barriers that lead to homelessness. WVI addresses the unique, and often unrecognized, challenges facing our nation's 2.3 million women veterans as they return to civilian life. With members nationwide, WVI provides outreach & support services to thousands of women veterans through the three pillars

of transition, empowerment, leadership, and diversity. WVI offers tailored programs, training and resources to equip women veterans at all stages of their military transition

Since its inception, WVI has supported over 3,500 women veterans through strategic outreach, signature events, and programs. The WVI network has grown to more than 50,000 women veterans and continues to grow every day.

The growth of Women Veterans Interactive is directly related to the need of women veterans to be connected to and supported by an organization that is “For Women Veterans by Women Veterans.” We do not have a magic solution, a secret sauce, or a long drawn out dissertation but we do have a proven method that is directly related to our grassroots effort approach in engaging and empowering women veterans.

WOMEN VETERANS INTERACTIVE AND THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Having an intimate understanding of the importance of women veterans being connecting to healthcare, since 2012, WVI has invited the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Center into our fold to collaborate with us on all our outreach efforts.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has attended and participated in every Women Veterans Interactive annual conference since 2012. Participation included keynote speeches, leadership panels and facilitation of workshops.

Most recently during WVI’s 2018 and 2017 annual Women Veterans Leadership and Diversity Conference both of which had over 200 attendees, we held a veteran’s benefits claims clinics in collaboration with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Each year approximately 125 to 150 veterans were able to receive onsite benefits claims assistance.

The feedback from the benefits claims clinics have been remarkable with some women veterans stating that this is the first time the VA has treated them like their service matters and other women veterans said they have a brighter outlook on going to the VA Medical Center to receiving health care from the VA Medical Center.

Additionally, in 2017, WVI partnered with the Center for Minority Veterans to conduct a virtual town hall that had 300 veteran attendees.

In 2106, WVI created the State of Women Veterans Campaign social media campaign and reached out to the Department of Veterans Affairs and formed a collaboration that to reach over 500,000 veterans. The goal of the campaign was to raise awareness of women Veterans’ military and societal contributions and provide an avenue for informing women Veterans about the VA benefits they have earned. The campaign was successful and surpassed the goal of reaching 500,000 veterans.

Every Women Veterans Interactive, Department of Veterans Affairs collaboration a woman veteran encounters help to change the image of the VA in a positive matter.

So, I pose the questions, why is more not being done by the Department of Veterans to collaborate with women veteran nonprofit organizations like Women Veterans Interactive and why are women veteran's organization not invited to Department of Veterans Affairs VSO meetings, especially when it comes to discussing issues and solutions surrounding women veterans.

CHANGE THE CLIMATE TO CHANGE THE ACCESS

A significant barrier impacting women veterans' access to health care lies within a system at the Department of Veterans Affairs dominated by a climate that is neither inviting nor inclusive for women veterans. It's time to build a culture that is inclusive for women veterans rather than a culture that treats women veterans as an object of affection because it's the right thing to do.

One cannot expect a population to engage in healthcare services they are not aware of, cannot access due to personal hardships, or do not feel safe accessing because most of the services are located within a male-dominated environment.

I humbly ask this subcommittee to work with Women Veterans Interactive to change the climate that has been set before the women who have so bravely served and sacrificed for our country.

We can change the climate by establishing legislation that will

- Allocate funding for collaborative women veteran direct outreach and engagement
- Require the Department of Veterans Affairs to focus on consistent strategic outreach and engagement strategies in collaboration with qualified women veteran nonprofit organizations
- Require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to have semi-annual meetings with women veteran nonprofit organization.

On behalf of Women Veterans Interactive, our members and the population we serve, I am appreciative for the opportunity to share our views on the Culture Barriers Impacting Women Veterans Access to Health Care.