

BEYOND DEBORAH SAMPSON: IMPROVING HEALTHCARE FOR AMERICA'S  
WOMEN VETERANS IN THE 117TH CONGRESS

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House Veterans' Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Health  
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As the only female-led "Big 6" veteran service organization, AMVETS led the way in defending women veterans in the 116th Congress.

Upon releasing the VAOIG report titled "Senior VA Officials Response to a Veteran's Sexual Assault Allegations," Commander Jan Brown immediately called upon the resignation of then-Secretary Robert Wilkie.

This report was prompted by accusations that the Secretary tried to discredit a female veteran who claimed she was sexually assaulted at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. The VAOIG report came to a conclusion that "The tone set by Secretary Wilkie was at minimum unprofessional and at worst provided the basis for senior officials to put out information to national reporters to question the credibility and background of the veteran who filed the sexual assault complaint." To the veteran community, this means that the VA leader tried to undermine a victim instead of taking a sexual assault complaint seriously. The Secretary betrayed the trust veterans put into the VA. He let down all of the women that have served our country in the Armed Forces.

Following her call for the Secretary's resignation, on December 13, 2020, Commander Brown sent a letter to Chairwoman Maloney and Ranking Member Comer of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. She requested an oversight hearing to investigate Secretary Wilkie's, and his associated political appointees, actions at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Commander Brown stated that "our nation's heroes deserve a system of checks and balances and further investigation into this matter. Doing so will show our women veterans that we have their back and that this is their VA."

Chairwoman Maloney and Ranking Member Comer did not respond to the request.

The Department of Veterans Affairs should publicly apologize to Andrea Goldstein, the female veteran that led to the aforementioned VAOIG report, for her treatment and the VA's subsequent and despicable actions.

Likewise, if Congressman Dan Crenshaw played any role in discrediting Ms. Goldstein, AMVETS fully supports an ethics inquiry into his conduct.

The notion that a lawmaker and a cabinet-level political appointee would work to discredit a sexual assault victim is unprincipled and will not be tolerated by AMVETS.

## **BUILDING ON BROKEN TRUST**

The Biden administration is inheriting a VA that has broken its trust with our women warriors.

What happened under Secretary Wilkie was simply unacceptable and should never again occur within VA leadership ranks.

With a fast-growing women veteran population of over two million, we must recognize their needs and understand how different their needs are compared to male veterans. Last year, AMVETS mentioned in Congressional testimony the importance of understanding and providing services to women veterans and hearing our stories to understand what's needed. But we, as a community, are behind the curve on women veteran issues.

According to the VA's latest suicide report, women veterans are two times more likely to die by suicide than civilians. The contributing factors include homelessness, unemployment, and hopelessness.

Many women veterans have lost faith in the VA system and don't seek the services they need at the VA because they aren't confident VA will meet their needs, be respectfully treated, or be safe. That is wholly unacceptable.

The VA needs to work on their messaging and create a national narrative to draw women veterans into the VA. When a woman veteran does engage with the VA, it needs to be a positive engagement, in which the veteran feels just as valued, as welcomed, and as safe as her male counterparts. The culture throughout VA must reflect these values.

## **AMVETS EFFORTS TO HIGHLIGHT WOMEN AND MINORITY VETERANS**

AMVETS has hosted numerous roundtable discussions and events over the past two years, centered around the women veteran experience to offer support to women veterans. At our focus group in 2019, we discovered women veterans want mentorship, separate services, and an environment at the VA that is safe and comfortable.

At our ROSE event on Veterans' Day weekend, with more than 90 women veterans in attendance, women veterans were treated to an evening with free food, music, and

lavished with adoring gifts from Swarovski and Kendra Scott. Women veterans felt they mattered, were heard, and not forgotten on Veterans' Day.

It's important to mention that there are challenges within the women veteran community as well. Many women veterans of color want more representation at the VA. Having providers who women can relate to is important. Being sensitive to offering services that cater to different ethnic groups will foster diversity and inclusion within the VA. It should be a priority at VA that their providers are diverse and able to relate to women veterans.

AMVETS, priding ourselves on inclusivity, knows the importance of being able to address the needs of all veterans absent of race, creed, or color. The VA can learn from us in offering the same to women veterans who are concerned that the VA is unrelatable to their needs.

The VA must do a better job at making the facility more welcoming of the LGBT+ community. AMVETS created a LGBT+ roundtable program. Those discussions make it clear LGBT+ veterans have felt isolated and unwelcome at the VA. One participant who is transgender stated that after correcting the receptionist at the front counter about her gender preference, though visibly she looked male, the receptionist refused to acknowledge this change and continue to misrepresent her in front of a waiting room filled with other women veterans. As a result, this woman veteran felt ignored and not accepted by the VA staff. Robust training is still needed, recognizing the diversity of our veterans community.

## **LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The VA should offer more services as it relates to reproductive health. AMVETS is proud to be working with Representative Lauren Underwood on this issue. We are specifically supportive of the Protecting Moms Who Served Act and The Access to Contraception Expansion for Veterans (ACE Veterans) Act.

The ACE Veterans Act gives women veterans the option to receive a 12-month supply of oral contraceptive pills at the VA. Providers will also be required to inform women veterans of their ability to choose a 12-month supply over the previous limit of 3 months. Refilling an oral contraceptive supply every three months can be a significant burden for women veterans.

This bill will give women more freedom when making decisions about their own healthcare. AMVETS will always stand by our women veterans and appreciate legislation that aims to better their experience with the VA.

The United States has the highest maternal mortality rate in the developed world, but there is still little known about maternal mortality and severe morbidity among women veterans. For this reason, we support the Protecting Moms Who Served Act because it will create the first-ever comprehensive report to study the scope of America's maternal health crisis among women veterans.

In the 116th Congress, AMVETS supported the Military SAVE Act introduced by Representatives Barr and Gabbard. This bill would require the VA to approve a veteran's counseling, care and services in the community in order to recover from military sexual trauma if community care is the veteran's choice and require the VA to inform veterans seeking non-department MST treatment of the counseling, care, and services that are available to the veteran within the VA. We were disappointed that this legislation was not passed into law in the last Congress, but we are hopeful it will be reintroduced and put on a trajectory to the President's desk this year.

AMVETS is thankful for Chairwoman Julia Brownley's leadership in formulating the Women Veterans Task Force, and for her staff's leadership in highlighting the many issues facing the women veteran community.

Specifically, AMVETS is supportive of the "Women Veterans TRUST Act," which would conduct an analysis of the need for women-specific programs that treat and rehabilitate women veterans with drug and alcohol dependency and carry out a pilot program regarding such programs.

We are also supportive of Chairwoman Brownley's effort to name new or undedicated facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs after women veterans and minority veterans to reflect our incredible diversity. As well as her effort to create a commemorative postage stamp series honoring women veterans.

### **The Path Forward**

The leadership shown by this committee with regards to women and minority veterans is unprecedented and should be applauded. You are bringing new voices to the table, you are highlighting what made many of our military careers so meaningful, a diverse, talented, ambitious network of men and women working together to defend our great nation.

There is a lot of work to be done, but we are hopeful that our new Secretary, and his appointees, walk the walk in ensuring that VA culture and services trend in a positive and respecting direction.

Likewise we look forward to working with Congress to continue offering our voice and support, as to why these issues are so critical to the millions of women veterans across our nation.

## **CHERISSA JACKSON**

Cherissa Jackson is a registered nurse and retired Air Force combat clinician. Jackson officially joined AMVETS on February 1, 2019 as Chief Medical Officer and heads the organization's HEAL Program, which strives to confront the risk factors that lead to crisis and veteran suicide. She uses her expertise to lead AMVETS' efforts to address issues related to women veterans and champion legislation that improves access to quality healthcare. AMVETS formed the HEAL program in February of 2018, which consists of a team of clinical experts with experience in eliminating barriers to access in healthcare for veterans nationwide.

Jackson boasts 23 years of active duty service, deploying three times during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom as a battlefield clinician. She is the author of "At Peace Not in Pieces," a bestselling memoir that outlines her principles of coping with the challenges of PTSD as a combat veteran and nurse. She was named one of PTSD magazine's "25 Individuals of Influence," as well as recently named to the "HillVets 100" class of 2019.

## **ABOUT AMVETS**

Today, AMVETS is America's most inclusive congressionally-chartered veterans service organization. Our membership is open to all active-duty, reservists, guard members and honorably discharged veterans. Accordingly, the men and women of AMVETS have contributed to the defense of our nation in every conflict since World War II.

Our commitment to these men and women can also be traced to the aftermath of the last World War, when waves of former service members began returning stateside in search of the health, education and employment benefits they earned.. Because obtaining these benefits proved difficult for many, veterans savvy at navigating the government bureaucracy began forming local groups to help their peers. As the ranks of our nation's veterans swelled into the millions, it became clear a national organization would be needed. Groups established to serve the veterans of previous wars wouldn't do either; the leaders of this new generation wanted an organization of their own.

With that in mind, 18 delegates, representing nine veterans clubs, gathered in Kansas City, Missouri and founded The American Veterans of World War II on Dec. 10, 1944. Less than three years later, on July 23, 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed Public Law 216, making AMVETS, the first post-World War II organization to be chartered by Congress.

Since then, our congressional charter was amended to admit members from subsequent eras of service. Our organization has also changed over the years, evolving to better serve these more recent generations of veterans and their families. In furtherance of this

goal, AMVETS maintains partnerships with other Congressionally chartered veterans' service organizations that round out what's called the "Big Six" coalition. We're also working with newer groups, including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and The Independence Fund. Moreover, AMVETS recently teamed up with the VA's Office of Suicide Prevention and Mental Health to help stem the epidemic of veterans' suicide. As our organization looks to the future, we do so hand in hand with those who share our commitment to serving the defenders of this nation. We hope the 116th Session of Congress will join in our conviction by casting votes and making policy decisions that protect our veterans.