



Modern Military Association of America

**Modern Military Association of America
1725 I Street NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20006**

STATEMENT OF

JENNIFER L. DANE, M.A.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & CEO

MODERN MILITARY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE DISABILITY ASSISTANCE & MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

117th Congress

Tuesday, February 7, 2022

"Honoring Our Promise:

Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for Dependents and Survivors"

Chairwoman Elaine Luria, Ranking Member Troy Nehls, and members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, subcommittee of Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, my name is Jennifer Dane, an Air Force veteran, and the Executive Director of the Modern Military Association of America (MMAA) – the nation's largest LGBTQ military and veteran non-profit dedicated to advancing fairness and equality. MMAA appreciates the opportunity to submit a statement on behalf of our 85,000 members and supporters.

LGBTQ+ servicemembers and veterans have served this country honorably since its inception; however, when it comes to benefits for military members, veterans, survivors, and caregivers, benefits have only been accessible since 2015 – the year in which same-sex marriage was legalized throughout the United States. In turn, this means that hundreds of thousands of veterans who previously served were not able to access these services or were denied simply because of policy development delays.

It is important to note, the Department of Veterans' Affairs and Memorial Services, have taken incredible steps to improve the culture and training within their ecosystem. These improvements include having a designated landing page for mental health resources for LGBTQ+ veterans, establishing an employee resource group for LGBTQ+ employees, and exploring an innovative and groundbreaking mental health plan for transgender individuals, which was previously led by Dr. Tiffany Lange. However, without continuous improvement, minoritized populations, such as the LGBTQ+ community, are left behind as compared with their heterosexual counterparts. In the next section, we will address the areas that we believe would be significantly beneficial for the experience of survivors and dependents.

MMAA Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Create a VHA/VBA Task Force for Achieving Equity and Inclusivity –

This includes survivors and dependents accessing services.

Explanation 1: Without systemically asking about sexual orientation and gender identity (GAO, 2020), the complexity and care needs and access to benefits of the LGBTQ+ Veterans, Survivors, Dependents, and Caregivers within the community remain unknown. The access point of information that is tailored for LGBTQ+ survivors and dependents is unavailable due to a lack of demographic data collection of sexual orientation and gender identity. Therefore, before starting to solve a problem, we must first know who our population is and what their unique needs are. Creating a VHA/VBA Task Force for Achieving Equity and Inclusivity would enhance access to health care and benefits.

Recommendation 2: Representation and acceptance of same-sex partnered veterans and transgender/non-binary veterans, survivors, dependents, and caregivers are crucial for trust and acceptance within the VHA/VBA.

Explanation 2: Much like the "I am not invisible" campaign targeting women veterans, a similar campaign is needed. LGBTQ+ veterans, survivors, and dependents do not feel seen, heard, and have a difficult time trusting the VHA/VBA. However, with a targeted marketing campaign, ad posters, and other opportunities, trust is built through representation.

Recommendation 3: Expand benefits to include partnerships before marriage was legalized in 2015 to individuals who were in a domestic partnership, civil unions, or any similarly situated relationships.

Explanation 3: An examination into retroactive benefits to individuals who were in partnership such as civil unions, domestic partnership, or any other legally bound relationship, should be considered in the evaluation of programmatic improvements. Many of our members who were in legally bound relationships to the extent of the law at the time, were not able to leave their partners or dependents their benefits such as survivor benefits. Some were even forced out of the military service and were not allowed to qualify for such services. A study to examine LGBTQ+ veterans is vital to progress and accessibility.

Concluding Statement:

There is more anecdotal evidence that our organization can present on behalf of our LGBTQ+ military servicemembers, veterans, survivors, dependents, and caregivers, but without a well-funded, robust research study conducted through the Department of Veteran Affairs and/or Department of Defense/Department of Homeland Security, we will continue to attempt to solve problems with assumptions and not data or facts.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our statements, Chairwoman Elaine Luria, Ranking Member Troy Nehls, and members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, subcommittee of Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. We hope to see lasting changes and retrospective actions for the LGBTQ+ community.

- Jennifer Dane, Executive Director, Modern Military Association of America