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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
DECEMBER 15, 2015

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to submit a written statement for the record at this hearing focused on the challenges and issues veterans face as they transition from military service to civilian life. Although this hearing is focused on programs and services to help male and female veterans make a successful transition. I will focus this statement on the unique issues women veterans face in this process. Gaining equal access for women to transition services, benefits and health care post military service is a top legislative priority for DAV. We want to ensure these services are tailored to meet their needs and provided to the same degree and extent that such services are provided to men.

In 2014, with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down and women turning to VA in record numbers, DAV commissioned a special report on women transitioning from military to veteran status. *Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home* presents a comprehensive assessment of the existing programs and services women veterans are provided by the VA, and the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The report highlights that despite a generous array of government-provided benefits to assist veterans with transition and readjustment, serious gaps are evident for women in nearly every aspect of current federal programs.

The vast majority of these deficiencies result from a disregard for the differing needs of women veterans and a historic focus on developing programs to meet the health care needs of men, who are prominent as veterans in both numbers and public consciousness. Although we have seen dramatic growth in the number of women coming to VA, for the foreseeable future women will remain a statistical minority of veterans. For example, VA has an estimated 6.6 million users; of these, women represent only about 6.8 percent of the patient population.¹ This reality poses a number of specific and ongoing challenges for VA—but the challenges can and must be resolved.

The following text, findings and recommendations are from DAV's report—*Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home*. We hope these findings will add to the discussion on

¹ U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, "Sourcebook: Women Veterans in the VHA, Vol. 3." Feb 2014.

transition and related issues before the Committee.

Employment/Employment Services

For men and women alike, a key requirement for a successful transition away from military service is the ability to establish satisfying, stable employment as a civilian. Most military members make this transition successfully, but some struggle. With the United States facing a significant draw-down of about a million service members by 2020,² it is critically important that employment programs and services are effective at helping men and women in the military make this transition smoothly.

Employment data makes it clear that recent veterans have struggled to make the transition from military to civilian life. While the unemployment rate for all veterans throughout the economic downturn was better than that for the civilian labor force as a whole,³ Post-9/11 veterans had persistently higher rates of unemployment than other veterans and it took longer for that trend to peak at 12.1 percent and start to decline after 2011. This trend was even more pronounced among women veterans, with unemployment among Post-9/11 women climbing to 12.5 percent through 2012.⁴ The latest data show gains for Post-9/11 women veterans, with an unemployment rate declining to 9.3 percent in 2013.⁵ However, this rate is only slightly below peak unemployment reached by the country overall in the depth of the recession in October 2009.⁶ Indeed, as a whole, women veterans have struggled with unemployment following the recent recession, lagging behind all men and non-veteran women.⁷ With almost 200,000 or so women ready to leave the military over the next four to five years, it is imperative that we improve our support for women veterans' employment.

The reasons underlying this persistently higher rate of unemployment are not definitively known. However, characteristics such as a younger age, being unmarried or divorced, lower educational attainment and having children at home are associated with a higher rate of unemployment and are also prevalent among women veterans.

² U.S. Government Accountability Office (2014). Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program. Washington, DC. GAO-14-144

³ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). Unemployment among veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces declines in 2012. TED: The Editors Desk. Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22 www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2013/ted_20130322.htm

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Economic News Release: April 04, 2014. p. o. s. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 18 years and over by veterans' status, sex, not seasonally adjusted. Washington, DC.

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Labor force statistics from the current population survey. Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22 http://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet?request_action=wh&-graph_name=LN_cpsbrief3

⁷ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). Unemployment among veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces declines in 2012. TED: The Editors Desk. Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22 www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2013/ted_20130322.htm

Age

Younger workers have a higher rate of unemployment than older workers⁸ with 18-24 year olds experiencing the highest level of unemployment among adults. Both male and female Post-9/11 veterans in this age cohort have a higher rate of unemployment than their civilian peers and the highest rate among veterans overall.⁹

Marital Status

Marital status correlates with employment. Married women have lower rates of unemployment than divorced, separated, widowed or never-married women.^{10,11} After age 35, women veterans are less likely to be married than their civilian counterparts due to more separation and divorce in this population. Indeed, in all age cohorts, women veterans are more likely to experience divorce.¹²

Educational Attainment

Younger women veterans, 17-24 years old, have a lower level of attainment of a bachelor's degree (5.2 percent) than non-veteran women (9.7 percent) of the same age. This difference persists among 25-34 year olds, with only 29 percent of veteran women attaining a bachelor's degree compared to 36 percent of non-veteran women of the same age.¹³ Analysis of veteran data show that poverty and educational attainment are linked. Only 3.2 percent of veterans with a bachelor's degree live in poverty compared to the 6.9 percent of veterans without a bachelor's degree who live in poverty.^{14, 15}

Motherhood

Single mothers have higher rates of unemployment than married mothers (12 percent vs 4.8 percent, respectively).¹⁶ Eleven percent of women service members are single parents compared with four percent of men. Women veterans are slightly more likely to have children

⁸ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). Employment Situation of Veterans 2012. Washington, DC.

⁹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Economic News Release: April 04, 2014. p. o. s. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 18 years and over by veterans' status, sex, not seasonally adjusted. Washington, DC.

¹⁰ Hartmann, H., Hayes, J. (2011). Women and men living on the edge: Economic insecurity after the great recession. Institute for Women's Policy Research. Washington, DC. C386

¹¹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Employment Characteristics of Families 2013. Washington, DC.

¹² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2011). America's Women Veterans: Military Service History and VA Benefits Utilization Statistics. Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, DC.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee Chairman's Staff. (2011). Broken Promises: The need to improve economic security for veterans. Washington, DC

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee Democratic Staff. (2013). Building job opportunities for returning veterans.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Employment Characteristics of Families Summary. Economic News Release, Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.nr0.htm>

than non-veteran women (58 percent compared to 52 percent).¹⁷ Among younger veterans this difference is pronounced with 29 percent of women veterans 17-24 years of age having children while only 13 percent of age-matched civilian women have children. Women veterans are more likely to have children under the age of 18 at home which correlates with poorer employment outcomes.¹⁸

Medical and Mental Health Concerns

According to the VA, women veterans have higher rates of medical and mental health concerns than do male veterans, and one in five women veterans who use VA health care have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).¹⁹ Overall, women veterans have a higher rate of trauma exposure than their civilian counterparts when pre-enlistment, during-service and following-service experiences are taken into account.²⁰ One recent survey of veterans²¹ indicates a significant difference in women veterans' perception of the impact of war on their emotional and mental health with 43 percent of them stating they are worse now than before serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, which is higher than the 30 percent of men who feel the same way. Mental health needs and diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and the effects of MST as well as physical health concerns have all been noted as risk factors for poor employment outcomes in veterans.^{22, 23, 24, 25}

Even when these factors are controlled, Post-9/11 women veterans and National Guard women veterans have higher rates of unemployment than other groups.²⁶ Given this constellation of factors working against employment success for some women veterans and their demonstrated higher rates of unemployment, it is important for all of the partners working on veteran transition challenges to identify the specific needs of women and institute specialized programs and outreach for them.

¹⁷ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee Democratic Staff. (2013). Building job opportunities for returning veterans.

¹⁸ Cooney, R.T., Segal, M.W., Segal, D.R., Falk, W.W. (2003). Racial differences in the impact of military service on the socioeconomic status of women veterans. *Armed Forces & Society* 30(1): 53-85.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Task Force on Women Veterans (2012). *Strategies for Serving Our Women Veterans*. Washington DC.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for women veterans experiencing homelessness: a Guide for Service Providers*. Washington, DC.

²¹ DiJulio, B., Deane, C., Firth, J., Craighill, P., Clement, S., Brodie, M. (2014) *After the Wars: Survey of Iraq & Afghanistan active duty soldiers and veterans*. Kaiser Family Foundation. Personal communications DiJulio, B.

²² Horton, J. L., Jacobson, I.G., Wong, C.A., Wells, T.S., Boyko, E.K., Smith, B., Smith, T.C. (2013). The impact of prior deployment experience on civilian employment after military service. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 70(6): 408-417

²³ Ostovary, F. D., J (2011). Challenges and opportunities of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans with disabilities transitioning into learning and workplace environments. *New directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 132: 63-73.

²⁴ Humensky, J. L., Jordon, N., Stroupe, K.T., Hynes, D.M. (2013). Employment status of veterans receiving substance abuse treatment from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. *Psychiatric Services* 64(2): 177-180.

²⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2014). *VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment*. GAO. Washington, DC.

²⁶ Vow to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW) (P.L. 112-56 Title II 125 S 711, 712).

Transition Assistance

The challenge of making the transition from military service to civilian employment has been widely discussed.²⁷ For many in the military, seeking civilian employment may be the first time they have developed a résumé or interviewed for a job. For most, it can be a challenge to translate the skills, knowledge, and experience gained in military assignments into language accessible to a civilian hiring audience. In particular, specialized training and certificates gained during service do not generally translate into certification or licensure requirements for an equivalent position in the civilian sector. Finally, military members who move frequently or have been absent on deployments may not have a robust local network of civilian contacts who can help identify employment opportunities where they live.

There is no direct evidence that this transition is any different for women than it is for men. Yet, women veterans' unemployment rate remains stubbornly high and women have voiced frustration with the transition process. For instance, women veterans were less likely than men (32 percent compared to 47 percent) to believe the military was doing enough to ease transitions to civilian life, and more women (18 percent) than men (7 percent) doubt their military skills will be useful in the civilian job market.²⁸ Other studies found that women felt they had been led to believe that military training would be more valuable than it is in their search for employment.^{29, 30}

Employment sector data appears consistent with the idea that women veterans find their military experience to be of less value in the job market. The data indicates that women veterans' employment patterns appear much more like that of civilian women than male veterans. Although women are filling technical positions in the military, they don't appear to be able to capitalize on that experience in the private sector in the same way as men.^{31, 32}

In recognition of the need to help service members to transition effectively to civilian life, Congress established the original Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in 1991.³³ The new DoD program, called Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) covers all service members and incorporates career readiness and transition preparation into the entire span of a military member's career. The revised program covers all departing service members. It is intended to help service members identify their post-separation education, financial and employment goals. After participating in the structured program, service members are expected to have clear goals

²⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Business Board (2013). *Employing our Veterans Part II: Service Member Transition*. Washington, DC.

²⁸ DiJulio, B., Deane, C., Firth, J., Craighill, P., Clement, S., Brodie, M. (2014) *After the Wars: Survey of Iraq & Afghanistan active duty soldiers and veterans*. Kaiser Family Foundation. Personal communications DiJulio, B.

²⁹ Business and Professional Women's Foundation. (2007). *Women Veterans in Transition*. Washington, DC.

³⁰ Thom, K. B., E (2011). *Chicagoland female veterans; a qualitative study of attachment to the labor force*. American Institute for Research National Center on Family Homelessness.

³¹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Economic News Release: April 04, 2014. p. o. s. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 18 years and over by veterans' status, sex, not seasonally adjusted*. Washington, DC.

³² U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Employment Characteristics of Families 2013*. Washington, DC.

³³ Transition Assistance Program 1991 (P. L. 101-510) S 502 (a)(1)

for employment or education and will know where and how to access the services that can help them achieve those goals.

According to a recent review of the program by GAO,³⁴ comprehensive data on participation rates and information on the effectiveness of the training is not readily available and post-transition outcome data is limited. The data that is gathered has not been publicly released with an analysis of outcomes and satisfaction by gender.

Commanders are the lynchpin of the military's integration program. They must ensure that transitioning service members attend the various trainings and they are responsible for ensuring an appropriate review of the service member's employment plan and directing any needed follow up as part of the program "capstone." GAO recognized that without uniform data gathering and accountability to ensure all commanders fulfill this responsibility, the impact of the program may be limited.

Finding:

The effectiveness of the TAP program cannot be assessed in the case of women.

Recommendation:

Data on participation, satisfaction, effectiveness and outcomes for TAP should be collected and analyzed by gender and race and returned in real time to commanders for their assessment and corrective actions.

Finding:

TAP does not offer elements targeted at women or their needs.

Recommendation:

TAP partners should conduct an assessment to determine needs of women veterans and incorporate specific break-out sessions during the employment workshop or add a specific track for women in the three-day session to address those needs.

Finding:

While the warm handoff for transitioning service members who have not completed an acceptable transition plan is laudable, the proof of success is whether every plan has been successfully implemented six months to a year out from separation. The hallmark of adult learning is that adults seek out and absorb information when they perceive that they need it, not necessarily when it is presented. Some transitioning service members may not be primed to absorb TAP training pre-separation but would be more receptive once they are actively seeking employment six months later.

³⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2014). Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program. Washington, DC. GAO-14-144

Recommendation:

DoD should transfer contact information and data on all TAP participants to VA and the Department of Labor (DoL) who should be responsible to provide gender sensitive follow up with all service members 6-12 months after separation to offer additional support and services, if needed.

Recommendation:

To judge the success of TAP, employment outcomes and educational attainment should be tracked and reported on a rolling basis, analyzed by gender and race, for all separated service members.

Department of Labor

The DoL is responsible for providing the employment workshop during the TAP program and they run a variety of programs and services that help support veterans in their search for employment. This includes the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) that provides employment resources and expertise, and the Gold Card which can be used by unemployed Post-9/11 era veterans to receive enhanced intensive services at DoL American Job Centers and the associated website, Career One Stop (www.careeronestop.org).³⁵ This support is individualized to the needs of the veteran and includes six months of follow-up with a case manager. In addition, DoL sponsors My Next Move for veterans, a job search portal that allows them to use their military occupation code to browse jobs and career information and to take an assessment to find out about careers compatible with their interests. A similar portal from DoD, Hero 2 Hired,³⁶ targets National Guard and Reserve members.

Importantly, DoL has a visible and strong focus on women veterans and their needs³⁷ and uses specific messages and images of women veterans that provide an inviting entry portal. However, the employment resources offered are the same for women as for men and one limited study indicates that women are unlikely to use these veteran related services.³⁸

Joining Forces

Launched by the White House in 2011, *Joining Forces* is a government initiative to promote employment for military members and their families.³⁹ The effort brings together federal agencies, state government, educational institutions and the private sector to promote and support employment and training for military families and veterans. Through the initiative (and

³⁵ Careeronestop: Pathways to success. Accessed 14-08-22. <http://www.careeronestop.org/>

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense. Hero2Hired. Accessed 14-08-22. <https://h2h.jobs/>

³⁷ U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service. Women Veterans. Accessed 14-08-22. <http://www.dol.gov/vets/womenveterans/>

³⁸ Boraas, S., Roemer, G., Bodenlos, K. (2013). Assessment of the workforce system's implementation of the veterans' priority of service provision of the Jobs for Veterans Act of 2002. Mathematica. Washington, DC

³⁹ White House. Joining Forces. Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces>

supported by tax credits for veteran hiring), private businesses and non-profit organizations have pledged to hire or train more than 800,000 veterans and their spouses.

Working with state licensure and certification processes, the initiative has also made progress in bringing attention to the need to streamline the translation of military training and certification to private sector equivalents.^{40, 41} While all of these efforts are tremendously positive and have raised national awareness of the skills and talent of former military members, the initiative is broad based without specific outreach to women veterans. In some instances, the private sector has done well to appeal to and welcome women veterans, using images and messages that include women veterans, while others have focused only on telling the stories of military men, giving the appearance that these occupations are closed to women. In addition, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit to encourage industry and non-profits to hire veterans expired December 31, 2013. With unemployment among Post-9/11 women veterans still high, and given the anticipated drawdown of strength at DoD, this tax credit should be made permanent.

Two Innovative Transition Programs for Women Veterans

There are two transition programs worth mentioning that seem to be having a positive impact for women veterans. First is a pilot program of women veterans retreats through VA's Vet Center Program—Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS). Public Law 111-163 included provisions that required VA to conduct a pilot program of group counseling in retreat settings for women veterans newly separated from the armed forces. VA reports that a total of 134 women were served in FYs 2011-2012 in six retreats coordinated by VA's RCS, or Vet Center program. RCS worked with the *Women's Wilderness Institute* to develop the locations and agenda for the retreats. Feedback from women veterans participating in the retreats has been very positive. In May 2013, the RCS staff provided a report to Congress on the outcome of the pilots and retreats and noted that they were beneficial for this cohort of war veterans. Statistically significant positive outcomes measured from the retreats were reduced stress, improved stress coping skills, and overall improvement in psychological well-being among participants. Most notably—73 percent of the women veterans who participated in the retreat showed improvement in scores in PTSD severity. Seventy-eight percent of the participants with scores qualifying for a PTSD diagnosis at pre-retreat, no longer qualified for a diagnosis 2 months post-retreat.⁴²

Second is an innovative private sector program, the Woman Veterans REBOOT Workshop (see attachment), designed to meet the unique needs of women veterans as they transition from military to civilian life. This unique three week program builds upon the participants' military training, skills, and experience and addresses the personal, social, and professional aspects of military-to-civilian life transition. The workshop is aimed at employment, career and educational opportunities.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Business Board (2013). *Employing our Veterans Part II: Service Member Transition*. Washington, DC.

⁴¹ Executive Office of the President (2013). *The fast track to civilian employment: Streamlining credentialing and licensing for service members, veterans and their spouses*. White House. Washington, DC.

⁴² Department of Veterans Affairs Report on the Pilot Program on Counseling in Retreat Settings for Women Veterans Newly Separated from Service in the Armed Forces Pursuant to the Requirements of Public Law 111-163, Section 203. May 9, 2013.

Closing

In order to better understand the experience of women in the military, data needs to be routinely collected, analyzed and reported by gender and minority status. Therefore, DAV recommends improved data collection on women and minorities for health care, disability compensation, justice involvement, education, transition assistance, sexual trauma, employment, and housing programs. Congress, policy makers, program directors, and researchers need this information in order to monitor and appropriately enhance services for women veterans.

Millions of women have answered the call of duty and put themselves at risk to preserve our nation's security and our way of life. They served this country faithfully and many with distinction. This is a transformative moment for the VA—Secretary Robert McDonald is leading an ambitious effort to change the culture at the VA and to direct resources where they will ensure that VA health care and benefits services can meet the needs of every veteran. That cannot happen for women veterans without a strong focus on their differences and their needs, met with a detailed, action-orientated plan.

DAV appreciates the opportunity to provide this statement to the Committee on this important topic and urges Congress to legislatively address the known and expected needs of women as documented in DAV's report, as well as our prior testimony on the report. I would be pleased to address any questions the Committee may have on these topics.

All-Woman Veterans REBOOT Workshop

Studies show that women veterans face greater challenges than their male counterparts. Yet there are very few programs to help them re-assimilate into civilian life – and many feel left behind. To answer the call, *National Veterans Transition Services, Inc.* (NVTSI) also known as REBOOT, launched the Women Veterans Initiative. The program is designed to meet the unique needs of women veterans as they transition from military to civilian life. The REBOOT Workshop™ is the nation's only transition program of its kind that provides women veterans with the tools they need to succeed.

“We need the tools in our toolboxes to succeed and REBOOT gave us those tools. Veterans need to go through this workshop.” Maria Orozco, REBOOT Class 62

The project is funded by the Ford Motor Company. REBOOT is also partnering with Soroptomist International to engage community leaders in providing mentoring for the veteran graduates.

Workshop Overview

The REBOOT Workshop™ is based around how we think and how our thoughts impact every facet of our lives. It demonstrates how we let habits, attitudes and beliefs stand in the way of releasing our inner potential. It also reveals how our beliefs and expectations about ourselves, our families, and our futures are directly related to our current realities. The REBOOT Workshop™ is designed to build awareness of how your mind works, how to control the way you think and how to achieve success in any part of your life. The program also shows how important it is for those that have suffered a traumatic experience in particular, as well as their families, friends and caregivers, to lock on to the power of the mind, and focus on a productive and contributive future.

The 15 day **REBOOT Workshop™** is divided into three parts:

- **Week I** – Military-to-Civilian Personal Transition. *Developed by The Pacific Institute®; addresses the Transition Domains of personal effectiveness and wellbeing.*
- **Week II** – Military-to-Civilian Lifestyle Transition. *Developed by Operation Legacy; addresses the Transition Domains of living situation and community-life functioning.*
- **Week III** – Military-to-Civilian Career Transition. *Addresses the Transition Domains of employment, career and education.*

Supplemental Support:

- **Mentoring:** In addition to peer support from other graduates, interested participants who complete the workshop will be matched with mentors that will support their efforts by providing advice guidance and leadership.
- Job placement assistance is available to graduates through our partner network.
- Connection to community resources will be made available through various channels and orchestrated through NVTSI.