ISSUE BRIEF: MEETING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF WOMEN VETERANS

SITUATION

- Women are a significant force in the U.S. military, making up 20% of new recruits, 14.5% of the personnel serving on active duty and 18% of the National Guard and reserve forces. About 2.4 million women are veterans of military service. They make up 10% of the veteran population.

- Since 2000, the number of women VA enrollees has grown from about 160,000 to nearly 400,000. More than 125,000 women veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are enrolled in VA health care, with more enrolling every day.

CHALLENGE

- While the number of women who volunteer to defend the nation is increasing dramatically, they are being put at risk by a services and support system designed for and dominated by men.

- A DAV commissioned study, *Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home*, found numerous instances in which both DoD and VA do not yet fully meet the specialized needs of women service members.

- Shortfalls faced by women veterans have been found in such areas as health care services, benefits, housing, education and employment and homeless assistance. Major gaps exist in DoD’s efforts to prevent and eradicate military sexual trauma, and in VA’s efforts to deal with the aftermath of sexual trauma.

- While the federal government has raced to establish programs to serve combat veterans, the current programs that await women transitioning from military service are disjointed, marked by serious gaps and not attuned to the unique needs of women who served.

SOLUTION

- *Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home* makes 27 policy recommendations to improve the provision of services for women transitioning from military service. Priorities, which should be addressed through legislation and agency initiatives, include devoting sufficient resources to close gaps identified, adapting current programs and creating new ones, and addressing a culture that presents numerous barriers women encounter in trying to receive their rightful benefits and services.

- VA must accelerate ongoing outreach and gender-specific research to better understand the unique impact of military service on women’s lives and health — especially women who have served during wartime.

- DoD and VA should modify all applicable data systems to be sure data identifying service members and veterans includes a gender element. Without data identifying women, the effectiveness of programs in meeting their needs can never be effectively answered.

- DAV urges Congress to hold hearings to evaluate DAV’s report and determine whether DoD and VA have met performance expectations in addressing the needs of women who served; and to conduct oversight on women’s satisfaction levels in being consumers of these benefits and services.