

Improving Services for Women Veterans

Serving in record numbers, women make up 15 percent of the active duty force and 18 percent of the Guard and reserve forces. Over 160 women service members have made the ultimate sacrifice in combat deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan and over a thousand have been injured or wounded. Since 2000, the number of women veterans using VA health care has more than doubled, and their enrollment in VA's health care system is increasing faster than their male counterparts. Although VA has made concerted efforts to ramp up services to meet the increasing demand it has struggled to meet the unique health care and support needs of women coming to VA for care.

VA acknowledges the need for cultural changes to ensure women feel welcome at VA facilities, and to improve, tailor and expand health care services to comprehensively care for women veteran's gender specific needs. DAV is helping to foster greater awareness of the unique needs of women veterans and is working cooperatively with VA officials through our legislative, communications and Foundation resources; providing testimony before Congress; and conducting a variety of forums and discussion groups in Washington, D.C.

On September 24, 2014, DAV released its landmark study; *Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home*. The report provides a comprehensive assessment of existing federal services available for veterans and highlights gaps for women across the federal landscape including: health care, specialized mental health and homeless services, transition assistance programs, housing options, community support services, employment and efforts to eradicate sexual assault. The report reveals that while the number of women who volunteer to defend our nation is increasing dramatically—they currently do not have to same opportunities for a successful transition in a system with policies and programs that have focused on and designed primarily for men.

In April 2015, the House and Senate Veterans Affairs' Committees held hearings on women veterans and DAV's report. During those hearings DAV called on Congress to implement provisions of our report by Memorial Day 2016. A number of bills seeking to improve services for women veterans have been introduced by Congress and are supported by DAV including:

- **S. 469**—the Women Veterans and Families Health Services Act of 2015
- **S. 471/H.R. 1356**—the Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act
- **H.R. 1496**—a bill to improve access to child care for veterans receiving VA health care
- **H.R. 1575**—a bill to make permanent the pilot program on counseling in retreat settings for women veterans newly separated from service in the Armed Forces
- **H.R. 1948**—the Veterans' Access to Child Care Act
- **H.R. 2054**—a bill to increase access to VA medical care for women veterans
- **H.R. 2915**—the Female Veterans Suicide Prevention Act

DAV continues our determined advocacy to ensure women's experiences and sacrifices in serving our nation in uniform are properly recognized and that gaps in federal programs are appropriately closed to ensure that the unique needs of women veterans are being met.