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BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**“CARING FOR ALL WHO HAVE BORNE THE BATTLE:  
ENSURING EQUITY FOR WOMEN VETERANS AT VA”**

**APRIL 10, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and Committee Members. My name is Dr. Erica Scavella, Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Joining me today are Dr. Sally Haskell, the Acting Chief Officer, and Dr. Amanda Johnson, the Acting Deputy Chief Officer, both within the Office of Women's Health (OWH), and Ms. Kenesha Britton, the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits for National Contact Field Operations with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

Thank you for the invitation to testify. Addressing the unique needs of women Veterans is crucial, especially as they are the fastest-growing group served by VHA today. As we conclude our 100th year of providing women's health care, VA aims to set a higher standard of care and become a national leader in the delivery of women's care. Continued collaboration with this Committee is essential to achieve the comprehensive care they deserve.

### **I. Health Care for Women Veterans**

Over the past 5 years, there has been a significant increase in the number of women Veterans seeking VA health care services, with women accounting for over 30% of the total growth in Veterans served. Since 2001, the number of women using VA services has more than tripled, rising from 159,810 to over 625,000 in 2023. VA provides comprehensive care for women Veterans, encompassing preventive, acute, and chronic disease management; reproductive health care; and mental health care.

To address the unique health care needs of women Veterans, VHA has developed primary health care policies specifically for them. These policies ensure equitable, high-quality care that is sensitive to their gender-specific health concerns and experiences. By emphasizing preventive care, early intervention, and holistic approaches to wellness, VA aims to promote the health and well-being of women Veterans through its primary care initiatives.

One key policy ensures that women are offered assignments to specially trained and experienced Women's Health Primary Care Providers (WH-PCP), who offer general and gender-specific primary care within a long-term patient-provider relationship. With

every VA health care system having at least three WH-PCPs, 87% of women Veterans are assigned to one. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, VA allocated funding for over 1,000 women's health personnel nationwide, including primary care providers, gynecologists, mental health providers, and care coordinators of which 86% are onboarded.

### Reproductive Health Policies

All enrolled Veterans can access a wide range of essential reproductive health care services at VA. Examples of these reproductive services provided by VA include contraception, pregnancy-related care, fertility and preconception counseling, sexually transmitted infection (STI) screening and treatments, and specialty medical and surgical management of gynecological conditions.

*A. Gynecology.* Comprehensive and specialized gynecological care, which may involve complex surgeries and cancer treatments, is provided to women Veterans as part of our commitment to meeting their unique health care needs. VHA provides a range of gynecological services through a network of skilled health care professionals at state-of-the-art facilities to address their specific health concerns. VHA provides compassionate, evidence-based care ranging from routine screenings and preventative measures to specialized treatments and support for gynecological conditions. To further these efforts, OWH has created several initiatives with a focus on clinical excellence, research, and education.

- The Gynecology Community of Practice and Virtual Grand Rounds serve as platforms for collaboration and learning among VA gynecologists, facilitating virtual meetings, webinars, and forums. These initiatives aim to elevate the quality of care.
- The VA Gynecology Virtual Grand Rounds additionally provides expert-led presentations, case discussions, and updates on reproductive health topics for Veterans. This platform enhances the quality of gynecological care for women Veterans.
- The National VA Gynecology Conference convenes health care professionals, researchers, and women's health experts to share research findings, best practices, and innovations in gynecological care. With a special focus on addressing the unique health care needs of women Veterans, this conference serves as a vital forum for collaboration.
- The VA Advanced Fellowship Program in Minimally Invasive Gynecology provides prestigious training in advanced surgical techniques. Through hands-on experience in laparoscopy and robotic surgery, enhancing health care providers' expertise and improving outcomes.

*B. Contraception.* VHA supports Veterans' reproductive health by offering all Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved, -granted, or -cleared contraceptive methods, including oral contraceptive pills, long-acting reversible contraception, and permanent sterilization methods. To improve access, VHA offers a 12-month dispensing of

hormonal contraceptives and allows self-administration of subcutaneous Depo-Provera, alongside education on reproductive health and contraception access.

*C. Maternity Care Coordination.* VA does not provide the full scope of maternity care and delivery on-site, but provides this care through community providers. VA covered over 7,000 deliveries in the past year alone. The Maternity Care Coordination program supports pregnant Veterans throughout their maternity journey, offering personalized care, education, guidance, and resources, including screening for intimate partner violence and depression. Following its wide success and positive reception, the maternity care program, which is available to all VHA health care systems, has been expanded to provide life-changing, coordinated care for a full 12 months postpartum.

*D. Abortion Care.* Ensuring access to essential reproductive care, including abortion care in certain circumstances, is vital for protecting the health and well-being of pregnant Veterans. VA provides pregnancy options counseling, which includes abortion counseling, and will offer abortions in cases of rape, incest, or when the life or health of the Veteran or VA beneficiary would be endangered if the pregnancy were carried to term.

*E. Fertility Services.* Infertility issues can arise due to service-related injuries or medical conditions, impacting Veterans' ability to start or expand their families. VA is dedicated to promoting, preserving, and restoring these Veterans' health and well-being to the greatest extent possible. Most VA fertility services are available to all eligible, enrolled Veterans and encompass a range of options, such as laboratory testing, surgical corrections, intrauterine insemination (IUI), sperm processing and washing, hormonal therapies, and genetic counseling. Additional fertility services such as in vitro fertilization are available to Veterans and their legal spouses who meet specific eligibility requirements under special legislative authority. VA recently expanded eligibility for IVF to single and unmarried Veterans and to allow for the use of donor sperm, eggs, or embryos.

## Mental Health

VHA is committed to supporting women Veterans' mental health and well-being through various initiatives. These include expanding access to evidence-based services and increasing awareness of gender-specific resources such as women-only therapy and peer support groups. Specialized care is offered for conditions like posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and reproductive mental health issues, such as postpartum depression. These efforts underscore VHA's dedication to fostering a healing environment tailored to the diverse needs of women Veterans. In addition to patient-centered programs, VHA offers innovative resources to support clinicians who serve women, including:

- A national network of Women's Mental Health Champions at each VA medical center that aims to expand and promote women's mental health resources locally.

- The National Reproductive Mental Health Consultation Program provides expert consultation to support VA clinicians on mental health and reproductive health concerns. Clinicians can access the service through email, expect a response time of less than one business day, and submit follow-up questions as needed.
- The VA/Department of Defense (DoD) Women's Mental Health Mini-Residency enhances clinicians' competency in providing gender-sensitive mental health care through annual training conferences. Since its establishment in 2016, over 850 VA and DoD clinicians have successfully completed this training program.
- Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) for Reproductive Mental Health is an adaption of IPT for women facing mental health challenges related to reproductive stages (e.g., infertility, menopause, etc.), with over 120 VHA clinicians trained in this therapy since 2022.

### Continuing Education Initiatives

Continuing education is crucial for clinicians and staff serving women Veterans, keeping them up to date with the latest advancements and best practices in women's health. It enhances their knowledge, cultural competency, and sensitivity towards women Veterans' unique experiences, thus building trust and rapport. It also cultivates a culture of continuous improvement, leading to higher job satisfaction, better health outcomes, and maintenance of certifications and licensures. Since 2008, VA has trained more than 11,500 clinicians in a 3 day update in women's gender specific health care known as the Women's Health mini-residency program, with 1,501 clinicians trained in FY 2023 alone. Notable initiatives include:

- 39 trainings organized by OWH and the Office of Rural Health targeting rural clinical sites, which is crucial for improving women Veterans' care.
- A 12-session course on reproductive mental health for multidisciplinary clinicians, covering various topics like menstrual irregularities, contraception, and cancers. Over 350 clinicians have completed this rigorous course.

## **II. Benefits and Services for Women Veterans and Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Survivors**

VA wants every woman Veteran to come to us for the benefits they earned and deserve. We are committed to informing women Veterans about their available VA benefits and services. VA is committed to connecting them to their earned benefits through more proactive and effective outreach and engagement. Currently, 702,557 women Veterans receive disability compensation benefits from VA—an all-time record and an increase of 180,959 women Veterans (or 26%) over five years ago.

The average woman Veteran who receives disability compensation benefits from VA has a 68% combined disability rating, and they receive an average of \$26,809 in earned disability compensation benefits per year from VA. The average grant rate for women Veterans is 89.2%, meaning that 89% of women Veterans who have applied for disability benefits with VA have received benefits for at least one condition.

VA also is working to ensure that women Veterans can get education benefits and well-paying jobs. Despite only making up 16.5% of the Veteran population, Women Veterans received 27.5% of Post 9/11 education benefits and 26.4% of Veteran Readiness and Employment benefits in 2023. These historic statistics are a direct result of our concerted efforts to bring more women Veterans to VA. Despite the significant growth in the number of women Veterans who are accessing their benefits, there is still more work to do, and VA wants every woman Veteran to come to us for the benefits they have earned.

We're constantly working to expand our outreach—and our services—to better serve women Veterans. That's why VA is hosting nearly 140 events this year specifically designed to support women Veterans, which is the largest outreach campaign in VA history to bring women Veterans to VA, and is directly emailing and texting Veterans to encourage them to come to VA.

In addition to our efforts to engage women Veterans after they have left the military, VA strives to provide information to Service members as part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) prior to their transition to civilian life. As a supplement to the VA TAP course, VA offers Women's Health Transition Training, a web-based training course that is open to all women Service members and can be taken at any time. Topics include transitioning to civilian life and health benefits (emphasizing women-specific needs), mental well-being, managing health care, eligibility, and transition assistance resources. VA also has implemented the VA Solid Start (VASS) program to ensure Veterans are aware of the benefits and services available. In 2023, VASS agents successfully reached 22,102 women Veterans, equating to a 76.7% connection rate, a 5.2% increase over FY 2022.

VBA front-line employees in public contact teams and national call centers receive training and information to connect women Veterans to Women Veterans Coordinators (WVC), who are the primary women Veterans' contact. A WVC is available at all regional offices. Coordinators maintain extensive knowledge about VA benefits and services, and an awareness of women Veteran issues and concerns, working hand-in-hand with other special emphasis coordinators. WVCs also maintain an effective network and referral system with the local VHA Women Veteran Program Managers coupled with local and state women Veterans' organizations to ensure they are informed about available resources.

### MST-Related Claims Processing

We recognize the courage and strength of MST survivors to come forward and file a claim for disability compensation. That's why VA treats all claims, but especially those related to MST, with the utmost respect and the seriousness they deserve.

Over the past several years, VA has instituted a series of reform measures to improve the MST-related claims process for all MST survivors. Some of these reforms

include the incorporation of trauma-informed communications principles and human-centered design into the MST claims process, the appointment of a single senior executive to oversee the MST workload, consolidation of all MST claims processing to a single operations center, and a memorandum of agreement with DoD that allows us unrestricted access to reports of military sexual assault.

These efforts are having an impact on the lives of survivors. In FY 2023, 43,044 MST-related claims were completed, an increase of 22,000 over all MST-related claims completed in FY 2022. Veterans received a grant of MST-related benefits 62% of the time, compared to just 41.8% in FY 2011, and the number of Veterans service connected for MST-related conditions (as of end of month January 2024) and receiving VA disability compensation benefits has doubled since FY 2019 when it was 61,000 to more than 128,000 in FY 2023.

Despite these improvements, we still have work to do to ensure that under-development, examination and medical opinion-related errors, and improper denials are problems of the past. We also want Veteran survivors of MST to receive their decisions in a more timely manner. That's why we are renewing our commitment to MST survivors by improving the workload management strategy of MST-related claims, adding more full-time employees dedicated to the MST Operations Center, and reviewing the trends of the most common errors on MST-related claims to create targeted training for our team, while also holding a claims quality standdown day for MST claims processors to provide additional training on the most common MST errors.

### **III. Conclusion**

I am grateful for the opportunity to update you on our efforts for women Veterans and those who experienced MST. Our commitment to ensuring that all Veterans receive the care, support, and respect they deserve remains unwavering. VA's women-centered programs have made significant strides in improving their well-being, especially as their enrollment with VA reaches unprecedented levels. We must maintain this momentum and protect the progress achieved. Your continued support is vital for delivering high-quality care and benefits to our Veterans and their families.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, this concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to answer any questions.