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**WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE**

“Caring for All Who Have Borne the Battle: Ensuring Equity for Women Veterans at VA”

April 10, 2024

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and distinguished Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs members – thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) to submit the following written statement about how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can support women veterans. We share your commitment to ensuring that VA is providing high quality care, benefits, and services that meet the needs of female veterans, and we are pleased to share our perspectives on the agency's current performance and future possibilities.

For 20 years WWP has been dedicated to our mission to honor and empower wounded warriors. In addition to our advocacy before Congress, we offer more than a dozen direct service programs focused on connection, independence, and wellness in every spectrum of a warrior's life. These programs span mental, physical, and financial domains to create a 360-degree model of care and support. This holistic approach empowers warriors to create a life worth living and helps them build resilience, coping skills, and connection to peers. Our organization has grown alongside the warriors we serve, and we strive to tailor our programming to the evolving needs of post-9/11 generation warriors. Today we serve more than 200,000 warriors, including more than 35,000 female veterans.

Our service to women warriors is part of a larger trend. In greater numbers than ever, women are stepping up to serve — representing the fastest-growing population in both military service and the veteran community. As women have become an increasingly significant portion of the WWP warrior population, WWP launched the Women Warriors Initiative in 2020. The initiative has been rooted in our desire to better understand, empower, and advocate for these women warriors who have served our nation. The Women Warriors Initiative is comprised of three core elements: (1) tailoring our programs for women warriors, (2) direct engagement with women warriors to discuss their experiences as Service members and veterans, and (3) the WWP Women Warriors Report; all informing our ongoing efforts to best support and advocate of women warriors.



WWP's Women Warriors Initiative

Programs for Women Warriors

Wounded Warrior Project offers direct service programs that span mental wellness, connection, physical wellness, financial wellness, independence, and advocacy. We have worked to adapt and structure these programs to ensure that all warriors have a quality experience and beneficial engagements with staff, other veterans, and the greater public. Although these programs are generally co-ed and designed to foster connection across the veteran community, dedicated tracks for certain populations can enhance impact and create unique opportunities for engagement. Gender-specific programming has provided an opportunity for women warriors to participate in female-focused events and activities, including in women warrior peer support groups, women warrior mental health retreats, and advocacy programs focused on the challenges and opportunities facing women warriors. In just the last year alone (October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023), WWP has:

- Helped **721** women warriors receive treatment for PTSD, traumatic brain injury, substance use disorder, and military sexual trauma through **Warrior Care Network**, a partnership between WWP and four premier academic medical centers;
- Placed **6,091** emotional support calls with women warriors through **WWP Talk**, a nonclinical, telephonic, goal-setting program designed to help warriors and family service members plan individualized paths toward personal growth;
- Brought **416** women warriors through **Project Odyssey**, a 12-week mental health program that uses adventure-based learning to help warriors manage and overcome their invisible wounds and empower them to live productive and fulfilling lives;
- Supported **158** women warriors in their roles as Peer Support Leaders or Warrior Leaders, WWP-sponsored volunteer positions that create pivotal leadership roles in their communities; and
- Hosted virtual and in-person events for **5,256** women warriors to keep them and their families connected and out of isolation.

Women Warrior Engagement

In addition to efforts to tailor our programs for women, the Women Warriors Initiative has been a forum to provide opportunities for feedback and data to better inform WWP services, perform research on the female veteran population, and deliver recommendations related to the future of women veterans. Through this initiative, in 2023, WWP staff held five virtual focus groups and traveled to five cities to bring women warriors and key stakeholders together to facilitate discussions around experiences, challenges, and accessing care and services. These engagements empowered women warriors to engage directly with congressional and federal government professionals and culminated in the Women Warriors Summit. The Summit brought over 50 women warriors from across the country to Washington, DC to meet with VA, White House, and Congressional leaders to engage in conversation, learn about public policy efforts, and advocate for changes to support women veterans.

2023 Women Warriors Report

Published in September 2023, the 2023 Women Warriors Report¹ is a mixed-methods research study that presents quantitative data from surveys completed by women veterans registered with WWP and qualitative data from focus group interviews with women warriors that took place both in person and virtually. The report is a comprehensive examination of the experiences and challenges faced by female veterans in the United States. The 2023 report was the second iteration of data being produced focused on women veterans through WWP. The 2021 report began with an initial survey to identify key themes of interest, and then focus groups were held to discuss those themes in more elaborative detail. The 2023 Women Warriors Report utilized quantitative data collected through the 2022 Annual Warrior Survey and through virtual and in-person focus groups.

The 2023 Women Warriors Report focused on 5 key areas: mental health, access to care, financial wellness, social health, and the military transition as well as a special topics section which included physical health, military sexual trauma (MST), and toxic exposure. Among the most notable findings:

- **76.9%** of WWP women warriors have sought professional mental health care
- **53.2%** of WWP women warriors had difficulty or delayed getting care for physical injuries or problems
- **10%** of WWP women warriors are unemployed, compared to 6.3% of male warriors, despite higher educational attainment

Through extensive research and data analysis, the report sheds light on the unique struggles encountered by women who have served in the military, ranging from difficulties accessing health care to navigating reintegration into civilian life. The report serves as the primary reference point for the discussion that follows.

Mental Health

Military service can impact a woman's mental health while they are in uniform, but also after their transition to civilian life. Some mental health impacts related to military service can interfere with a woman veteran's life, including her employment.² The 2023 Women Warriors Report builds upon existing research which generally shows that, overall, women veterans indicate higher rates for certain mental health conditions compared to male veterans, and unique health risk factors and outcomes.³ The most striking findings are below:

PTSD, Depression, and Anxiety

WWP women warriors are more likely to present with moderate to severe mental health symptoms than WWP male warriors. Whether PTSD (50.7% vs. 48.2%), depression (58.7% vs.

¹ The 2023 Women Warrior Report can be viewed online and downloaded by visiting <https://newsroom.woundedwarriorproject.org/women-warriors-initiative>.

² Kelli Godfrey et al., *Negative Impact of Military Service on Women Veterans' Mental Health Can Lead to Long-term Poor Mental Health and Higher Unemployment Rates*, 10(3) MILITARY BEHAV. HEALTH 243, 243-48 (2022).

³ Jennifer Runnals et al., *Systematic Review of Women Veterans' Mental Health*, 24(5) WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUES 485, 485-502 (2014).

54.1%), or anxiety (49.3% vs. 46.2%), women warriors were more likely to score higher on objective severity measures.⁴ Interestingly, women generally experienced specific symptoms more commonly than men. Symptoms including trouble relaxing, worrying, and feeling anxious were reported at higher rates by women than men, who more commonly cited becoming easily annoyed or irritated. Sleep challenges, feeling tired or having little energy, and having poor appetite or overeating were more common among women, while men were more likely to cite having little interest or pleasure in doing things. These insights complement prior research that shows women warriors report using mental health tools or services such as mental health care or prescription medication at rates higher than their male counterparts.⁵

Suicidal Ideation and Alcohol Use

More than half (56.1%) of women warriors reported at least one instance of suicidal ideation in their lifetime, which was higher compared to male warriors (50.8%). Approximately one-third (33.2%) of WWP women warriors have attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime compared to 23.5% of male warriors. About two in five (47.2%) of WWP women warriors screened positive for potential hazardous drinking or active alcohol use disorders. A military background has been shown to increase experiencing disparities for women veterans when seeking support care or services, including substance use treatment services.⁶

Mental Health Seeking Behavior

Across several measures, WWP women warriors report seeking care more often than men. When asked about tools and resources used for stress, emotional challenges, or mental health concerns, women were more likely to report talking to friends and family (71.1% to 64.2%), seeking services at VA (60.7% vs. 54.0%), engaging in physical activity (58.0% vs. 54.0%), and using prescription medication (66.6% vs. 57.4%). Men were only more likely to talk with another veteran (61.1% vs. 58.0%). In focus groups, women warriors spoke about having interests in exploring holistic and alternative forms of therapeutic care and treatment for mental health, including meditation, treatment-focused applications, and other modalities of support.

Quality of Life

Compared to the general U.S. women population, WWP women respondents scored lower on the mental component (34.5 v. 50.8) but slightly higher on the physical component (38.6 v. 37.0). These scores are based on the Veterans RAND 12-Item Health Survey (VR-12) where higher scores indicate better health.

⁴ The PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) was used for PTSD, the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) was used for depression, and the General Anxiety Disorder 7-Item (GAD-7) was used for anxiety.

⁵ David L. Albright et al., *Mental and Physical Health in Service Member and Veteran Students Who Identify as American Indians and Alaskan Natives*, 69(7) J. AMERICAN C. HEALTH 783, 783-90 (2021).

⁶ David Albright et al., *Pregnancy and Binge Drinking: An Intersectionality Theory Perspective Using Veteran Status and Racial/Ethnic Identity*, 25(8) MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH J. 1345, 1345-51 (2021).

How WWP Helps:

WWP is committed to helping warriors and their families face the future with confidence. We understand that there is always another goal to achieve and another mission to discover – that’s why we provide a variety of programs and services, all available at no cost to veterans and their families.

Telephonic emotional support: WWP Talk is a nonclinical telephonic emotional support and goal-setting program that connects warriors and/or family members, via a weekly call, with a dedicated team member who can help with developing an individualized plan to promote a path towards personal growth. In FY 23, WWP provided Talk services to 680 women warriors.

Adventure-based healing: Project Odyssey is a 12-week program that includes outdoor, adventure-based learning to help warriors develop better coping and communication skills. Project Odyssey is also available as a couples program. In FY 23, WWP hosted over 30 unique sessions specifically for women warriors (20.5% of the Project Odyssey sessions).

WWP Recommendations

Since publishing the 2023 Women Warriors Report, WWP has engaged with veterans, media, policy makers, and other stakeholders to help raise awareness and identify solutions to the challenges outlined above. Regarding mental health care, the legislative solutions we seek are generally agnostic to gender and reflect that better access to mental health care – which benefits all veterans – is the goal. WWP supports:

- The ***Making Community Care Work for Veterans Act*** (S. 2649) and the ***Veterans’ Health Empowerment, Access, Leadership, and Transparency for Our Heroes (HEALTH) Act*** (S. 1315). As veterans continue to report being offered mental health care appointments that are months away, or different modalities that may provide care sooner (like group therapy), we believe that more success will be found by ensuring that current access standards are clearly communicated and adhered to. Both bills would codify existing mental health care access standards in an effort to increase VA accountability. In addition, both bills would address glaring deficiencies in how VA provides access to its Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Programs.
- The ***Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan Repayment Act*** (S. 462, H.R. 4933). This bill would provide up to \$250,000 in eligible student loan repayment for mental health professionals in substance use disorder treatment who pursue employment in Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas. With increasing numbers of veterans specifically seeking treatment for substance use disorder, passing this legislation will incentivize the training of more providers in this space, resulting in better access to care for veterans and shorter wait times for treatment.

- WWP also supports oversight of past legislation like the *VA Peer Support Enhancement for MST Survivors Act* (P.L. 117-121), which requires the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to ensure every veteran who files a claim relating to MST is assigned a peer support specialist during the claims process, (unless they elect not to), and the *STRONG Veterans Act* (P.L. 117-328, Div. V), which includes a section (§ 503) partially intended to better understand the challenges women veterans face in accessing critical services at residential substance abuse rehabilitation programs that include a safe and welcoming environment during treatment.
- Additional research to help understand these issues should include exploration of the root causes of trauma women veterans face and the coping skills they employ; the factors that impact women veterans' mental health issues, as well as the factors and treatments that can improve these issues; risk factors for suicide attempts and how they differ between women veterans and male veterans, as well as the factors that contribute to the higher rates of attempted suicide among WWP women warriors compared to WWP male warriors.

Access to Care

The 2023 Women Warriors Report illuminates challenges encountered by female veterans in accessing health care services. The report reveals disparities in health care access, with many women facing barriers such as long wait times, inadequate provider knowledge about women's health issues, and difficulties accessing specialized care. Additionally, geographical constraints often exacerbate these challenges, particularly for women residing in rural areas. These findings align with existing women veteran research which suggests that women veterans consider factors related to safety, quality, and the value of health care in their accessing care options.⁷ Among the most notable findings in the 2023 Women Warriors Report:

Women's Health Care Services

The most common form of health care for WWP women warriors is VA health care (90.3%), with Tricare (53.2%) as the second most common. Nearly three in four (71.0%) women warriors reported using VA medical services for primary care; however, only 61.9% use VA for women's health care specific services.

Barriers to VA Care

WWP women warriors are more likely to report challenges accessing VA care than WWP male warriors. Among the most significant areas of concern were the prevalence of WWP women warriors who reported insufficient access to VA health care services and benefits (19.9% vs. 15.8% of men), VA providers being insensitive to patient needs (19.7% vs. 13.7%), and no access to childcare (9.4% vs. 4.3%). As a reflection of overall experience, more than half of WWP women warriors (53.2%) indicated they had difficulty or put off getting needed care for physical injuries or problems, which is a higher proportion than male warriors (42.0%).

⁷ Elizabeth A. Evans et al., *Why Women Veterans Do Not Use VA-provided Health and Social Services: Implications for Health Care Design and Delivery*, 64(2) J. HUMANISTIC PSYCHOL. 251, 251-80 (2024).

Military Sexual Trauma

Although WWP women warriors reported military sexual trauma at a rate more than three times higher than male warriors, they reported receiving MST care through VA less often (4.6% vs. 6.8%). Findings in the report showed that over two-thirds (64.9%) of WWP women warriors indicated they had experienced sexual harassment, which was higher than male warriors (5.1%).

How WWP Helps:

Fitness and nutrition: WWP’s Physical Health & Wellness program empowers warriors and family members to make long-term changes toward a healthier lifestyle through movement, nutritional education, coaching, goalsetting, and skill-building. In FY 23, WWP assisted 1,647 women through this program and provided several female-focused tracks including a Hormones Wellness Series, a woman-warrior only coaching program, and non-coached programming to teach women warriors about pelvic floor health, self-defense, weightlifting, yoga, and other wellness workshops.

WWP Recommendations

When looking beyond mental health, the 2023 Women Warriors Report strongly suggests that VA can improve gender-specific care. Gender-specific care for women refers to medical, psychological, and social services tailored to address the unique health needs and challenges faced by women. Ensuring that female-specific care is easy to access – whether it be reproductive health care, breast and cervical cancer screening, or menopause management among others – is an intuitive priority. However, our 2023 Women Warriors Report concluded that many WWP women warriors notice discrepancies in accessing care related to nutrition, support for weight-related concerns, and pain. Congress can support women veterans’ health needs by supporting legislation below:

- The ***Maternal Health Care for Veterans Act*** (H.R. 3303). Congress recently codified VA’s Maternity Care Coordination program with the *Protecting Moms Who Served Act* (P.L. 117-69) and provided \$15 million in initial funding. This program manages the maternity care coordination position at VA, a multifaceted role that supports pregnant women veterans as a liaison between the patient, the non-VA provider, and the VA facility through monitoring the delivery and coordination of care and tracking outcomes of services related to maternity care. The bill would reauthorize funding for the Maternity Care Coordination program at the same authorized funding level of \$15 million per year for the next five fiscal years. It would also require VA to provide an annual report to Congress through FY 2028 on its activities and use of funds relating to the coordination of maternity health care.
- The ***Service Women and Veteran Menopause Research Act*** (H.R. 7596). Research has shown that women veterans entering or experiencing menopause with a higher

menopause symptom burden may be most vulnerable for chronic pain.⁸ Additionally, there are unique issues related to menopause care that can be better understood with more research, such as hormone therapy.⁹ This bill would require VA and the Department of Defense to collaborate on an evaluation of certain research related to menopause, perimenopause, or mid-life women's health, and to conduct or fund associated research.

- WWP continues to support oversight of legislation that impacts women veteran health care, including key provisions of the *Deborah Sampson Act* (P.L. 116-315 §§ 5101 (Office of Women's Health), 5107 (Programs on Assistance for Child Care for Certain Veterans), 5108 (Availability of Prosthetics for Women Veterans), 5111 (Sense of Congress on Access to Facilities by Reservists for Counseling and Treatment related to Military Sexual Trauma), 5201 (Staffing of Women's Health Primary Care Providers at Medical Facilities)).
- WWP also encourages expanding the hours and days of operation of VA clinics. While some facilities already have policies that extend hours and days of operation, this is not consistent enterprise wide. WWP appreciates a recent Veterans Health Administration (VHA) initiative ("Access Sprint") to increase appointment availability for three specialized services – cardiology, mental health, and gastroenterology – by offering night and weekend clinics.¹⁰ Moving forward, an access sprint for mammograms and gender-specific services (gynecological and cervical exams) as well as endocrinology services (related to hormone wellness for aging women veterans) would be welcomed.
- Women warriors would also benefit from more tailored tools for navigating VA's healthcare system. Allowing them to weigh in on what community care providers they are referred to for services, especially for infertility and gender-specific care, would be another potential avenue of building trust and empowering women veterans to play active roles in their health care journeys. Publishing an online directory of VA-approved community care providers specializing in women's health care is an additional supportive way we can help women veterans make more informed decisions about their care.
- WWP also encourages VA to take steps that are focused on long term care planning for women veterans. Increased communication, investment, and research about women veterans as they age, as well as to ongoing efforts to raise awareness for existing programs, services, and opportunities can help. One such opportunity that could be highlighted is for women veterans over the age of 55 to participate in the VA Golden Age Games, where women have been historically underrepresented.
- WWP recommends VA conduct a system assessment of innovative technologies such as 3D mammography technology. Currently, VHA has active mammography programs only at 78 facilities in 17 out of the 18 regional VISNs. This suggests that some veterans would have to utilize multiple facilities for comprehensive care and facilities would

⁸ Carolyn Gibson et al., *Menopause Symptoms and Chronic Pain in a National Sample of Midlife Women Veterans*, 26(7) MENOPAUSE 708, 708-713 (2019).

⁹ Noella Dietz et al., *Women Veterans and Menopause: Knowledge and Preferences*, 58(8) WOMEN HEALTH 898, 898-914 (2018).

¹⁰ Jory Heckman, *VHA Launches 'Access Sprints' to Offer More Medical Appointments to Veterans*, FED. NEWS NETWORK, Jan. 22, 2024, available at <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2024/01/vha-launches-access-sprints-to-offer-more-medical-appointments-to-veterans/>.

potentially have to transfer records. A full understanding of innovative technologies would benefit veterans and their health care providers.

Financial Wellness

The 2023 Women Warriors Report includes financial wellness findings that shed light on the economic struggles and challenges faced by women warriors. The report reveals disparities in financial stability, with many women experiencing challenges such as inadequate employment opportunities, lower wages compared to their male counterparts, and difficulties in transitioning to civilian careers. Moreover, the report underscores the impact of these financial stressors on overall well-being, including mental health and family stability. Key areas of research include:

Unemployment

Despite being more educated, WWP women warriors face higher rates of unemployment than male warriors and women in the U.S. general population (based on August 2022 data). Women warriors reported a 10.0% unemployment rate (vs. 6.3% for male warriors), which was notably higher than U.S. women with a disability (7.8%), U.S. women overall (2.4%), and all U.S. women post-9/11 veterans (2.0%). Family and/or childcare responsibilities are one of the top barriers to employment for unemployed WWP women warriors (27.6%) – and only 17.4% of unemployed male warriors report this barrier.

Income, Debt, and Food Security

Across several measures of these contributors to financial strain, women and male warriors were generally similar. Women and men both show a median household income between \$50,000 and \$74,999, although there were variances in weekly compensation for work (\$1,407 full-time and \$555 part-time for men vs. \$1,371 and \$867 for women). More than 9 in 10 (92.3%) of WWP women warriors have debt other than mortgage, of which 55.9% have at least \$20,000 in total debt (excluding mortgages). This is similar to the level of indebtedness reported by WWP male warriors (92.9% and 57.1%, respectively). Both women and men were relatively close in meeting the threshold for being food insecure (40.0% vs. 38.4%); however, these figures are nearly four times higher than what is seen in the U.S. general population (10.2%). Despite these findings, WWP women warriors were more likely to show moderate to high financial distress (72.1%) than WWP male warriors (68.6%).

How WWP Helps:

Career coaching: Warriors to Work helps warriors and family members succeed in the civilian workforce by finding meaningful employment that matches their skillsets. In FY 23, WWP served 1,398 women warriors and delivered 14,845 total services such as resume and cover letter review, networking and interview preparation, and post-placement counseling.

Financial education and counseling: WWP's Financial Education team facilitates education and support to support warriors and families succeed in improving their financial well-being. Over 800 women warriors were served in FY 23, receiving services including budget and

credit counseling, financial advising, and financial education. Similarly, WWP provided 1,160 emergency financial assistance grants to women warriors to help with urgent needs like food, rent, and utilities.

WWP Recommendations

Similar to our recommendations around mental health, WWP supports measures around financial wellness that are gender agnostic. However, the proposals outlined below can potentially have a bigger impact on women warriors based on the employment findings discussed above. WWP encourages Congress to pass the following:

- The ***Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship Opportunity Act*** (H.R. 5785). Within STEM professions, higher education leads to higher pay.¹¹ In 2023, the STEM workforce included 12.3 million women (35% of the workforce) and is projected to increase.¹² This bill would expand eligibility for veterans seeking education in STEM related fields, which we believe would encourage more women veterans to pursue efforts in STEM. WWP supports provisions in this bill that would extend the scholarship to graduate-level programs and mandate research about denied applicants, including demographic information. As women veterans and Black veterans were found to be disproportionately denied for the scholarship, WWP supports a House Committee on Veterans' Affairs amendment to would require VA reporting on the objective processes for scholarship acceptance and administration.¹³
- The ***VET-TEC Authorization Act*** (S. 1678). This bill would reauthorize VA's Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET-TEC) program. The program accepted 6,700 veterans during the initial years of the program (through March 2022), with a majority (66%) successfully completing the program.¹⁴ With the program scheduled to end this month (April 2024), VA reported that the program supported over 14,000 beneficiaries who completed the program, with nearly half reporting having found sustainable employment with starting salaries averaging \$65,000.¹⁵ With the success of having impacted veteran lives and developing opportunities for veterans to pursue meaningful employment, WWP supports this and other efforts to reauthorize the program.
- Beyond these bills, policymakers and organizations can work towards improving the overall quality of life for women who have served in the military. One area where WWP women warriors have expressed a need for is in professional development and connection with mentors. WWP encourages policies and programs that invest in mentorship and transition support services for women veterans through the development of a program

¹¹ Liam Knox, *Measuring Outcomes in Income*, INSIDE HIGHER EDUC., May 4, 2023, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/careers/2023/05/04/measuring-outcomes-income>.

¹² NAT'L CTR. FOR SCI. ENG'G STATS., NAT'L SCI. FOUND., DIVERSITY AND STEM: WOMEN, MINORITIES, AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES 2023 (2023), available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/wmpd>.

¹³ U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., HIGHER EDUCATION: VA COULD IMPROVE SUPPORT FOR VETERANS PURSUING STEM DEGREES (2022).

¹⁴ U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., VETERANS EMPLOYMENT: PROMISING VA TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION PILOT WOULD BENEFIT FROM BETTER OUTCOME MEASURES AND PLANS FOR IMPROVEMENT (2022).

¹⁵ Press Release, U.S. Dep't of Vet. Affairs, VET-TEC Update: The Pilot Program Concludes this April (Apr. 1, 2024), available at <https://news.va.gov/129949/vet-tec-update-the-pilot-program-concludes-this-april/>.

that connects women veterans with professional mentors. Recommendations for future research including developing an understanding in why differences exist in unemployment rates among women and men in both veteran and civilian populations. Additional research should study the impact of supporting obligations on women veterans' financial wellness.

Social Health & Military Transition

The 2023 Women Warriors Report includes social health findings that offer important new perspectives on the social welfare of women warriors. WWP defines social health as “health, resilience, and camaraderie marked by meaningful relationships and experiences with both individuals and a community.” The findings emphasize how difficult it is for women to establish and preserve social ties after leaving the military.

For many women, social health is tied in to the overall experience of military transition and veteran identity. The transition from active-duty military service is recognized to be a stressful time in a Service member's life and journey. Existing research has focused on developing an understanding around personal well-being outcomes (sense of purpose) for women veterans during their military research, finding that many women veterans are not satisfied with current available transition support services.¹⁶ Building from these findings, the 2023 Women Warriors Report underscores important facets of the post-service adjustment process for women warriors.

The report sheds light on the range of complex obstacles that women face when they leave the military and enter the civilian workforce. These obstacles include finding jobs that match their background and skill set, navigating the healthcare system, and gaining access to resources for housing and education. Key findings include:

Community and Loneliness

Loneliness and being alone are two different things. Individuals can feel lonely even if they are surrounded by people. The average loneliness score of 6.6 among WWP women warriors falls within the threshold indicating loneliness, which is similar to the average score among male warriors (6.1); however, more WWP women warriors fall into the loneliness range. When categorized into groups, the majority (73.0%) of WWP women warriors are considered lonely, compared to 64.9% of male warriors. More specifically, WWP women warriors were more likely than WWP male warriors to feel isolated (82.0% vs. 76.7%), feel left out (79.4% vs. 71.6%), and lack companionship (77.8% vs. 69.0%).

Veteran Identity

For WWP women warriors, the challenges of veteran identity are magnified. When asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about life after service, key differences emerged for WWP women warriors. Only 66.0% of women warriors viewed their military

¹⁶ Kari Fletcher et al., *Transition Services Utilization Among US Women Veterans: A Secondary Analysis of a National Survey*, 8(1) J. VETERANS STUDIES 161, 161-74 (2021).

experience positively (vs. 82.3% of WWP male warriors). WWP women warriors were also less likely to agree that people in their community respect that they are veterans (78.3% vs. 83.7% of WWP male warriors). That difference was even more pronounced when asked if co-workers respect that the individual is a veteran (78.8% of WWP women warriors vs. 86.0% of male warriors).

In addition to these statistics, focus groups revealed several common factors in social health for women veterans. Veteran identity often shapes social interactions for WWP women warriors. The lack of outreach or community for women veterans was noted by many, with some women sharing that they had been the only woman or the youngest person in attendance at local veteran events. Social anxiety and rural living both create barriers to social health.

How WWP Helps:

Warrior and family events: The Alumni Connection Program creates meaningful engagement opportunities through face-to-face and virtual programming for warriors and family members to meet and connect with other veterans and families within and outside their communities. Over 5,200 women warriors participated in these activities in FY 23 (20% of all participants) for a total of 26,619 unique engagements (30% of all engagements).

Group meetings: WWP Peer Support Groups offer a safe, judgment-free environment to regularly meet, share experiences, and build relationships with other veterans through meetings held nationwide. There are currently 14 Women Peer Support Groups.

WWP Recommendations

The 2023 Women Warriors Report encourages VA to conduct in-person and virtual quarterly town halls at each regional office, led by the Women Veterans Coordinators, to allow engagement and connectivity with women veterans and VA staff. This was a requirement included in the *Deborah Sampson Act* that has been implemented, but there are opportunities for further growth. Most VA Medical Centers (88.5%) were in compliance of holding two public forums for a total of over 68,000 attendees in Fiscal Year 2023. Between 80.5-83.5% of facilities held a focus group each quarter for a total of 1,765 women veteran participants across all facilities, averaging about 4 women veterans per group. WWP encourages closer inspection of accountability protocols for facilities not in compliance, or to develop a greater outreach campaign to increase participation.

Research recommendations include future studies that look at the types of peer support women veterans seek as they transition out of the military, root causes of isolation and barriers to social engagement among women veterans, and the impact of military experiences on resilience among women veterans. Additionally, there are measures not unique to women that we believe would help improve military transitions. Those bills include:

- The *Servicemembers and Veterans Empowerment and Support Act* (S. 1028, H.R. 2441). Focused on the challenges veterans are having when seeking to establish service

connection for mental health conditions caused by military sexual trauma, this bill would provide for several improvements to disability compensation and claims processing, and health care access. Most notably, the bill outlines several changes related to evidence and development of claims.

- The *Combat Veterans Pre-Enrollment Act* (S. 3560). This bill would allow Service members who have served in combat theaters to enroll in VHA prior to separating from the military. The goal is to improve the transition and the continuum of care and increase the likelihood of enrollment upon discharge.
- In addition to these bills, WWP encourages VA and the Department of Defense to find ways to avoid re-traumatizing MST survivors and reducing the stigma around reporting procedures; adapt the current VA program, VA MOVE!, to be more inclusive and specific to women veterans; and extend more outreach and communication for women-specific innovative programs or services, such as VA's THRIVE and VA's RENEW programs. Research should focus on the differences in MST related symptoms among men and women regarding societal and cultural exposures and their impact on quality of life as well as differences in chronic pain among women and men- including the veteran population, as the research on this specific population and topic is limited in the civilian population in general.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Wounded Warrior Project once again extends our thanks to the Committee for its continued dedication to our nation's veterans. Specifically, we appreciate the opportunity to speak about WWP research and other efforts intended to develop a greater understanding of women veterans. It is paramount to recognize the invaluable contributions of women veterans to the American population today. Their dedication, sacrifice, and resilience have not only fortified our nation's defense but also enriched our society in countless ways. As leaders, caregivers, innovators, and advocates, women veterans play integral roles in shaping our communities and advancing our collective prosperity. By honoring their service and amplifying the voices of women warriors, we not only honor the principles of equality and justice upon which our nation was founded but also ensure a brighter, more inclusive future for all Americans.



WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT FISCAL YEAR 2023 IMPACT: WOMEN WARRIORS

In greater numbers than ever, women are stepping up to serve — representing the fastest-growing population in both military service and the veteran community. Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) is committed to serving these women, from their time in service through their transition to civilian life, and beyond. Our direct service programs help warriors build resilience, coping skills, and peer connection — empowering them to take on their next mission in life. The following statistics represent program activity and the impact on women warriors during the 2023 fiscal year (10.01.22 - 09.30.23).

34,282

women warriors are registered with WWP (as of 9.30.23).



MENTAL HEALTH

721

women warriors received treatment for PTSD, traumatic brain injury, substance use disorder, and military trauma through Warrior Care Network®

6,091

emotional support calls conducted with women warriors

414

women warriors participated in Project Odyssey, a WWP mental health program that teaches coping skills to improve resilience



FINANCIAL WELLNESS

14,857

career coaching services provided, including resume review, interview prep, and post-placement counseling

RESULTING IN:

347

women warriors achieving employment

\$28.4 million

economic impact of V.A. benefits claims handled by WWP for women warriors



PHYSICAL HEALTH

Of women warriors who participated in WWP Physical Health & Wellness Coaching:

41%

experienced an improvement in quality of sleep

56%

experienced an improvement in psychological well-being

44%

experienced a reduction in pain



CONNECTION

Of women warriors who attended WWP Connection events:

97%

reported that they feel socially connected to their peers

95%

said they have people they can depend on



INDEPENDENCE

113

women warriors are enrolled in the Independence Program, helping them live more independent lives for as long as possible



Read more about WWP's Impact at woundedwarriorproject.org/Impact