

Vanessa Meade, Veteran

First, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. It is a privilege and an honor to do so. I will be focusing my testimony regarding the services addressing the needs of female veterans in Alaska.

As a woman and a Gulf War veteran, I want to commend changes I have seen over the years regarding the services for women veterans. We have come a long way in understanding and accepting that women have and are continuing to serve vital roles in the military, including women serving in combat missions. I have seen real changes in the way our local VA addresses women veterans' needs, particularly in the past year. The development of Women Veteran Program Coordinators at VA's has been an integral part of that change.

We can also do much better in addressing the needs of women veterans in our state. I think people, for the most part, have the best of intentions, particularly in the VA system here in Alaska. Since founding the Alaska Veterans Organization for Women (A.V.O.W.) in 2011 to provide a place and a space for women veterans to connect with other women veterans and to share our experiences, I have heard and assisted women veterans with issues around accessing services and benefits.

I would like to discuss a few of the concerns women veterans have presented to me regarding these services and benefits. One concern, most recently, was a woman veteran who went to meet with the VA Women Veterans Program Coordinator while she was at the VA and she was astonished to see that there was not a separate office for this coordinator within the VA. She had a difficult time understanding why that program coordinator did not have an office and how she had no place to meet with women veterans in a private and confidential manner in the area she is located. While having the program coordinator is wonderful, to this woman veteran, where the coordinator's office space was located, in a hallway cubicle where there was no privacy and limited

confidentiality, spoke volumes about the lack of care and concern the VA has for providing services to women veterans.

I have also heard numerous from women veterans that are tired of hearing that the VA has a women's clinic here in Alaska. This is not true and it is not accurate. While the VA has specific women providers, women veterans who have experienced military sexual assaults and harassment, are often placed in unlocked rooms to receive women specific services, in medical office areas where male veterans are being served, at times, in the next room. One woman talked about waiting for her service provider in a room in the clinic and a male veteran walking into her room, by mistake, as she was waiting for a gynecological appointment. As a woman who had experienced severe sexual harassment and an assault while she served, she was understandably very upset this had happened.

Another issue is there are many women veterans who still see multiple service providers, instead of having one service provider, which is a VA mandate, who can provide their women-specific medical services. A woman going to three separate appointments to have an annual physical is daunting and unnecessary and the VA has to do a better job of providing comprehensive services for women veterans.

During medical appointments, there are also cases where women were asked about military sexual trauma during screenings and reported they had those experiences during their service, were not told that there were counseling services available to them. The box was checked and the screener moved on to the next question. In addition, the lack of childcare for VA appointments has been identified as a barrier for women attending VA services in Alaska.

A difficulty in accessing benefits for women veterans in Alaska is a lack of women who are veteran service officers (VSO's) in existing VA vetted organizations that assist veterans in submitting claims for disability compensation. The lack of women VSO's in Alaska directly affects the number of women who will file a claim or become eligible

for benefits through the VA due to women feeling uncomfortable speaking to male VSO's, particularly about military sexual assault and harassment that has affected their lives in so many ways.

In a state that has the most women veterans per capita in the country, I think services and accessibility to veterans' services for women veterans can be improved significantly. One argument I have frequently heard is, that while we have approximately 8,500 women veterans, less than 1,800 utilize VA services, and until more women veterans access VA services, increasing women specific services is difficult to provide without higher numbers of women veterans. My response to that argument is that the VA has to create an environment in which women veterans feel valued as veterans, receive efficient access to services and programs, and feel safe to receive the services they are entitled to receive. While we are moving in the right direction, there are still many things that need to be done to ensure women veterans treated with the dignity and respect that all veterans deserve.

Thank you again for your time and I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you about the access to services and benefits for women veterans in Alaska. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about my testimony or the organization I founded, A.V.O.W., for women veterans here in Alaska.