



Business and  
Professional  
Women's  
Foundation

# **Testimony by Business and Professional Women's Foundation**

## **Joint House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to Receive Legislative Presentations**

**March 30, 2011**

Business and Professional Women’s (BPW) Foundation is a national organization that supports workforce development programs and workplace policies that recognize the diverse needs of working women, communities, and businesses. Through our “Joining Forces for Women Veterans” program, BPW Foundation offers assistance and resources to women veterans and their families as they return to civilian lives. We are pleased to submit our legislative priorities to address the existing needs of women veterans and our recommendations to confront these concerns.

As you already know, women represent 15 percent of the military and are the fastest-growing segment of the veteran population. However, the current services and programs for veterans do not necessarily meet the distinct needs of women. Gender not only shapes the military experience of men and women, but it also influences their transition process.

Separation from the military and re-entry into civilian life and work are frequently viewed as short term processes. Our 2007 groundbreaking study, *Women Veterans in Transition*, challenged this long-standing assumption. BPW Foundation findings indicated that for many women veterans it can take as long as seven years to feel acclimated to civilian life. The study revealed that transition is a lengthy, nonlinear, multidimensional process that requires a coordinated effort.

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Results from the *Women Veterans in Transition* study hightlighted the importance of creating programs and services that work for women veterans and their employers throughout the entire transition process. As a recognized neutral convener, BPW Foundation found itself uniquely positioned to bring this conversation to fruition, bringing government, business, and community leaders together to discuss the challenges and solutions needed to ensure the success of women veterans in their civilian life. BPW Foundation found that substantive programs were needed to address three key transition areas: family and community re-integration, homelessness, and employment.

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In October 2010, BPW Foundation convened a Summit, *Joining Forces for Women Veterans*, to continue building a repository of information, resources, and evidence-based programs for women veterans. The one-day summit included the participation of government officials representing the White House, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Small Business Administration (SBA). Nongovernment participants included members of the business community, non-profit leaders, and most importantly women veterans. This event was designed to educate business, government, and community leaders about the challenges and opportunities women veterans face. But most importantly the Summit provided an open forum to share best practices and develop real solutions. Women veterans played an instrumental role in identifying contributing factors hindering their ability to access resources to meet their needs. The following four key findings pertain to the why, what, where, and how of identifying and implementing solutions that support women veterans.

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**Finding 1: There is an economic and moral imperative for addressing the distinct needs of women veterans.** Improving transition outcomes for women veterans and strengthening the nation's economic competitiveness are mutually beneficial goals. Supporting the advancement of women veterans will increase their success along with that of business, communities, and families.

Investing in women veterans as employees is smart business. Women in the military are leaders, managers, and team members. The military has expended extensive resources to train its personnel to be the most skilled, efficient, inventive, disciplined, and adaptable employees. Women veterans have valuable skills and experiences to bring to a potential employer. This is frequently underestimated or not understood during the hiring process by both businesses and women veterans.

For employers investing in women veterans is smart economics. Women in the military possess an entrepreneurial mindset, are proactive and goal-oriented, and know how to use resources effectively. Women veterans have experience making decisions in the face of significant

ambiguity, uncertainty, and danger. They understand the importance of having an alternate plan and are both willing and able to adapt.

While these traits align with characteristics of successful business owners, women veterans are underrepresented among business owners population. Veteran-owned businesses account for 14 percent of all U.S. small businesses, but only 2.7 percent of veteran-owned firms are owned by women. (This is based on the most recent available census bureau data from 2002.) Given the importance of small businesses to our economy, women veterans as a potential entrepreneurial force should not be overlooked.

Investing in women veterans is a moral obligation. Although women veterans protected our freedom during their service in the military, they return home with little protection of their own. They lack assurances of housing or stable income. As government, business, and community leaders, we need to embrace and adapt the military creed of “leave no man/woman behind” with regard to our women veterans.

**Finding 2: Women veterans lack awareness of or access to benefits, services, and programs that address their distinct needs.** While programs and services are available for women veterans, many women veterans are unaware of these benefits, services, and programs. Unless women veterans are aware of them, it matters little that they exist. Furthermore, few of the current programs and services were designed specifically to address the unique needs of women veterans.

**Finding 3: Efforts to address women veterans’ transition challenges must include dual focus: support for women veterans and capacity-building for organizations.** To understand the needs and challenges of women veterans, organizations must first identify the women veterans and foster an environment that encourages self-identification. Employers need to recognize that women veterans may not seek help until challenges interfere with their jobs or personal lives. They can support women veteran employees by learning more about accessing GI benefits for health and education.

**Finding 4: Actions and solutions that address women veterans' transition challenges should be informed, holistic, collaborative, and community-based.** Business, government, and community leaders need to listen and learn from individual experiences of women veterans in order to better serve their needs. Additionally, much can be learned from an in-depth analysis of lessons learned from evidence-based programs.

Reintegration, housing, and employment challenges are interconnected and cannot be seen in a separate light. Supporting women veterans requires addressing their economic, social, mental, and physical needs. Only holistic efforts will lead to successful transitions for women veterans.

The government alone cannot effectively address the needs of women veterans. DOD, DOL, and VA will play a vital role, however, these agencies cannot do it all alone. Non-profit agencies and private companies must share the risks and rewards of supporting women veterans.

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Solutions must happen locally where women veterans live. Women veterans return to communities and it is within those communities that employers, service providers, and networks must be leveraged to support their return to civilian life. While we need a national framework to support the scope and quality of services, organization and delivery of services must be in the community with leveraged resources from all levels.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From this experience, BPW Foundation has identified three objectives to address the existing challenges of women veterans in transition. We have proposed specific actions with regard to research, policies and practices, and programs in order to achieve each goal. To read our complete list of recommended actions, please see our Summit report at [http://www.bpwfoundation.org/documents/uploads/JFWV\\_Final\\_Summit\\_Report.pdf](http://www.bpwfoundation.org/documents/uploads/JFWV_Final_Summit_Report.pdf). For the purpose of this testimony, we have focused on federal legislative initiatives.

**Goal 1: Increase women veterans’ awareness and use of existing benefits, services, and programs.**

To ensure that women veterans are utilizing the available programs and benefits, the government needs to develop better ways of reaching out to this constituency. Email communication provides an effective opportunity to easily distribute information among women veterans. We believe the government should:

- (1) Allow veterans to retain their military email addresses to increase access to information on VA benefits and resources.
- (2) Add email address to DD Form 214. (The DD Form 214 is a verified record of a service members’ time in the military and is used by government agencies to secure veterans benefits.)
- (3) Establish a “one-stop” shop model for women veterans that is community-based and includes connections with veteran benefits provides as well as other support services.

BPW Foundation supports H.R. 809 introduced by House Ranking Member Filner (D-CA). It requires that a women veterans’ bill of rights be prominently displayed in each Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facility and widely distributed to women veterans. The women veterans’ bill of rights contains a list of 24 rights that women veterans are entitled to on a number of issues ranging from coordinated comprehensive primary health care to equal considering in hiring and employment. We looked forward to advocating on behalf of this important legislation.

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**Goal 2: Address the distinct needs of women veterans in transition-released programs and services including increasing their capacity to utilize resources and benefits.**

BPW Foundation encourages the government to address the specific needs of women veterans by expanding on existing programs. We recommend:

- (1) Including gender-specific programming and resources in the military Transition Assistance Program (TAP).
- (2) Making the TAP program mandatory and standardized.

Senate Chair Patty Murray (D-WA) is a champion for the women veterans community. During the prior legislative session, she introduced legislation to fill an important need with respect to

homelessness, employment training programs, and healthcare concerns for all veterans including women. BPW Foundation looks forward to working together with Senator Murray on legislation to support our women veterans throughout the transition process.

Women have achieved great success in the military with opportunities to advance and hold high-ranking positions. However, women veterans often find it difficult to leverage their military skills into civilian careers. Entrepreneurship proves an opportunity to women veterans to gain meaningful employment – just not in the traditional way we think of employment.

**Goal 3: Increase the capacity of business, government, and community leaders to attract, support, and advance women veterans in businesses, agencies, and organizations.** In our opinion, there is a role for the federal government to ensure success at the state level. This role includes:

- Instructing shelters to ask if homeless women are veterans and refer veterans to special services.
- Designating and promoting state contacts for women veterans in state VA offices.
- Encouraging states to identify and reach out to women veterans using DD Form 214 information.

In summary, BPW Foundation believes it is necessary to bring attention to the issues that impact the reintegration and success of women veterans. The resources intended to support these women are not always known or available. Assumptions that women veterans can easily find employment or transition their skills to comparable positions in the civilian world are unfounded. It is important to raise awareness about the value of women veterans as participants in workplaces and communities. Through public-private partnerships, targeted resources, and recognition of the distinct need of women veterans, these women can be assured a respected place in the labor market and community.

BPW Foundation would like to thank both the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and the House Veterans' Affairs Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony about our

legislative priorities and the current issues plaguing our women veterans. Please feel free to contact Deborah L. Frett, CEO of Business and Professional Women's Foundation, for more information.

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