

Testimony
of
Dawn Smith
Founder and CEO, Mystic Reme Teas
Greenville, SC
before the
Committee on Small Business
U.S. House of Representatives
May 7, 2014

Mr. Chair, Madam Ranking Member, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the importance of supporting women veterans through mentorship to realize their career and entrepreneurship goals. My name is Dawn Smith. I am the Founder and CEO of Mystic Reme Teas in Greenville, South Carolina, and testifying today on behalf of Business and Professional Women's Foundation.

As a woman veteran who recently started my own business, I hope my experiences can be helpful to the committee as you examine which government and nonprofit programs can best assist and meet the unique needs of women veterans as they transition back to civilian life. The importance of recognizing and sustaining women veteran focused career development programs or subsets that specifically address women needs is supported by my personal experience and that of many of my peers, as well as validated by research that demonstrates the difference in our needs relative to male veterans and all men.

Women-owned firms account for 30% (7.8million) of all non-farms privately held U.S. businesses with potential to grow almost twice as fast as male-owned firms. Although there is so much potential for entrepreneurship, women veterans are significantly underrepresented among business owners. Veteran owned businesses account for approximately 14% (2.4 million) of U.S. small businesses, approximately 4% of which are owned by women. Obviously women veteran business ownership is not keeping pace with the overall growth of women's business ownership, which is growing faster than men's.

Proud to serve my country

I am very proud of my military service. I served in the Air Force for eight years and was deployed six times to Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey and Germany. My expertise in the military was logistics, which means I was responsible for making sure that the movement of both troops and cargo got to the right place and were on time. In both Iraq and Afghanistan I was a Terminal

Operations Manager responsible for processing and loading more than 7,000 passengers and directing the shipment of hundreds of thousands of tons of cargo. My work was consistently recognized for meeting excellent delivery and departure standards. I also earned my MBA while in the military.

Road Blocks in the military to civilian career transition

Because of my advanced logistics experience and MBA, I really didn't think I would have a problem finding a rewarding career when I left the service. But when I returned home to North Carolina to raise my children on my own, I was not even considered for management jobs; instead, I was offered positions like a warehouse worker, which I did not think utilized my skills, education and experience. For a couple of years I took various jobs that did not fit my background including working as a high school teacher and secretary since I needed to feed my children. These jobs offered neither the career I was seeking nor the salary commensurate with my experience.

While working, I continued to look for a more rewarding and financially secure position. I returned to school to begin a master's program in accounting. But looking for a job while managing the demands of work, school and motherhood, I became discouraged. I knew I needed some help, so I turned to the internet to see what career resources might be available for a woman veteran. I was very fortunate to find Business and Professional Women's Foundation, a non-profit organization that runs a free career mentoring program for women veterans. What attracted me to their program, Joining Forces Mentoring Plus®, was that working women volunteers mentor women veterans, like me, to help them navigate the path to successful civilian careers, and if they desire, pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. Participants can access a free "high-tech/high-touch" internet community that includes experienced women mentors as coaches, navigators and supporters. Women veterans can be from all branches, eras, ranks and levels. And Joining Forces Mentoring Plus meets the woman veteran where she is – getting prepared to leave the service, just leaving the service, out a while but hasn't found the right job, unemployed or under-employed, has been working for some time but wants to take that next step to move up the career ladder or even start her own business.

Mentorship: the Missing Link

I immediately signed up and was assigned a wonderfully accomplished and enthusiastic mentor, Sandy Smith. Sandy worked with me one-on-one and was persistent in offering advice and support on everything from interviewing skills to resume development. She pushed me, checking on how many resumes I had sent out each day. She also encouraged me and helped me to develop a new attitude and mindset that gave me the courage to apply for positions that previously I would not have thought possible. As result, in 2012, I was hired as an auditor by the U.S. Defense Contract Audit Agency, which required me to move to Greenville, South Carolina. I am happy to report that my salary at this job was twice what I had been making previously. After landing the job, Sandy, my mentor, did not leave me on my own but coached me on office etiquette and protocols necessary to successfully navigate the civilian sector workplace.

I loved my job and felt that my career was on very solid ground, but felt like something was

missing because I had always dreamed of owning my own business. With Sandy's encouragement and sustained mentoring last year, I started an online store that sells my own brand of tea. I am very excited that Mystic Reme Teas is currently in the final selection round to appear on the ABC show Shark Tank. If I am chosen, I will be seeking funding to open my own tea bar.

I truly believe that none of this would have happened without the personal mentoring and wide array of high tech – high touch resources offered by BPW Foundation. Through my exposure to the organization and as a result of working with them, I have learned that BPW Foundation has always been concerned with the welfare of working women. From its early history BPW Foundation has worked to advance untapped populations in every facet of the workplace, including women in the green economy, young careerists, women with chronic illness, innovative employers, women business owners and women who have served our country. Having studied and elevated issues important to working women – particularly women in non-traditional occupations – for nearly a century, BPW is uniquely qualified to respond to the domestic and workplace needs of women veterans.

I also feel this program was so successful for me because it was designed to meet the needs of women veterans. The success of JFMP is directly related to its being designed by and for women. It is critical that women veterans be able to access targeted support that specifically addresses our needs. Generic veteran-based employment and career development programs too often miss the unique elements and needs that matter most to women veterans.

BPW Foundation's interest in women veterans began almost ten years ago, when they wondered how the growing number of women veterans was handling the transition back into the civilian workforce. What they discovered was that no one really knew; and worse yet, no one was asking. So BPW Foundation conducted a national survey of 1,600 women veterans – the first of its kind – and found that we have many unique needs. That, in turn, led to BPW Foundation's Joining Forces for Women Veterans 2010 National Summit and the resulting report that found **career mentoring** to be a key factor missing from our post-military transition into civilian careers.

My experiences are a great example of the amazing results mentoring can have on someone's career – particularly as they transition out of the military. And we know that mentoring works. Study after study has shown the benefits of mentoring including more career satisfaction, higher earnings and better productivity. And not just the mentee benefits from a mentoring program. Mentors also benefit with learning new skills and ways of looking at problems. And not surprisingly, since both the mentee and mentor benefit, so do businesses that support mentoring programs. Not only do many top companies have mentoring programs but they benefit from more satisfied employees and show an extraordinary Return on Investment.

Addressing the Unique Challenges Women Veterans Face

I can attest to the fact that women leaving the service often face unique challenges and have unique needs including single motherhood or care giving for family members, including

wounded warriors. Also women veterans often do not identify as veterans and don't know they can access a wide array of benefits. We are frequently looked at differently from our fellow male veterans. Women who served in war zones are not afforded the same level of prestige as their male counterparts.

This unacceptable situation resulted in BPW Foundation's call to action. With input from their Women Joining Forces Advisory Council, a career mentoring model was developed to respond specifically to women veteran needs for awareness and guidance about available support and employment resources; and one that recognizes multiple roles impacting women veterans and their access to jobs. It is based on a workforce transition model – Working Women Helping Women Work® – which brings experience, expertise, guidance and encouragement. Joining Forces Mentoring Plus® was launched in 2012, and now includes women veterans, military spouses, female caregivers of wounded warriors, and women who have lost a loved one serving in the military.

It is important to me that a core principle of BPW Foundation is to rely on evidence-based research to improve and upgrade the program. Programs that serve women veterans must respond to their unique needs, so BPW Foundation regularly surveys and speaks with program participants. They apply those suggestions and input to continually improve the design and development of the program.

For example, in 2013 they added a new “member” category, to allow participants to achieve a certain comfort level with the program before having to connect with a mentor (while still having full access to JFMP resources). This addition has met with much success, as many members choose to become mentees after a short amount of time.

BPW Foundation also learned that many women who have served our country are overwhelmed by the amount of information and choices out there, and are not comfortable trying a new program. Many rely on personal recommendations they receive via social media and networking. Thanks to Citi (a JFMP Leadership partner), BPW Foundation's JFMP program was selected as a participant in “Citi Skills Day” – a pro-bono opportunity to have a team of their in-house experts give advice to nonprofits. As a result of this training, a social media/internet marketing professional, a woman veteran business owner, was hired in the first quarter of 2014, to help better communicate with women veterans that JFMP serves and wants to serve. This move has resulted in access to an even broader audience of women veterans and military spouses.

Finally, as demonstrated by my testimony today, BPW Foundation felt it was important to let a JFMP program participant tell her own story. Again the goal is to increase their confidence and comfort level; and provide experiential opportunities to women in the veteran community to advocate on behalf of themselves. Mentees and mentors have been interviewed and their experiences compiled into concise case-studies as well as magazine articles, exemplifying how this program can help women, like me, in specific areas such as employment, transitioning a

successful military career to the civilian workplace; interview preparation and salary negotiation; starting or building a business and getting to that next career step.

Building Support for Women Veterans through public-private partnerships

I am not surprised that this program has been recognized on the national stage both through the White House's Joining Forces effort and the Clinton Global Initiative in 2012 and 2013. The value of JFMP mentorship was also showcased during the Veterans on Wall Street conference in November 2012 and 2013 and has been featured in a wide range of media. For example, my story was actually covered on NBC Nightly News.

One very important aspect of the program is the ongoing best practice of leveraging the strengths of JFMP public and private-sector partners, which have grown from 40 in 2013 to 70 in 2014. These partnerships have also enabled BPW Foundation to expand the reach of JFMP to include female caregivers of wounded warriors and women who have lost a loved one serving in the military. As a partner in the Department of Defense's Military Spouse Employment Program, mentoring resources for spouses are shared. In January 2014, a partnership was forged with Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), which enabled JFMP to reach out to women who have lost a loved one serving in the military.

In their effort to reach even more women veterans and military/veteran spouses and recognizing the need for grassroots, state-level resources and mentoring, BPW now partners with the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, through a state-level portal, California Joining Forces Mentoring Plus. The program reaches out to California women veterans providing the same high quality free employment and career development resources, including identifying education needs, training, and credentialing programs, and job opportunities. The goal is for this type of state-level, public-private partnership to serve as a model for other states, particularly those with heavy veteran populations.

Collaboration and Information Sharing as a Resource Multiplier

We all know that government budgets are tightly stretched. That's why BPW Foundation focuses on collaboration and information-sharing among partners as a resource multiplier. More than ever, coordination among service providers and across sectors is needed to most effectively deploy dwindling resources. This is especially true given the draw-down of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the increasing number of military service members transitioning back to civilian life over the next few years. BPW Foundation is part of a coalition of veteran and military service organizations that meets regularly with the Army Public Affairs office to proactively address these concerns and to find solutions to meet the needs of this growing veteran population.

In addition to public-sector partnerships, several JFMP private-sector and nonprofit partners have renewed their commitment (Alliant Credit Union, Citi, Booz Allen Hamilton, CVS, Cengage, and others.) and been joined by newer partners (Direct Employers, JPMorgan Chase, Northrup Grumman, MTCL, NBC Universal, Newman's Own Foundation, and more.) Partners augment the resource rich internet platform with career tools, job banks and much more, all of which is

available free of charge to JFMP participants. Thanks to the generous support of BPW Foundation and its partners, there is no cost to participate. Members benefit from free financial, career transition and entrepreneurial/small business tools, products and services tailored to meet our unique needs. In addition, many JFMP partners' networks of women employees act as mentors also providing inside information on specific industries. Focusing on and leveraging the strengths of these partners benefits everyone, but most importantly, the women JFMP serves.

BPW Foundation has also targeted its efforts to help JFMP participants establish careers in "non-traditional" (but urgently needed) STEM and IT fields. In 2013 they partnered with the National Council for Women and Technology (NCWIT) to assist JFMP participants with IT career opportunities and resources. In 2014, a partnership with Million Women Mentors will also open up STEM career opportunities.

Support for Women Veteran Small Business Owners

BPW Foundation has always been a champion of women small business owners and many of its members are women business owners. Therefore it was natural for BPW Foundation to expand their 2013 CGI America commitment to include building resources for women veteran entrepreneurs and women veteran small business owners. They wanted to step up to help women who have served our country, like me, to start and grow our own businesses. In May 2013, BPW Foundation conducted a survey of women small business owners, to gauge the current environment and outline recommendations for improving it. Partnerships with Dell/Intel and the National Association for the Self-Employed were key to this effort.

Conclusion

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to testify and share my story about the resources that helped me launch my successful career and start my small business. I hope that other women veterans will benefit from my experience, and that the committee will support programs like the BPW Foundation's Joining Forces Mentoring Plus that are tailored for the challenges and needs that our women veterans face as we seek meaningful lives after our time in the military.

###

About BPW Foundation: BPW Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) located in Washington, DC and has the mission of empowering women to reach their full potential. It receives no government funding, and is backed by numerous corporations such as Citi , Booz Allen Hamilton, Alliant Credit Union Foundation, CVS Caremark, Cengage, JPMorgan Chase and Northrop Grumman. Visit www.joiningforcesmentoringplus.org or www.bpwfoundation.org to learn more.