



Business and
Professional
Women's
Foundation

Deborah L. Frett
CEO, Business and Professional Women's Foundation
Workforce Development Institute 2011
Concurrent Session, January 27, 2011
Clearing a Path for Veterans

Hello, I am delighted to be here today to add to this very important discussion about veterans and their path to a successful transition back into civilian life. I am Deborah Frett, the Chief Executive Officer for Business and Professional Women's Foundation. BPW Foundation's goal is to transform workplaces making them better for employers and employees and to develop a workforce that "works" for women and families.

While recognizing the importance of supporting all of our veterans, today I am going to focus on the path for women veterans. Throughout American history, women have served our country valiantly in times of peace, war and conflict. For far too long, though, women veterans have been invisible. It wasn't until the 1980 Census that women were asked if they had served in the U.S. Armed Forces. When finally asked the question, more than 1.2 million women responded "yes." Every day women in the military proudly serve our country, but when they return home they often do not receive the recognition, benefits and services they have earned.

Women represent 15% of the military and are the fastest growing veteran population. Yet, tools and programs are still largely designed with men in mind and do not necessarily meet the unique needs of women veterans. Gender shapes men and women's military experience as well as their transition process.

In 2005 BPW Foundation recognized the surge of women veterans returning home from two wars. Being the first foundation to focus exclusively on research about working women, BPW Foundation wanted to know how workplaces were receiving these new and uniquely skilled workers and what resources were available to help them move from the military to the civilian workforce.

According to the Center for Women Veterans, the population of women veterans in the United States is over 1.8 million and it is estimated that 150,000 women will transition out of the military over the next five years. Women veterans are an under-recognized and under utilized group of working women.

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 meaningful civilian careers. Aside from the difficulties of the current economy, women veterans often encounter inconsistent or inaccessible transition resources,

1718 M Street, NW, #148
Washington, DC 20036
www.BPWFoundation.org

ph: 202/293-1100
fx: 202/861-0298

misperceptions by employers and co-workers about their skills as well as work readiness and readjustment challenges.

As a research organization we first wanted to catalogue and learn about what types of support systems existed for these exceptional working women and whether there were any dedicated services and programs tailored for them. We found much was lacking and the result of this research was the beginning of our Women Joining Forces® initiative.

From this research we also recognized the necessity to create a new support system to assist the career transitions these women were sure to confront, which is even more important today as we face the recession and a compromised workforce.

Preliminary research found that women veterans receive less support upon return from service and often can have a difficult transition.

- Many women veterans do not self-identify as veterans and are unaware of the services available to them;
- Many women just leaving the military often experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty about post-military career plans;
- Women veterans are more likely to be underemployed than male veterans, and women veterans are **3.6** times more likely than women who are not veterans to become homeless.

In 2007, we conducted and published research, the first of its kind that examined the transition of women veterans of all eras back into the civilian workplace. More than 1,600 women veterans responded to our survey, taking the time to give us testimonials detailing their experiences. We heard them loud and clear: they are proud, they are resilient, they are talented, and they need our support.

The over riding theme from the research was that a one-size fits all approach to programs and policies that support women veterans transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce does not reflect the full diversity of their experiences, responsibilities and resources. Some key finding included:

- Younger, women veterans without college degrees are less likely to report a successful transition compared with their older counterparts with college degrees.
- Current programs and policies to support the transition experiences of veterans may be better-suited to meet the needs of older, college-educated veterans than younger veterans without degrees.
- Younger women veterans took longer to secure jobs after leaving the military, felt less positive about their first post-military job, and were less likely to say their first employer valued the skills learned in the military. They also believed their first job demanded different skills than they had learned in the military.
- On the other hand older women veterans, who were more likely to have started the transition process prior to leaving the military, report finding a civilian position they liked more quickly, and found ways to build on their military experiences and skills.

- Another fact this audience may find of particular interest is that over 80 percent of the respondents had some college education at the time of their separation and this number increases to over 90 percent of respondents with some college or more at the time of their survey response. Of that number, approximately 60 percent used military benefits to attain their current level of education.

The survey results indicated that the transition from the military into the civilian workforce is actually a multi-dimensional process for women veterans. This reality has implications not only for the types of resources needed by women veterans as they transition but also the timing and duration of those resources.

As the number of women veterans in the U.S. population increases, ensuring the effectiveness of policies meant to engage this growing and often-highly skilled segment of workers will become even more important. This is especially true in this depressed economy which is making it even harder for women veterans to find gainful employment to support themselves and their families.

This is why what we are discussing here today is so important. Since our first recognition of the problem until today, many others have joined the cause of our women veterans. For instance last fall the White House National Economic Council released a report on Women and the Economy and helping female veterans transition into the civilian workforce was cited. And the unique challenges of women veterans are finally getting attention and funding. From the recent recognition that the veteran's health care system was created by and for men and must change to meet women's needs and recently funded research on the effects of PTSD on women veterans to the acknowledgement that women veterans have higher suicide rates than their female non veteran counterparts, women veterans needs are finally getting some of the attention they deserve. But these things, while all important, are just the beginning of what needs to be a concerted effort on the part of all of us to ensure that our women veterans and their families are successful.

One of BPW Foundations important roles over the years has been to convene employers, employees and policy makers to find solutions and best practices for successful workplaces. In order to help solve the issues facing women veterans, last Fall we held the "Joining Forces for Women Veterans" an Inaugural Summit bringing together top employers, government leaders, non profits and women veterans to establish parameters for a call to action to assist women veterans and launch a nationwide fund that will support programs that offer concrete solutions and remedies. I have brought copies of the draft report of that Summit to share with you today.

Adding to our research and Women Joining Forces program, the Summit was the natural next step in building a repository of information, resources, and evidence-based programs for women veterans. Public and private stakeholders learned about three key issues—family and community reintegration, homelessness, and employment and careers—and identified specific avenues and actions to support women veterans in transition to civilian life. We found that

- There is an economic and moral imperative for addressing the distinct needs of women veterans.

- Women veterans lack awareness of and therefore do not use the benefits, services, and programs that address their distinct needs.
- Efforts to address women veterans' transition challenges must include dual focus: support for women veterans and capacity-building for organizations, and that
- Actions that address women veterans' transition should be informed, holistic, collaborative, and community-based. Only through local partnerships can we provide “customer-driven” solutions to their challenges and support needs.

But the Summit was not an intellectual exercise. We expected tangible and verifiable results. To help open more career opportunities for women veterans, lessons learned at the Summit will allow us to help employers better communicate with and understand these women—from the interview process through orientation and career growth—and to enable employers to implement veteran-friendly practices that can be replicated and shared.

Successes will result when employers increase their understanding and appreciation for what women veterans have to offer, and how to take advantage of their valuable skill sets and leadership abilities. We want to enable employers to take full advantage of this growing source of intellectual capital.

We also seek ways to supply veterans with practical help—information they need to more strategically make their own critical career choices by:

- Giving them information so they are better informed;
- Providing them with or connecting them with better support programs;
- Find the data to help create better standards, tools and programs; and
- Continuing and funding more data-driven research;

Other programs that we have initiated both pre and post Summit include the Joining Forces for Women Veterans Career Development workshops. In partnership with the Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service and Education Center, BPW Foundation is conducting a series of career and self development workshops for women veterans in transitional housing at the Coatsville Veterans Center. Funds dedicated to serve homeless women veterans through the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs are a new priority of the US Department of Labor Veterans Employment Programs. We hope to expand this model to other women veterans programs, as it includes both building confidence and self advocacy, skills many women veterans lack.

In addition, Our Moving from Red to Green: Working Women in the Green Economy, funded through a grant by Walmart Foundation, was a pilot program to train women for jobs in the Green economy. One of our first four training sites was the Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center. This site, which has been doing excellent work with male veterans for several years, welcomed our assistance to help them develop better technologies and strategies reach women veterans. This project has had its challenges as we continue to learn that women veterans often do not reach out for assistance or self identify. By working closely with the Women's Health Clinic at the VA Medical Center, this initiative is raising awareness of the

services and training available to women at the Multi-Service center. BPW Foundation is advocating for these kinds of partnerships to serve women veterans across the country.

BPW Foundation's efforts to assist women veterans also includes the program, *Women Joining Forces*, which provides resources, mentoring and networking opportunities for women veterans. Our **women joining forces dot org** and Connect-a-Vet websites provide one-stop-results for many resources currently available to women veterans.

One effort we are expanding to help women veterans better network, something that they admit they don't do as well as they should is our new Facebook Page aimed at women veterans. In this location they will be able to share information, make connections and know that they are not alone when they have questions. The site is run by a BPW Foundation staff member who also is a woman veteran who is working part time while getting her Masters.

And as you all know education and training is key to job success. While women leaving the military have many unique and sought after skills, often additional education and training will enhance their career transition. One of our Summit supporters is familiar to many of you, Cengage Learning, Education to Go, which is providing a number of scholarships to women veterans through BPW Foundation. Another supporter is INOVA Health System's which is providing Military to Medicine Scholarships to help women veterans learn new skills and find a new career paths. The first scholarship was given out at the Summit to a very deserving women veteran who had shared her story of homelessness with us and is now on the path to a better life for her and her family.

I am very pleased to have been here with you all today to share our knowledge about women veterans and their transition. I know that each of us is working hard to ensure that all of our veterans have a successful and fulfilling life after the military and I would like to thank them for their service. Before I close I would like to share a story from one of our women veteran respondents in the Transition survey.

“As an enlisted person who had never been to college, I was totally unprepared for the university setting. The VA counselors on college campuses were my single biggest resource of information and guidance. Between the GI Bill, joining the Air National Guard for the tuition waiver, and Vocational Rehabilitation I managed to obtain a B.S. and two M.S. degrees. I cannot stress enough how indebted I am to the military/VA system for allowing me to obtain higher education. I cannot overstate, however, how confusing the process was and how much I relied upon the VA counselors and college CA liaisons to get me through it.”

We continually need to be sure we are meeting their needs. Thank you.

#####