



Business and
Professional
Women's
Foundation

Statement by Business and Professional Women's Foundation

Advisory Committee on Women Veterans

March 29-31, 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 views about the existing needs of women veterans and our recommendations to address these needs.

As this Committee knows, women represent 15 percent of the military and are the fastest-growing segment of the veteran population. However, public and private sector tools, 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 military and re-entry into civilian life and work are frequently viewed as temporary 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. Unfortunately, traditional transition activities do not account for the full breadth and range of such needs experienced by many women veterans.

The results of the *Women Veterans in Transition* study sparked discussion around the need to create programs and services that work for women veterans and their employers throughout the entire transition process. As a 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 to ensure the success of women veterans in their civilian life. BPW Foundation developed a substantive program to address three key transition areas: family and community re-integration, homelessness, and employment.

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 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), as well as business and non-profit leaders and most importantly women veterans themselves. It was designed to educate business, government, and community leaders about the challenges and opportunities women veterans face and to share 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.

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 supportive 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 that is often times 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. 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. In addition, 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. Public agencies and private companies must share the risks and rewards of supporting women veterans.

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 may 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.

Goal 1: Increase women veterans' awareness and use of existing benefits, services, and programs. We recommend performing research to identify women veterans' networking patterns and resource acquisition to understand how to increase their awareness and access to benefits and services. One option is to allow veterans to retain their military email addresses to increase access to information on VA benefits and resources at the state and local levels. Another option is to add an email address to DD Form 12. With regard to programs and

services, we believe it is important to develop a system of benefits and care coordination at the state and local levels. We suggest designing a toolkit to help women veterans understand and navigate benefits, programs, and services. Notification of services entitlements and how to receive assistance should be disseminated through use of military email. BPW Foundation encourages establishing a “one stop” community-based model for women veterans. This should include linkages with veterans’ benefits providers and other support services.

Goal 2: Address the distinct needs of women veterans in transition-released programs and services including increasing their capacity to utilize resources and benefits. We suggest identifying gender-based constraints to reintegration, secure housing, employment, and entrepreneurship to better inform the development of programs and tools for women veterans. Additionally, it is important to identify characteristics and attributes of programs that successfully address women veterans’ reintegration, housing, and employment needs. In regards to policies and practices, BPW Foundation believes that it is not only important to include gender-specific programming and resources in the military’s Transition Assistance Program (TAP), but also to standardize this program, making it mandatory. On the program and services end, we support developing employer models of recruitment and advancement for women veterans. It would be beneficial to develop and implement model networking and mentoring programs for women veterans as well as establishing standards of excellence for publicly and privately funded women’s services at veteran centers. Women veterans should receive advocacy and assertiveness training and modeling to support their success in the civilian world. Furthermore, women veterans must be empowered to better navigate and negotiate the Veterans Administration as well as the employment-related systems

Goal 3: Increase the capacity of business, government, and community leaders to attract, support, and advance women veterans in businesses, agencies, and organizations. We recommend continuing to reach out to women veterans and catalogue their experiences through company and organization-based sessions. It is necessary to perform research to identify needs and solicit approaches and assistance at the state and community level. Also, it is important to organize women veteran groups to discuss successful methods of recruiting and integrating

women veterans into the workplace. With respect to homelessness, simply teaching shelters to ask if homeless women are veterans would result in more referrals to special services for veterans. In addition, it is important to designate and promote state contacts for women veterans in state VA offices as well as identify and reach out to women at the state level through DD Form 214 information. It would be beneficial to develop company and organization-based affinity groups for women veterans. We suggest collaboration on adaptation of existing women veteran-specific programs that are working. In addition, women veterans should be provided with information, assessment, and resource avenues to explore entrepreneurship.

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 the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans for the opportunity to submit comments. Please feel free to contact Deborah L. Frett, CEO of Business and Professional Women's Foundation, for more information.