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**Comments for the Interagency Task Force on Veterans Small Business Development**  
**December 10, 2010**

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the Interagency Task Force, for giving me the opportunity to provide comments today. My name is Deborah Frett. I am the CEO of Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Foundation. I would like to speak to you about the unique challenges and opportunities faced by our women veterans and women service disabled veterans. First, let me say that we are here today because we believe entrepreneurship provides an opportunity to women veterans to gain meaningful employment—just not in the traditional way we think of obtaining employment.

Women in the military possess an enterprenuerial mindset, are proactive and goal oriented, and they get the job done using 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 they are willing and able to adapt. These traits align with key characteristics of successful business owners. Given the importance of small businesses to the U.S. economy – accounting for 99.7 percent of employer firms – women veterans as a potential entrepreneurial force should not be overlooked.

Although there is much potential for entrepreneurship, currently, women veterans are underrepresented among business owners. Veteran-owned businesses account for 9 percent of U.S. small businesses. As of 2002, only 2.7 percent of veteran-owned firms were owned by women.

Overall, women's business ownership is growing much faster than men's. It is unclear why women veteran's business ownership is not keeping pace with the overall growth of women's

business ownership. To understand this trend, I encourage this Task Force to include research provisions in their recommendations to find out the reasons that women veterans are underrepresented in small business ownership.

Since 2007, BPW Foundation has been conducting research about women veterans and their transition from military to civilian life. My remarks today also reflect the discussions and findings from BPW Foundation's inaugural summit *Joining Forces for Women Veterans* held in Washington, DC on October 21, 2010. We were very fortunate to have two members of this Task Force as speakers at the summit and I would like to thank Madam Chair and Assistant Secretary Ray Jefferson for their participation. As speakers, you both know first hand the important discussions that took place among government, business, and community leaders as well as women veterans. These conversations highlighted specific transition challenges women veterans face and the expertise that women veterans can provide to the workplace following their military service.

Today, there are approximately 1.8 million women veterans who have served our nation. Of the two million Americans who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001, approximately 12 percent or 240,000 have been women. Overall, women represent 15 percent of all service members. According to estimates by the American Legion, the number of women on active duty will increase to 20-25 percent in the new millennium.

Women veterans leave the service with skills and experiences of great benefit to businesses including starting their own businesses. But often their employment and career transition outcomes indicate that something is amiss. The veteran support system was built by and for men. The current transition programs and services, including those offered by the government agencies represented here do not always address the unique challenges that women veterans face when they re-enter civilian life.

Women veterans are an educated population. Seventy-percent of women veterans have some college education compared to 57 percent of veteran men. Women leave the service with

significant levels of training and education, discipline, resiliency, resourcefulness and team-building skills. However, these assets do not necessarily lead to civilian careers. As of January 2010, 11.2 percent of women veterans were unemployed as compared to 9.4 percent of veteran men.

To ensure that women veterans are utilizing the available government programs and benefits, better ways to reach out and communicate with them must be developed. BPW Foundation's research found that women veterans often do not self identify as veterans and do not actively engage in networking and therefore miss out on many of the benefits and opportunities open to them. For instance women veterans often do not utilize traditional veteran networks and outlets but may utilize other personal or informal networks. To ensure that you are reaching women veterans you must know what networks they do use, trust and rely on. It is essential that we learn how to best "find" our women veterans.

I would like to note that the SBA has already started a new exciting program for women and families of active-duty military members through a partnership with Syracuse University, which runs a program for veteran-owned start-ups. This investment in women veterans is an important step in helping them learn the intricacies of running their own businesses and confronting the red tape often encountered by new businesses. As the women proceed through this program it is important to learn about their needs, how they found out about the program, and the barriers they encounter when trying start a business.

BPW Foundation's research has shown that when women return home from military service, they often shoulder greater parenting and domestic responsibilities than their male counterparts. They are not only trying to support themselves but their children as well. A key to engaging with these women veterans is as simple as providing childcare during classes, mentoring session, and other meetings.

One of the outcomes of the *Joining Forces for Women Veterans* Summit was the recognition that the government cannot do it all. There is a real need for private-public partnerships not only to

expand the resources available but also to educate businesses about women veterans, their unique skills and the benefits of working with them.

It is vital that women veteran owned small businesses be included in all businesses supply chains. If we fail to act on behalf of women veterans, we not only fall short of our moral obligations but we also forfeit the opportunity to benefit from the experiences and skills women veterans bring to our workplaces, communities and we hope their own businesses.

In addition to my remarks I would also like to submit to the Task Force, BPW Foundation's research on women veterans in transition along with issue briefs on a number of key issues including Employment and Careers, Homelessness and Reintegration. I will forward the white paper based on the Summit as soon as it is completed. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and share with you some of BPW Foundation's findings as we work to ease the transition of women veterans back to their civilian lives.