



February 4, 2020

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David P. Roe, M.D.
Ranking Member
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
333 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe,

Since the early 1980's, Women Veterans have sought equal access to the benefits they have earned through honorable service in the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

Though obstacles to securing services, particularly health care, have been enormous and many have been addressed over the years, a common barrier to effective, consistent care continues to be sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape on the grounds and within the facilities operated by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Offenders range from other veterans to providers to volunteers and staff. As recently as last year, information collected via a survey conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs, revealed that 1 in 4 women veterans seeking services at a VA Health Care facility reported being harassed by other veterans.

Women Veterans consistently report the same issues surrounding sexual harassment and violence that they faced in the military: not being believed, followed by rumors coupled with negative impact on their ability to receive services, and avoidance or gaslighting by senior personnel.

Women represent the fastest growing segment of the veteran population. Their concerns about safety, support, and gender specific services must be addressed.

In September 2019, a Senior Policy Advisor for the Women Veteran Task Force of the House Veterans Affairs Committee was sexually assaulted in the Washington, DC VA atrium.

Inspector General Michael Missel closed the case because they could not secure enough evidence to file charges. Part of the reason given was that the video camera in the atrium, which should have captured the attack and therefore the identity of the attacker, was out of service.

Secretary Wilkie's response was to effectively "gaslight" the victim by stating: "We believe the VA is a safe place for all veterans to enter and receive care, but the unsubstantiated claims raised by you



(Representative Takano) and your staff could deter our veterans from seeking the care they need and deserve.”

The Inspector General responded that closing the investigation with no criminal charges does not mean that the underlying allegation is unsubstantiated. It simply means there was not enough evidence to prosecute the case.

Representative Takano responded that Secretary Wilkie’s remarks were “shockingly tone-deaf” and “outrageous.” He further contended that “the Secretary’s flippant letter is only further evidence to my staffer and others that coming forward is punished, speaking out retaliated against and that a hostile environment at the VA is tolerated.”

It is clear that in spite of decades of imploring the VA to create rules and regulations protecting women veterans seeking services at the VA from aggressive behavior, harassment, and assault by other veterans and in some cases staff, the VA leadership continues to ignore or minimize this egregious behavior.

These are the same behaviors women (and some men) faced in the military. This is the same population with whom they served. We are asking for immediate and specific legislation to address these behaviors to include immediate removal from VA facilities of offenders and lifetime bans for repeat offenders.

Many women veterans have suffered sexual violence in the military, only to be subjected to the same behaviors and institutional retaliation mirrored in the VA.

Further, we insist the Secretary issue an apology to the victim and all women veterans for his inappropriate reaction to the situation and that part of informational campaigns include addressing inappropriate behaviors of both Veterans seeking service and all personnel working for or on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Sincerely,

Combat Female Veterans Families United
GA Military Women
Lady Veterans Connect
Lambda Beta Alpha Military Sorority
Melwood Veteran Services
Minority Veterans of America
Northeast Florida Women Veterans
Protect Our Defenders
Pink Berets
Red Feather Ranch
San Diego Women Veterans Network

441 4th Street NW, Suite 707N
Washington, DC 20001



Service Women's Action Network
Service: Women Who Serve
Veteran Women Enterprise Center
WINC: For All Women Veterans
Women Veterans of West Texas
Women Veterans Alliance

The MWC is a national group of formal and informal organizations, who work collaboratively to serve and support US active duty, Guard, reserve, Veteran and retired service women by uniting and elevating their voices to influence policy and improve their well-being. Collectively, the MWC represents over 1.6 million members and supporters. Our vision is that someday military women are fully integrated, equally respected and equally supported members of the military and veteran community and their contributions are recognized as essential to national defense.

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