



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

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TO: House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee, Senate Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee and the Legislative Administrator

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Legislative Report: Implementation of HB 3479 Establishing the Oregon Women Veterans Coordinator

Overview

Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) submits this Legislative Report on the implementation and current status of HB 3479 (2015, codified as ORS 406.070) that created the Oregon Women Veterans Coordinator. HB 3479 requires ODVA to submit a Legislative Report that includes:

- 1) The number of women veterans, and spouses and dependents of women veterans, served;
- 2) The type of assistance provided by the coordinator;
- 3) Recommendations for the improvement/expansion of the services provided; and
- 4) Recommendations for legislation

The Women Veterans Coordinator, Elizabeth Estabrooks, joined the ODVA team in January 2016. She has a background in community planning and in the field of prevention and advocacy relating to violence against women, a Master's in Social Work, Policy and is an Army veteran. Her primary focus was to conduct outreach and advocacy and to provide services to reach a greater percentage of the estimated 28,000 Oregon women veterans and improve their services and benefits. Concurrently, she conducted outreach and education with community partners, elected officials, and the general public, also for the purpose of advocacy, improvements in services and benefits, and providing greater visibility for women veterans. The Coordinator gathered data and research (quantitative and qualitative) to provide critical information for programs, services, and policy determinations regarding improving services for women veterans.

The Number of Women Veterans Served and the Services Provided

There are approximately 28,000 women veterans in Oregon. The Oregon Women Veterans Coordinator (WVC) made contact with and provided the following services to women veterans around Oregon.

- One-on-one services to over 100 women, via phone, email, or in person. There have been 77 complex cases for actions such as claims filing, meetings with US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) representatives to resolve complaints or problems, or congressional inquiries. Alternatively, they may have issues of housing instability or homelessness that cannot be resolved through standard channels because of discharge or disability status. There are one to three contacts a week (calls or emails) from veterans or partners asking for assistance with smaller, less complex assistance. For instance, a veteran in an abusive relationship who needs assistance may contact the WVC, who will make a referral to the appropriate agency, depending on the veteran's county. Services provided may include providing daycare resources; assisting a veteran who has

been turned over to collection because of errant medical billing; working with a county veteran service officer on a complicated or sensitive (e.g. Military Sexual Trauma) claim; or working with the VA to resolve complaints about healthcare. The WVC has responded to two Congressional inquiries and helped defer one through intervention in the claims process. Contacts range from singular contacts that may be resolved quickly, to ongoing contacts extending to more than a year. Most of the work of the WVC can be accomplished over the phone or through emails, but on occasion must be done in person.

- 40 Listening Sessions and three Focus Groups (in partnership with the local offices and staff of the federal Veteran Health Administration (VHA) have been conducted with over 300 women veterans. Women speak about their experiences in the military and as veterans and problems they have had. These are a combination of education and therapy sessions. Women veterans have the opportunity to hear about benefits; the WVC learns about issues that she may be able to address. For example, during a listening session the WVC learned that the White City VA therapy groups for women veterans had been discontinued; she was able to advocate with the VA, which started at least one more group for women veterans with military sexual trauma.
- Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF) outreach for three women veterans. Plans are in place for future visits at CCCF, along with a new partnership with Multnomah County for jail visits.
- Public tabling events (stand downs, Expos, college and job fairs, etc.) contacted approximately 600 women veterans and 1,200 family members. Share information on the direct role of Coordinator and ODVA, distribute benefits information and VA health information.
- At ODVA conferences (Women Veterans Conference and ODVA Expos), 650 women veterans plus and 200 family members; provided information on ODVA services and health benefits.
- In 2016 and 2018 she planned and directed the Oregon Women Veterans Conference. For 2016: 333 registered attendees, 96% overall satisfaction and 88% stating they would return. For 2018: 387 registered attendees, 93% expressing overall satisfaction and 89% stating they would return.

Services Provided: Public Outreach

Although impossible to understand the full numbers, it is estimated that the Coordinator has reached thousands of women veterans and families through the following public outreach approaches:

- Email via the GovDelivery system, regular postings to social media, radio interviews around Oregon, articles in newspapers and in the ODVA VetNews and ODVA Benefits Magazine.
- ODVA spearheaded the *I Am Not Invisible* (IANI) photo exhibit, a remarkable exhibition featuring 20 portraits of Oregon women military veterans. The exhibit was launched February 24, 2017 to a crowd of approximately 500 at the Portland Art Museum and was curated by Elizabeth Estabrooks, the Women Veterans' Coordinator. After the display at the Portland Art Museum, the exhibit began a traveling campaign and has been shown in 41 different locations in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C. Showing have been held at the Oregon Capitol, three Oregon museums, and the Russell Senate Building Rotunda in Washington D.C. with speaking engagements as part of the project at 22 of these locations. The IANI exhibit has developed into an awareness campaign responsible for starting conversations about women veterans and their unique experiences, challenges, needs, and barriers. It has been cited in blogs, radio and television interviews, and in national media such as the Huffington Post. IANI has been replicated by the VA Center for Women Veterans in Washington D.C. and seven states, with four more in process. One Oregon County has done their version, and another is in preparation. It is an excellent example of public outreach work by the Women Veterans Coordinator and ODVA.
- Developed questions and provided support and technical expertise for the 2016 ODVA Oregon Women Veterans Health Study, a study of access and utilization of physical and mental health care services for women veterans throughout the state.

- Conducted education to diverse groups of participants on women veterans at 51 different events, reaching over 2,000 partners. These events included, in part, presentations to the American Association of University Women Oregon Conference; National Organization for Women Oregon State Convention; Changemakers Oregon State Conference; Supportive Services for Veteran Families trainings (Southern Oregon and Portland); Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence State Training Conference; Three-part course at Portland State University School of Social Work; and two Women Veteran Summits sponsored by ODVA that reached community partners in six counties. Through these presentations the WVC educates legal, law enforcement, health, and mental health partners around Oregon about women veterans and their unique experiences, challenges, experiences, and needs, as well as implementing best practices in working with women veterans.
- Partnering with the Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (OCADSV) to develop a group education curriculum to be delivered by OCADSV member programs to women veterans with military sexual trauma.

Recommendations:

- Continue the position and programs of the Oregon Women Veteran Coordinator because they are highly successful in improving services for women
- Veteran-related policy and programming is stated in gender-specific terms (including birth sex and gender identity) because research shows that policy and programs have greater impact and are more effective when stated in a gender-specific manner.
- Continue the highly-successful biennial Oregon Women Veterans Conference.
- Enhance and expand ODVA partnerships to provide future gender-specific and culturally-appropriate services for women veterans, which will enhance services to all veterans.
- No recommendations for additional legislation for the 2019-21 biennium.

Full report: <https://www.oregon.gov/odva/Connect/Pages/Reports.aspx>

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