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**House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committee
Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 77
May 15th, 2019**

Chairman Perales, Vice Chair Hood, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committee – thank you the opportunity to offer proponent testimony for Senate Bill 77.

Senate Bill 77 would designate June 12th as “Women Veterans’ Day” and will recognize the role of women in the military forces and to commemorate the sacrifices of and valor displayed by Ohio women veterans.

My name is Ashley Gorbulja-Maldonado and I am a legionnaire, entrepreneur, business owner, veteran programs advocate, a 2019 Semi-Finalist for Ms. Veteran America, and a continuously serving Ohio Army National Guard in-line promoted staff sergeant, with a working packet to direct commission into the Army Reserves.

Overview

On June 12, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed into law the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act allowing women in addition to nurses to become a permanent part of the U.S. military. Prior to this act, women (with the exception of nurses) served in the military only in times of war. Since the United States first declared itself an independent nation, American women have found ways to serve their country despite resistance from men, sometimes going as far as impersonating male soldiers to join the fight at the frontlines. These milestones that have changed the course of our nation; milestones set by servicewomen who refused to accept the status quo and paved the way for the next generation.

Ohio’s is home to 67,000 women veterans from all eras of service, each with their own unique “herstory”. Women make up 16.2 percent of today’s Active Duty military forces and 19 percent of National Guard and Reserves. There are more than two million women veterans in the U.S. today and according to VA it expects women will make up 18 percent of the veteran population by 2040.¹

Women are now the fastest growing cohort within the Veteran community. Interestingly enough, the overall Veteran population is decreasing at a rate of about 1.5% per year, and the women Veteran population is increasing at a rate of 1% per year.²

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1. *Department of Veterans Affairs. Women Veterans’ Health Care. Women Veterans Today.*
 2. *“Statistics on Women in the Military,” Women in Military Service for America Memorial*
 3. *Women Veterans Report: The Past, Present, and Future of Women Veterans. National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, DC. February 2017*



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Based on the upward trend of women in all service branches, the expected number of women Veterans using VA health care will rise rapidly, and the complexity of injuries of returning troops is also likely to increase.³ This now means our women veterans will have returned home from war, have lost limbs, and potentially suffer from PTSD and other service-connected conditions such as MST (military sexual trauma) or Post-Partum Depression.

Symbolic Importance

Many Women Veterans will attempt to request service(s) from the VA, take out home loans, use their benefits, and try to conduct themselves in such a way similar to their male counterparts but are abruptly stopped by being asked, "Is your spouse the veteran?" Or have been overlooked by veteran service organizations, festivities, or through general interactions within their communities. Women who have served in the U.S. military are often referred to as "invisible veterans" because their service contributions until the 1970s went largely unrecognized by politicians, the media, academia, and the general public.

I will add that anecdotally, even now there are veterans who do not realize that they are Veterans: there is a common misconception that combat service is a requirement for veteran status. Some VA and DoD colleagues suggest that sometimes it's not recognition, per se, but wanting to put the past behind (especially if there were negative experiences such as sexual harassment associated with the service). This unfortunately means there are women who may not claim or receive the recognition for service and even the healthcare, financial or other benefits associated with their service.

So, what does this mean? We need to raise awareness at the state and local levels to change the narrative of the existing long-standing shadow casted in a historically male dominated military and veteran service organizations (VSOs). Women Veteran's Day is not a replacement for Veterans Day but an opportunity to expand on the deficient lack of Women Veteran resources and bring much needed attention to our communities to achieve the same support and structure that our male veterans receive when they return home from combat.

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Women Veterans are not second-class veterans, we are not damsels in distress, we are WARRIORS! We are resilient leaders in our communities, in industry, higher education, and in public service with a propensity of confidence, courage, and a level of high competency that stems from working harder and performing better to receive the same recognition as our male counterparts.

This brief historical summary of women's participation in the U.S. Armed Forces demonstrates the persistence of generations of women who fought against a traditionally male-dominated institution and paved the way, so today's military women have the privilege of serving their country, not as women, but as Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen; more importantly as Veterans. Women Veterans Day is meant to increase OUR visibility, to ensure that Ohio women veterans have the optimal platform to empower, educate, and encourage one another to share "herstory," to draw attention to the remarkable contributions of past, present, and future Ohio women veterans.

I'm proud to be part of this effort to solidify a day that will continue to honor my fellow women veterans' service and sacrifices. This designation symbolizes a commitment to raising our profile, supporting programing efforts to ensure that we have equitable access to services, resources, and to bring awareness to all our contributions that we have so rightfully earned. This designation is a small step in the right direction for the state of Ohio as national efforts are on-going to raise the visibility of our fellow women veterans though the Veterans Administration. I hope that in my lifetime with combination of robust programing and outreach that we will change the women veteran narrative. So, that one day future warriors will not be called women veterans but a veteran and that they will never know what it is like to be invisible.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have at this time.

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