STATEMENT OF

JACQUELINE GARRICK, ACSW, CSW, CTS
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, HEALTH CARE
NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON

VA SERVICES FOR WOMEN VETERANS

JUNE 8, 2000

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

The American Legion appreciates the opportunity to participate in today's hearing. Since The American Legion's inception in 1919, women veterans continue to service in positions of leadership at the community, state and national levels of the organization. Women veterans could vote or run for National Commander of The American Legion before they were eligible to vote for President of the United States!

The American Legion Guide: *Women Veterans – Identifying Risks, Services and Prevention*

Recently, The American Legion conducted a review of the services and benefits available to women veterans. ***The American Legion Guide****: Women Veterans – Identifying Risks, Services and Prevention* is a 16-page publication, is a compendium of women veterans' issues; availability of benefits and services; and tips in accessing assistance. This new guide is the first one-of-its-kind for women veterans gives meaning to the slogan, "Women are veterans too."

The American Legion developed this guide in response to VA's Psychosocial Rehabilitation's desire to conduct outreach to formerly incarcerated female veterans. The American Legion immediately recognized that incarceration was not the only risk women veterans might face. Other issues related to employment, education, child-care, housing and homelessness, harassment, domestic assault, rape, substance abuse, cancer, AIDS, environmental hazards and other illnesses are all issues affecting women service members and veterans. Women veterans do not always identify themselves as veterans, nor do agencies or systems providing services inform them of their earned

benefits and rights. The American Legion hopes that its guide will reach all women veterans to provide information of services available.

Center for Women Veterans

According to the Center for Women Veterans, there are approximately 1.2 million female veterans, and approximately 15 percent of the active duty forces are females. The number of female servicemembers is expected to grow upwards of 20 percent over the next several years. More and more women are seeking services from VA. The demographic make-up of women veterans and their demands for services vary from their male counterparts. Women veterans enrolling in VA today tend to be younger, better educated and less likely to be married. VA is primarily structured to meet the healthcare and benefits demands of an older, sicker male population. Therefore, women veterans are elbowing their way into the institutional consciousness of VA through the advocacy of The American Legion and other sister veterans service organizations. The culmination of this joint advocacy effort resulted in the passage of Public Law 98-160, which authorized the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans and the establishment of the Center for Women Veterans through Public Law 103-446.

The Center for Women Veterans, directed by Joan Furey, and the Advisory Committee for Women Veterans, chaired by Linda Spoonster Schwartz are to be commended for their dedication and contributions to improve the quality of healthcare and other services available for women veterans. It is through these efforts that we have come a long way in ensuring recognition and appropriate access for the special needs of women veterans.

In the wake of eligibility reform, VA developed its Uniform Benefits Package to include:

- gynecological care;
- mammography;
- osteoporosis screening and bone density treatment;
- menopausal care and Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT);
- infertility services;
- tubal ligation;
- oral contraceptives; and
- maternity care, including labor and delivery (usually on a contract with a VA affiliated hospital.)

Mental health care includes counseling for sexual trauma. VA still does not cover abortion or new baby care. Women veterans can access this care through 130 women's clinics, Women Veterans' Coordinators, Vet Centers, and an expanse of VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) across the country. Yet, there are still areas of consideration that need to be addressed.

Advisory Committee on Women Veterans Legislative Recommendations

In its 1998 Report, the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans made 42 recommendations, five of those recommendations are pertinent to Congress:

- Require federally funded research to capture specific data about military service and war zone history for comparative analysis of the veteran and civilian population and publish outcomes and findings by gender.
- Authorize Selected Reservists and National Guard personnel who experience sexual assault, trauma, or harassment, while on active duty, to have access to VA counseling and treatment programs.
- Remove all time constraints and limitations on VA services and treatment programs for survivors of sexual assault and trauma. The Sexual Trauma Counseling Program must be made a permanent part of VA's Uniform Benefits Package.
- Require all federally funded social service agencies and other community based programs and organizations identify the veteran population that they serve to VA on an annual basis.
- Enact Medicare Subvention.

The American Legion views each of these legislative initiatives with merit and supports their enactment. These are necessary steps to ensuring that not only women veterans, but all veterans have appropriate access to information, services and care whenever they need it. The other recommendations made by the Committee pertain to VA, Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and other agencies.

The American Legion Legislative Recommendations

As an organization that has taken a leadership role in defending and protecting the rights of women veterans, The American Legion feels there are several other recommendations to be made to this Subcommittee:

- **Provide dependents with access to quality health care, as outlined in the GI Bill of Health.** This measure would benefit women veterans in two ways. First, it would expand access to spouses, thereby creating a greater demand within VA for gynecological care. This increased utilization and influx of resources would facilitate improvements in access points and specialization. It is a simple medical philosophy that teaches that the more patients treated the better at treating patients a provider gets. Secondly, women are usually the healthcare decision-makers in most households and with the increase in single parent families, women must have a health care plan that includes their children. It would also provide for a more comprehensive continuum of care, if after the birth of a child, a woman could easily access a well-baby program through the same management source. It is a disincentive to a parent or spouse to use VA when they cannot enroll their entire family. DoD recognizes this obligation and it is time for VA to follow suit.

- **Expand the homeless veterans grant and per diem program to be a three-year instead of a one-year program.** The current side effect of a one-year operating budget is that it acts as a disincentive to Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) Directors to want to establish these programs in their networks. This becomes especially harmful to programs that would benefit women veterans, since there is a community-based need for women's housing.

- As Congress monitors VA to ensure it is maintaining capacity, the special needs of women veterans should be given careful consideration as well. Are the special programs giving due consideration to the unique needs of women in regard to privacy, specialization, equipment and prosthetics sizes, and educational services? The American Legion encourages capacity reporting include women veterans.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, The American Legion greatly appreciates the opportunity to participate in today's hearing. The American Legion hopes that as the Center for Women Veterans and the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans move forward in their work, The American Legion will all be able to join forces to improve the knowledge and availability of services to this nation's women veterans. ***The American Legion Guide****: Women Veterans – Identifying Risks, Services and Prevention* is designed to contribute to the efforts being made to advance the cause of women veterans and get them to the services and benefits they earned.

The American Legion looks forward to the Summit on Women Veterans to be held in just a few weeks in Washington, DC. It views this as an additional opportunity to identify the unmet needs of this population.

Women are veterans too, but they must first know it and feel it.

Mr. Chairman that concludes this statement.