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FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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**Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs
Fact-Finding Committee on
Women Veteran Benefits and Communications**

**Report to the Governor of the State of Florida and Executive
Director of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs**

May 2, 2022



In Memory of



**Fact-Finding Committee on Women Veteran Benefits and
Communications Member**

**Nancy Bullock-Prevot
Chief Cryptologic Technician Collection
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1976-2022**

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Part I: Executive Summary

The Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs (FDVA) Fact-Finding Committee on Women Veteran Benefits and Communications will hereafter be referred to as the "Fact Finding Committee" and was established on Sept. 1, 2021, by FDVA Executive Director James S. "Hammer" Hartsell. The Fact-Finding Committee was created to assess the needs of Women Veterans in Florida to ensure the availability of earned veterans' benefits, and the FDVA and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) communications are tailored correctly to provide optimal results for the 165,000 Women Veterans who call Florida home. The Fact-Finding Committee is mandated to provide the FDVA Executive Director with independent advice and make recommendations for implementation as an extension of the 2020 FDVA *Forward March* Report and build on its findings. The Fact-Finding Committee is standing behind this report, and it is time to take action to bring awareness and necessary changes to the betterment of our Florida Women Veterans!

The Fact-Finding Committee consists of 14 women members who are either veterans or veteran advocates and appointed by the FDVA Executive Director. FDVA State Women Veterans' Coordinator Vanessa Thomas provided administrative and logistical support services related to the functions of the Fact-Finding Committee and proved to be an invaluable asset to the Fact-Finding Committee.

Locating Women Veterans in Florida who are not utilizing their veteran benefits has been a challenge. To improve upon communicating FDVA and VA benefits, the Fact-Finding Committee generated substantial insights and best-practice strategies to increase awareness of veteran benefits they justly earned. This requires allocating dedicated resources to support Women Veterans to enlighten and ultimately lead to more women becoming empowered to seek out their veterans' benefits. Where possible, the FDVA and VA need to develop better indicators and communication to improve shared learning. This will require deeper, more substantive engagement, enhancing existing collaborations between FDVA and the VA, and building new partnerships with organizations that provide veteran services to our Women Veterans. To more effectively expand efforts to promote Women Veterans benefits, such efforts by the FDVA and VA are not only the right thing to do but are in keeping with the Fact-Finding Committee's motto, "Never Stop Serving our Women Veterans!"

In-person Town Hall Meetings were conducted in four different cities between Fact-Finding Committee members and local Women Veterans - Sept. 23, 2021 in Orlando, Oct. 7, 2021 in Jacksonville, Oct. 21, 2021 in Pensacola, and Oct. 28, 2021 in Ft. Lauderdale. In addition, an online questionnaire was developed by the FDVA State Women Veterans' Coordinator utilizing Survey Monkey to obtain demographics and concerns from Women Veterans.

Based on the two sources of information and a comprehensive review of multiple sources of previous studies on Women Veterans, the Fact-Finding Committee narrowed down four specific areas of concern for Women Veterans in Florida: Awareness of the Deborah Sampson Act, Homelessness, Outreach and Communication, and Nursing Home Care.

In examining these four topics, the Fact-Finding Committee offers 14 recommendations. (Each recommendation, along with a brief synopsis of the supporting reasoning for each, follows.) Further description of the reasoning supporting each recommendation and a discussion is provided in the full Fact-Finding Committee Report for 2022.

We thank Major General Hartsell for his leadership in supporting Women Veterans and for understanding the value of the Fact-Finding Committee's work. The Fact-Finding Committee appreciates the great efforts and strides that FDVA and VA have previously taken to address the needs of Women Veterans in Florida. Going forward, our aim with this report is to ensure significant and attainable goals can be met from our recommendations. Our Women Veterans in Florida are counting on your watchful eye to look after us!

Respectfully submitted,

Lorraine A. Holland

Major Lorraine A. Holland, U.S. Army (Retired)
Chairperson
FDVA Fact-Finding Committee
Women Veteran Benefits and Communications



Fact-Finding Committee Meeting, Nova Southeastern University, Pembroke Pines, Oct. 28, 2021

Part II: Recommendations and Continuing Concerns

1. Deborah Sampson Act/Mission Act/Health Care

Issue: The military Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is not partnered with FDVA to provide information, resources, and tools to help transition Women Veterans and their families from military to civilian life.

Recommendation:

Identify service members who have an End of Active Service (EAS) date or have been recently discharged. Educate and partner them with State and Federal Veteran agencies as well as the FDVA.

Issue: Insufficient number of Women's Health Primary Care Providers at VA facilities.

Recommendation:

VHA work in collaboration with Florida State Schools to fund education in exchange for the health worker committing to a contract working for the VA for a set number of years.

Issue: Denied VA disability claims for PTSD related to military sexual trauma (MST).

Recommendation:

The VBA needs to collect and analyze data on denied MST claims and audit MST denied claims for accuracy.

2. Homelessness

Issue: Homeless shelters do not designate enough beds for Women Veterans, especially so when the Veteran has children.

Recommendation:

FDVA maintain and publish a database that provides information on organizations (who have been vetted) that provide supportive services to homeless women veterans.

Issue: Homeless Women Veterans with children are very challenged to find a shelter that accepts children, let alone find "affordable housing" in Florida.

Recommendation:

Increase funding to existing programs to allow them to branch out and accommodate Women Veterans with minor children. Create agreements with real estate companies to set aside apartments on a sliding income scale. Homeless shelters that identify they accept both males and females need to designate separate facilities for Women Veterans. To break the cycle of Women Veterans returning to homeless shelters, a comprehensive program to train the women (while in a homeless shelter) in state and federal resources, employment opportunities, and how to obtain affordable housing should be mandatory.

Issue: Women veterans who do not have a qualifying discharge or did not serve long enough on active service may not be eligible for shelters that receive a per diem for beds set aside for veterans.

Recommendation:

If an unfavorable discharge or length of service does not qualify a Woman Veteran for housing, consideration should be given if the Veteran experienced sexual harassment or trauma on active duty.

Issue: The Continuum of Care (COC) reports homelessness based on their "Point in Time" initiative and those who visit seeking Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) assistance. The accuracy of this count is questionable because Women Veterans do not always go to the COC or the VA for help, and their numbers are not captured. Many women veterans (especially those that suffer from MST) do not seek out shelters due to fear of mostly all male residents. Homeless Women Veterans can often be found living in their cars or residing on someone's couch and not captured as a "homeless" veteran, and thus not captured in COC reports.

Recommendation:

Once the State decides to implement change, the information needs to be disseminated to all Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) in the State. VSOs should report the number of homeless women (and men) Veterans they see monthly to gather a more accurate account of homelessness in the State.

3. Outreach/Communication Systems/Point of Entry

Issue: Some gaps identified through the **points of entry initiative** are addressed in whole or in part in existing State and local resources. However, the ease and consistency of supporting information to be found by Women Veterans is inconsistent, information is hard to find, and systems are not user friendly.

Recommendation:

Identify all points of entry into the State or community and assess the following:

- Effectiveness by considering who is successfully performing this role to create best practices for the State to duplicate throughout.
- Recommend the DoD TAP program be extended to one year and provide resource material for the outside to better prepare the member for transition into civilian life.
- Peer-to-peer onboarding into the community.
- Partner with Veterans Florida on all findings and recommendations to enhance and update their current management of point of entry efforts.
- FDVA produce a comprehensive *WELCOME PACKET* for incoming to the State and work with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.
- Additional resources can assist with establishing an "*OUTSIDE THE GATE: TAP*" to be administered by Veterans Florida, i.e. the Reverse Boot Camp program. Develop a pilot program and assess.
- Establish a Quarterly FDVA Florida Women Veterans' Virtual Chapter with a committee member from the north, central and south Florida areas to provide a platform for Women Veterans to be heard and addressed.

Issue: There is not a One-Stop-Shop Network to eliminate the inconsistent and disconnected system of communication throughout the State, which complicates the transition process for Women Veterans. Women Veterans seeking services for daily quality of life for themselves and their family are hampered by not having access to a singular and simple network. This causes confusion and/or frustration, and many women give up on taking advantage of the many benefits that they so rightly have earned.

Recommendation:

Create a One-Stop-Shop statewide system to make the process of getting needed information while transitioning by the following:

- Include the Continued Arms software program already in use by Mission United and other veteran support systems as a prototype for statewide use of a one-stop-shop network for resources and events connecting vital information from veteran

support groups across the State for any veteran to find what they need and can be set up by county.

- Review current marketing/outreach to Women Veterans, including electronic, hard materials, and websites.
- Identify networks and communication trails/systems already in existence and measure the experience for Women Veterans, what makes them effective and what gaps exist.
- Need a *Central Contact or Referral System for Resources* due to a gap in most local communities at varying levels of formalized community collaborations between nonprofits, colleges, universities, veteran service organizations, VA representatives, etc.

Issue: Disconnected communication between resourced State Veteran Service Agencies. Although veteran service agencies are performing some great work in the State, there is little coordinated communication between these groups to collaborate, plan strategically, and gain insight into better outreach and provide much-needed information. Our findings indicate that follow-up with veterans is behind in many areas, and resources are not valid, not vetted, and inconsistent.

Recommendation:

- FDVA coordinates quarterly in-state meetings to collaborate and increase coordination of communication of services, ideas, systems, and successes and identify gaps. Advocate keeping current funding to continue work toward this and calculate what more is needed to advance prioritized recommendations.
- Update the branding/messaging in all statewide agencies that serve Women Veterans and coordinate the offered information. A statewide system that will be congruent, coordinates referral information and offers an easy-to-navigate system that is to the point is sought.

4. Women Veterans Nursing Home Care

Issue: FDVA veterans' homes dropped from 98% census to 62% census amid the pandemic. FDVA veterans' homes generate revenue, and the proceeds go into a trust fund that finances new state veterans' homes. Right now, loss of income at a time when the State is facing challenges, including medical staffing and census counts, needs immediate action.

Recommendation:

Competition is fierce to hire quality health care workers for both privately run nursing homes and State-run veterans' homes. FDVA to seek additional funding and other incentives to lure health care workers to state-run veterans' homes.

Issue: The number of Women Veterans or Veterans who answer to her/she continues to increase, and the demographic becomes more diverse across all eras, ages, and stages in life. Nursing homes need to adapt to a growing population of Women Veterans and discover the reasons why more females are not residing in State and VA veterans' homes. The ratio of male to female nursing home patients warrants investigation to identify why so few female veterans reside in FDVA and VA veterans' homes.

Recommendation:

A comprehensive study should be conducted to achieve a proactive approach to meeting evolving needs, rather than a reactive approach from not having the information necessary to anticipate the projected growth of Women Veterans. A study encouraging FDVA and VA run veterans' homes to use science-based research to study physiological differences between women and men to help identify if keeping the overall housing of Women Veterans in a separate wing from the males is appropriate.

Issue: Many nursing homes have two rooms that share one adjoining bathroom. This can limit the ability to house Women Veterans.

Recommendation:

A study of the State and VA veterans' homes should be conducted to look at the configuration of rooms and bathrooms to maximize the number of male and female veterans that can be housed. Recommendations provide support to FDVA and VA in making the right decisions on when and where to provide critical resources when looking at housing Women Veterans.

Issue: Women Veterans in FDVA-run veterans' homes may not all receive in-house GYN care.

Recommendation:

FDVA conduct a review of its veterans' homes to ensure in-house GYN care is administered to Women Veterans.

Part III: Fact-Finding Committee History

In August 2021, Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs Executive Director James S. “Hammer” Hartsell created the Fact-Finding Committee on Women Veteran Benefits and Communications within the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs to assess the needs of Women Veterans in Florida and evaluate whether veterans benefits and FDVA and VA communications are tailored correctly to Women Veterans. Florida has approximately 1.5 million veterans, of which 165,000 are women. It is important that State and Federal veterans’ benefits are accessed by all eligible veterans. Because services and communications are generally geared toward male veterans, this Fact-Finding Committee was charged to assess Women Veterans’ opinions and any recommendations for improvement.

Specifically, Executive Director Hartsell charged the Fact-Finding Committee to examine and, if necessary, make recommendations for improvements in the following areas:

- Ensure proper recognition of the role of Women Veterans and education on their veteran status.
- Ensure Veteran services are tailored toward Women Veterans.
- Review policies for VA staff when interacting with Women Veterans.
- Review policies of FDVA veterans’ homes to ensure they are considering the needs of women veterans.
- Review programs, such as the Mission Act and Veterans Florida entrepreneurship programs, to determine if they are utilized by women and, if necessary, recommend changes or ways to better disseminate information to Women Veterans.
- Research demographics of military occupations of Women Veterans and civilian career paths.
- Review Deborah Sampson Act programs in Florida and make recommendations for implementation.

The Fact-Finding Committee consists of 14 members nominated by Veteran Service Organizations or are Women Veterans or community veteran advocates and were appointed by the Executive Director of the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs.

Fact-Finding Committee members include:

| <u>Name/Branch</u> | <u>Location</u> | <u>Position</u> | <u>Organization</u> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Nancy Bullock- Prevot, USN, | Pensacola | President and CEO | Her Foundation |
| 2. Cheryl Tillman, USAF | Gainesville | Women Veterans Program Mgr. | VA |
| 3. Fiona McFarland, USN | Sarasota | State Rep. District 72 | FL House of Reps |
| 4. Dee Quaranta, USAF | Jacksonville | President and CEO | NE FL Women Veterans |
| 5. Katie Chorbak, USA | Jacksonville | Director and CEO | Our Sisters Keeper |
| 6. Lorraine Holland, USA | Orlando | President | MOAA |
| 7. Daila Espeut-Jones, USA | Orlando | Chairperson | Orange Co. VAC |
| 8. Stella Tokar | Miami | Chief Executive Officer | Bold Consultant |

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|------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 9. Cherie Korn, USA | Putnam Co. | Vet Service Officer | Putnam County |
| 10. Lisa Dean, USA | Crystal Beach | Special Projects Officer | Hillsborough Co. Vets |
| 11. Beatrice Love Moore, USN | Okaloosa Co. | Board Member | FL Veterans Foundation |
| 12. Alnita Whitt, USA | Orange Co. | Vet Service Officer | Orange Co. Vet Services |
| 13. Debbie L. Berry | Orlando | Senior Staff Analyst | Lockheed Martin |
| 14. Connie Christianson, USA | Ft. Lauderdale | Chair, Women Vet Comm. | Vietnam Vets of America |

Appointments to the Fact-Finding Committee were made on Sept. 3, 2021, and Lorraine Holland was designated by the FDVA Executive Director as Chairperson of the Fact-Finding Committee. It was staffed by Vanessa Thomas, FDVA's State Woman Veterans Coordinator, with assistance from Bob Asztalos, FDVA's Deputy Executive Director. The Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs provided administrative and support services related to the functions of the Fact-Finding Committee. The Department coordinated with the Florida Veterans Foundation, the Florida Veterans Council, and other Veteran Service Organizations to support the Fact-Finding Committee. Members volunteered their time to the Fact-Finding Committee. Funding from the Women Veteran License Plate Fund was used to cover travel and other meeting expenses.

Fact-Finding Committee Timeline, 2021-2022

- August
 - FDVA staff research if similar initiatives have been done in other states and Washington, D.C.
 - FDVA solicited member nominations from Veteran Service Organizations and other veterans.
 - FDVA Executive Director established the Fact-Finding Committee.
- September-October
 - Sept. 3, FDVA Executive Director appoints members and Chairperson. Appointment letters are sent to members.
 - Sept. 9, the Fact-Finding Committee conducts a virtual organizational meeting.
 - The Fact-Finding Committee creates and distributes via FDVA social media a survey for Women Veterans to better identify issues of concern.
 - The Fact-Finding Committee conducted four public hearings and meetings at academic or Veteran Service Organization settings where the public was invited to testify. Fact-Finding Committee members then met for a business meeting. Meetings were four hours in length, with a two-hour open forum for the public and a two-hour business meeting to discuss issues and recommendations:
 - Sept. 23, American Legion Headquarters, Orlando, in conjunction with the monthly Florida Veterans Council meeting
 - Oct. 7, Wounded Warrior Project Headquarters, Jacksonville
 - Oct. 21, Scuder Community Institute, Pensacola
 - Oct. 28, Nova Southeastern University, Pembroke Pines, hosted by Mission United, United Way of Broward County

- November 2021-March 2022
 - Fact-Finding Committee members broke into subgroups to develop recommendations for various topics. The subgroup reports were submitted to the Chairperson, who, with staff, consolidated these recommendations into this report.
- May 2, 2022
 - The Fact-Finding Committee submitted the final report to the FDVA Executive Director at the County Veteran Service Officer/FDVA Spring Training Conference, Safety Harbor, Fla.



Fact-Finding Committee Meeting, Wounded Warrior Headquarters, Jacksonville, Oct. 7, 2021.