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Date: March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
To: Chair Lively & Committee Members  
House Veterans' Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee  
From: Carla C. Piluso, Representative, House District 50  
Regarding: House Bill 3749

House Bill 3479 creates the position of a Women Veterans Coordinator within the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, and is a bill I urge your support on.

I served for 35 years as a police officer with the Gresham Police Department and my last six years serving as the Chief- I know well the trials of navigating male-dominated systems, as a woman. When I received my committee assignments, I knew I wanted to introduce legislation that benefited veterans, in particular, female veterans—women who made a great sacrifice, who served their country, and who deserve access to every benefit they are eligible to receive. I met with members of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) and spoke with Veterans Advocates to hear about what ways we might be able to improve the experience of female veterans. From these meetings, HB 3479 was created.

To provide some background, The U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs provides a wide variety of benefits from educational assistance via the GI Bill, health care, home loans, insurance, and other services for retired United States Armed Forces personnel, their dependents, and survivors. Women are the fastest-growing military population, with 28,483 self-identified women veterans currently in Oregon. In the next 30 years, women are expected to make up almost one-fifth of the veteran population in the U.S. Despite this growing population of women veterans in Oregon, women veterans are accessing the VA benefits they are entitled to at a much lower rate than their male counterparts, this is a problem that warrants being addressed.

I am grateful for all men and women who make the decision to serve in the military, and they all deserve top notch services. That means we need services that recognize the unique needs of various populations, including gender specific services to address some hard facts about our female veteran population.

Those facts include:

- There are higher rates of physical/mental health problems among female veterans which is linked to things like high unemployment rates and homelessness for this population.<sup>1</sup>
- Higher rates of women veterans are unemployed than male veterans, though women are more likely to complete some college, and more likely to use their educational benefits (when they are accessing their VA benefits) toward school than their male counterparts.<sup>2</sup>
- Women veterans earn, on average, \$10,000 less per year than male veterans.<sup>3</sup>
- Women veterans are two to four times more likely to become homeless than non-veteran women.<sup>4</sup>

- Military Sexual Trauma is more likely to lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder than any other military or civilian traumatic events including combat exposure, and nearly 40% of homeless women veterans suffer from Military Sexual Trauma.<sup>5</sup>
- 33% of homeless women veterans have a minor child living with them.<sup>5</sup>
- However, 2 of 3 VA disability claims involving Post Traumatic Stress Disorder related to Military Sexual Trauma are rejected.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, women veterans need access to gender-specific care to address these unique needs, a big challenge in the predominately male-centric VA system. This is a challenge we must take on, because many of these numbers are quite frankly unacceptable. Women veterans and their families experience undue strain when they are unaware of and not accessing important medical and support services through the VA, services that could help to address these trying issues.

HB 3479 works to begin addressing these issues by establishing Oregon Women Veterans Coordinator for the state of Oregon. This position within the ODVA would help veterans and their families apply for and access benefits they are entitled to, create and distribute information targeted for women veterans and their families, and help women veterans through the appeals process if a denial of benefits occurs. The creation of this position will demonstrate that Oregon cares for *all* of her veterans and ensures equitable access to services that benefit women veterans and their families. Additionally, this will aid Oregon to leverage federal dollars from VA benefits programs, saving money for the state.

I want to be clear that I have no intention of minimizing the experiences of the men who serve, but instead bring our women vets out of the shadows in order to ensure they are accessing any and every benefit available to them. Women have served in the armed forces in some capacity since the American Revolution, they are now able to serve in the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps and Navy in a variety of occupations, and as recently as 2013 in combat. It is time their service and sacrifice is acknowledged and they are encouraged to access all the benefits and services they have earned and deserve.

Thank you Chair Lively and members of the committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce House Bill 3479. I appreciate your time.

Sincerely,



Carla C. Piluso  
Representative, HD 50

1. Cal Vets, California Veterans Affairs Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.calvet.ca.gov/WomenVets/Documents/California%20Women%20Veterans%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>
2. United States Department of Veterans. (2012). Strategies for Serving Our Women Veterans. Women Veterans Task Force Draft for Public Comment
3. United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2013). National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. Women Veteran Profile.
4. Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University. (2013). A National Summit On Women Veteran Homelessness A Leadership Dialogue
5. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General. (2012). Inpatient and Residential Programs for Female Veterans with Mental Health Conditions Related to Military Sexual Trauma
6. Service Women Action Network.(2012). Rape, Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the Military Quick Facts. Retrieved from <http://servicewomen.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/10/Final-RSASH-10.8.2012.pdf>