

The Opinion Page

AAUW Stands By Women In Service And Veterans

POTSDAM - On Veterans Day, AAUW remembers the service and urges everyone to understand the experiences of our women veterans and service members.

Of the approximately 2 million service members who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, about 200,000 are women. Women service members and veterans face many of the same challenges that others in the military community face, but in many ways, women veterans and service members are not being treated fairly by either the military health care or justice system.

Army Secretary John M. McHugh has warned that current budget cut talks involving the Department of Defense could involve cuts to programs for military families. And yet the Army is not meeting the needs of many military women and their families now.

Recent research from the University of Washington School of Public Health reports that teenage boys who have a parent serving in the military are more likely than civilians' children to binge drink, use drugs and perform poorly in school.

In 2007, nearly 2 million children in the United States had at least one parent serving in the military. The survey data included more than 10,000 teens in 8th, 10th and 12th grades. They found that 8th grade girls with parents deployed to combat were at risk for depression and suicidal thoughts.

Approximately 40 percent of active duty women have children, but military childcare is not meeting the current need and there are limited mental health services to help military mothers and their children.

Many VA medical centers are not women-friendly, and half of the nation's VA medical centers do not have a gynecologist on staff.

One in three women veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress also reported Military Sexual Trauma. Those women reporting MST were four times more likely to develop Post Traumatic Stress than those not reporting MST. (MST also affects men. In FY 2010, the 45.7 percent of veterans who screened positive for MST were men.)

While the Veterans Benefits Administration approves 53 percent of all claims related to Post Traumatic Stress, it accepts far fewer claims — only 32 percent — when the PTS is related to sexual trauma.

And prosecution rates for sexual predators in the military are low; in 2010 less than 21 percent of cases went to trial. Of these, only 53 percent were convicted.

Earlier in this year, a group of U.S. women veterans filed a federal class-action lawsuit against the Department of Defense. The suit calls for the Pentagon to address the hostile environment in which complaints of sexual assault in the military are allegedly met.

Under existing policy, commanding officers "act as judge and jury" in cases of sexual assault and in many cases charges are not filed against assailants.

In support of those plaintiffs, the AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund accepted the Cioca v. Rumsfeld and Gates case. The plaintiffs charge that the agency violated their constitutional rights by allowing a culture of assault and by failing to act on complaints.

The plaintiffs' case is supported by a 2008 survey of 103 military sexual assault victims that revealed nearly half of military women did not report a rape due to the fear of ostracism and the belief that nothing would be done.

In the suit, plaintiffs suggest alternative measures to more effectively deal with complaints, including having an objective third party handle sexual assault charges instead of commanding officers.

Sexual assault is also a problem at our nation's three military academies. The number of reported sexual assaults spiked during the 2009-2010 school year.

Forty-one sexual assaults involving cadets or midshipmen were reported at the academies, a 64 percent jump from the previous year. The Defense Department has indicated that only an estimated 10 percent of sexual assaults are reported at all.

The report also states that 12.9 percent of women and 1.9 percent of men surveyed at the three service academies indicated experiencing "unwanted sexual contact."

AAUW supports passage of the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act (H.R. 2016), which would help to end sexual assault and violence on campus by requiring schools to spell out their policies, conduct prevention activities, and ensure necessary assistance for victims. It would constitute a step toward ending the sort of violence which prevents women from attaining their educational dreams.

In October, the U.S. Government Accountability Office released a study that reported 82 of 583 service members surveyed had been sexually harassed in the last year, but only four said they formally reported the incident. The study found that one of the reasons a service member may not report an incident is because it would not be taken seriously.

The study said the Department of Defense must improve its commitment to preventing sexual harassment. Nearly half of all service members surveyed said they think people they work with could get away with sexual harassment, even if it were reported.

Women veterans are twice as likely to become homeless as women who never served in the military. In the last ten years, the number of women veterans who have become homeless has doubled. Most of them are under age 35.

It is harder for women veterans to find a job after the service. 14.7 percent of women veterans are unemployed. In New York State, an estimated 13.3 percent of recent veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are unemployed, including 88 former service members in St. Lawrence County. There are more than 8,000 vets estimated to be in New York State and out of work, based on numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics in June.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, is pushing for approval of the Hiring Heroes Act of 2011. The bill would change federal hiring practices that allow soldiers to begin the federal employment process before they leave the military and encourage hiring of more service members. The bill would also create a competitive grant program for non-profits that provide mentorship and job training programs in an effort to boost job placements with private-sector companies.

In August, the Watertown Daily Times reported that a Utica-based mobile food pantry, Feed Our Vets, started making regular trips to serve military families in Watertown. Founder and Executive Director Richard J. Synek noted that more than half of his clients have been active duty personnel who are struggling financially.

AAUW stands by the women in the military and seeks to both honor their service and advocates that recognition and progress be made on these issues for our women service members, active and retired.