



October 31, 2017

Secretary David J. Shulkin, M.D.  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave. N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20420

**Re: Changing the VA's exclusionary motto**

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

Veterans make tremendous sacrifices to secure our freedom, and deserve our respect. In recognition of these sacrifices, the Department of Veterans Affairs was created to serve veterans' needs. Yet the Department still fails to fully recognize and support women veterans. Nowhere is this failure clearer than in the Department's continued use of an exclusionary motto.

In 1959, the head of the Veterans Administration put two plaques on the main entrance of the agency's headquarters. The plaques read, "To care for *him* who shall have borne the battle and for *his widow*, and *his orphan*." That action enshrined not only a motto, but a culture that too often renders women veterans invisible at the agency, even to this day. Every day that the VA preserves this motto, it ignores and obscures the needs of far too many women veterans.

In IAVA's most recent [survey](#) of our members, women veterans overwhelmingly agreed that being a veteran is important to their identity. Yet, they paint a picture of continued challenges being recognized as such. Only 27% agreed that the public treats women veterans with respect. Less than half felt VA employees treat women veterans with respect. Seventy percent did not feel VA adequately provides women veteran program managers, the staff whose primary role is to help welcome and guide women veterans through VA care. Overall, a mere 22% rated VA's support to women veterans as good or better. And these numbers are supported by many stories of women defending their service to VA employees or receiving substandard care for their health needs.

As these statistics make clear, the VA is still falling short when it comes to women veterans. Major policy changes won't happen overnight, but culture and policy go hand in hand and bringing the VA's culture into the 21st century can be jumpstarted by action at the top.

The VA's motto is outdated. By excluding women, it diminishes the contributions by women in the military, and too often communicates to women veterans that they are unwelcome outsiders. It would mark a powerful commitment from VA leadership to improve a culture that better acknowledges and respects the service and commitment of women veterans. Every responsible institution in America now seeks ways to better support women, and as we approach Veterans Day, this is the time to do it. VA can, and should, lead from the front.

Other military institutions have recognized the power of culture and made significant strides toward crediting women service members by replacing their cultural signifiers—slogans, songs, and titles—with gender-inclusive alternatives. In 2003, the Air Force Academy took down its famous and beloved “Bring Me Men” sign and replaced it with a gender-inclusive motto: “Integrity First. Service Before Self. Excellence In All We Do.” The “Bring Me Men” sign was mounted on a stone arch in 1964 and hung for forty years. After conducting an investigation into the culture of sexual assault and hostility towards women at the Academy, the Air Force concluded that removing and replacing the “Bring Me Men Sign” was an urgent and essential step in making the Academy more supportive of its women cadets. The Air Force [directed](#) the Academy to remove the sign immediately and replace it with a statement that “more suitably represents the aspiration of the entire cadet wing and the core values of the Air Force.”

The Air Force Academy is not alone. In 2004, the Naval Academy [revised](#) the lyrics of its fight song, replacing “college men” and “sailor men” with “colleges” and “sailors.” The then-Vice Admiral and academy superintendent [stated](#) that the change would make the song “inclusive” of women and “consistent with our values.”

West Point also made gender-inclusive [changes](#) to the lyrics of some of its traditional songs. In “Alma Mater,” it replaced the line “Guide us, thy sons,” with “Guide us, thine own” and in “The Corps,” the “men of the Corps” was changed to “the ranks of the Corps.” West Point officials changed the lyrics after hearing the songs performed at funerals for female graduates killed in combat. The incongruity of honoring fallen women with songs that excluded them convinced Army leadership that “symbols and words are important,” and that “[making](#) these relatively minor changes are the right thing to do.”

This progress is not limited to educational institutions; branches of the military are also taking actions to include women in their cultures and traditions. In 2016, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus launched an effort to update gendered occupational titles in order to reflect the integration of women into combat. Following this initiative, the Marine Corps [announced](#) that nineteen occupational titles would be made gender neutral. In many titles, the word “man” was simply changed to “Marine.”

It is past time that the Department of Veterans Affairs give due respect to women, as much of the military has done. The VA’s continued use of its sexist motto symbolizes the agency’s resistance to gender equity, and perpetuates a hostile and unequal environment for women veterans.

When Administrator Sumner G. Whittier put instituted the VA motto, he did so unilaterally. He followed no official process; it was merely his choice to assign the motto to the VA. Today’s Department of Veterans Affairs can do better. We ask you, Secretary Shulkin, to remove the outdated motto and replace it with an inclusive message and mission that acknowledges women veterans and honors all veterans.

We appreciate your leadership and look forward to working closely with you on this critical issue--as we have with so many others.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allison Jaslow", enclosed in a light gray rectangular box.

Allison Jaslow  
Iraq War Veteran  
Executive Director  
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America