

WaPo: "VA has a woman problem. It starts with its motto"

NEW YORK, NY (May 31, 2017) – In case you missed it, *The Washington Post* recently published an op-ed by Allison Jaslow, a Iraq War veteran and the Executive Director at Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) entitled ["VA has a woman problem. It starts with its motto."](#) The piece underscores the urgent need for leadership to change the culture at the VA, as well as the services provided, to reflect the growing population of women veterans.

IAVA is the leading Post-9/11 veterans empowerment organization, and our top priority this year is improving recognition and services for women veterans. In March, IAVA launched [She Who Borne The Battle](#), a groundbreaking campaign that aims to change the VA's sexist motto, among other priorities, including improved services at the VA.

Jaslow, the lead spokeswoman for the campaign and a leading veterans advocate, writes:

"The Department of Veterans Affairs has a woman problem. Need evidence? Look no further than its [motto](#): 'To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.'" ...

Today women are nearly 20 percent of recruits, 15 percent of the active duty and 18 percent of the reserve component. We have been on the battlefields of every U.S. war and conflict over the past decade, with more than 345,000 women deployed since Sept. 11, 2001. And we will be the fastest growing segment of the veteran population over the next five years, with our numbers expected to top 2 million by 2020.

...

Even more disheartening is when VA – the very agency meant to acknowledge and serve veterans – falls short. At IAVA, we often hear from women who are "welcomed" at their local VA hospital by staff addressing their husbands first. We hear from women who have to drive more than 40 miles for a medical checkup because one-third of VA medical centers don't have a gynecologist on staff.

...

As a nation, we need to care for she who shall have borne the battle, too. And it's hard to support her if we don't even acknowledge she's there.

Full text of the op-ed can be seen below and online [here](#).

The Department of Veterans Affairs has a woman problem. Need evidence? Look no further than its [motto](#): “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.”

That motto – engraved on plaques outside VA buildings across the country, featured proudly in VA presentations and on the agency’s website – comes from President Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. It was an eloquent and well-meaning statement in its time. But the face of U.S. troops, and veterans, has drastically changed since then.

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Yet the sad truth is that Americans and the agency have a long way to go in recognizing women as veterans.

In a 2015 [survey by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America](#) (IAVA), only 15 percent of our members said that “the general public understands the contributions of women in the military.” Such sentiments are reinforced when, for instance, self-proclaimed patriots reprimand female veterans for pulling into “reserved for veterans” parking spaces.

Even more disheartening is when VA – the very agency meant to acknowledge and serve veterans – falls short. At IAVA, we often hear from women who are “welcomed” at their local VA hospital by staff addressing their husbands first. We hear from women who have to drive more than 40 miles for a medical checkup because one-third of VA medical centers don’t have a gynecologist on staff.

And The Washington Post reported on a [female amputee](#) who had to go to battle with the agency just to get a properly fitting prosthetic. Forced to wear an artificial limb built to male specifications, Brenda Reed’s replacement leg fit so poorly it would fall off in public. We should be ashamed when women like Reed get the message that they’re an afterthought.

I deployed twice to Iraq. I was in combat. And after nearly 15 years of women being on the front lines of our nation’s “war on terror,” I shouldn’t feel like a second-class veteran. I’m tired of repeating myself to people in disbelief of my service in the line of fire or having to kindly explain to a fellow veteran at VA facilities that I’m not a nurse, but a patient.

We need a cultural change within the department. We need better VA and community outreach to female veterans, coordinated community care that supports the unique needs of female veterans and the collection of gender-based data to help identify those needs.

My organization has partnered with leaders from both parties and both houses

of Congress to advance the "Deborah Sampson Act" and address these problems, We expect all members of Congress to support it and ensure it becomes a law.

And to swiftly show every woman who has worn a uniform that we honor her as much as the man who stood in formation next to her, we should replace the VA motto.

As a nation, we need to care for she who shall have borne the battle, too. And it's hard to support her if we don't even acknowledge she's there.