



December 18, 2020

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President-Elect of the United States
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President-Elect:

Over the last several years, Congress has set forth numerous mandates to guide the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure VA delivers care and benefits that meets the growing and changing needs of an increasingly diverse veteran population. Launched at the start of the 116th Congress, the Women Veterans Task Force (“Task Force”) has worked to increase the visibility of the two million women who have served in the U.S. military and to promote inclusivity and equitable access to comprehensive healthcare, benefits, education and economic opportunity, and other federal resources, particularly at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In the 116th Congress, the 85 Democrat and Republican Members of the Task Force collaborated to pass dozens of bills into law, including the Deborah Sampson Act, the most transformative legislation supporting women veterans in decades. While Congress has historically only held one hearing per Congress focused on women veterans, the Task Force held 21 public events and visited 22 VA and Department of Defense (DoD) sites. These activities highlighted and informed the urgent need to serve the fastest growing, and most diverse subgroup within the military and veteran population. We have much work to do, and in the 117th Congress, my hope is that you will prioritize within your administration the same priorities of the Task Force and that we can work hand-in-hand with your administration to make the changes we must to ensure that all of our veterans received the equitable care and benefits they have earned and deserve.

As you know, women have served in the U.S. military since the Revolutionary War. Today, women comprise 10 percent of the current veteran population and 17 percent of currently serving military personnel. The women veteran population is also increasingly diverse, with more than 40 percent belonging to a racial and ethnic minority, approximately 30 percent of whom are Black. While we know a disproportionate number of women veterans belong to the LGBTQ community, poor or nonexistent data collection at both DoD and VA limits our ability to have a full picture of the community in order to identify challenges, opportunities, and best practices.

I respectfully request that your Secretary of Veterans Affairs take the following actions pertaining to women veterans:

- **Prioritize and Publicize Preventing Violence Against Women:** Approximately 1 in 4 women veterans and women employees experience sexual harassment at VA, with little accountability for offenders. Past leadership has actively perpetuated a culture of impunity. Existing violence prevention efforts must be expanded, accelerated, and publicized, and led and championed by the Secretary.

- **Conduct a “Listening Tour” with the Task Force:** I invite the next VA Secretary to join the Task Force in holding Town Halls around the country to specifically hear from women veterans. A listening tour would not only inform policy, but would send the critical message to the nation, to the VA, and most importantly to our women veterans, that they are being heard, that they are no longer invisible.
- **Eliminate the ban on Abortion and Abortion Counseling:** VA has the most restrictive ban on this provision of women’s healthcare in the entire federal government. This ban can be repealed by the Secretary under broad authority to provide medical care under the Medical Benefits Package.
- **Expand availability of in-house gender-specific care:** VA must expand the availability of in-house gender specific care, including mammography and OB/GYN care. Committee oversight has found both staff and space shortfalls nationwide. Hiring and construction must take into account the rapid pace of growth and enrollment in the women veteran population.
- **Support legislation eliminating of copays on contraception.** Currently, VA is exempt from the mandate under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) that contraception be covered without a copay. The Equal Access to Contraception for Veterans Act would lift this barrier to preventative care.
- **Change the VA motto.** The current motto excludes the full diversity of all who have “borne the battle” and their families, caregivers, and survivors.
- **Renew Efforts to Support Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST):** At least 1 in 4 veteran women and 1 in 100 veteran men are survivors of sexual violence in the military. While the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) continues to improve care and access for survivors, the disability claims process at the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) requires additional attention so that it does not further retraumatize survivors. I encourage your administration to further lower the burden of proof on survivors, and incorporate compassionate, trauma-aware practices into the claims process.
- **Maintain Close Oversight on Deborah Sampson Act Implementation:** The Biden VA must implement the law with an eye towards inclusion that ensures the diversity of the women veteran population is taken into account, to include ethnic and racial diversity, tribal affiliation, rural veterans, LGBTQ veterans, and veterans with spinal cord injuries or disorders (SCI/D).
- **Improve Data Collection.** The Secretary should direct that veterans’ LGBTQ status be captured as a data field in veterans’ electronic health records and elsewhere as appropriate.

I look forward to working with you and your administration to ensure that women veterans are not invisible, and that they receive equitable access to care and benefits in a safe and welcoming environment. I also look forward to working with you and your administration in the coming months as we continue to ensure that our nation meets its obligations to veterans.

Respectfully,



JULIA BROWNLEY

Chair, Women Veterans Task Force