

New challenges emerge as number of female vets grows

Many finding it hard to get appropriate health care

By Rick Maze
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Key lawmakers and major veterans' groups are stepping up their efforts to improve veterans programs directed at women.

Surrounded by women who were featured in the independent film "Lioness," a documentary about Army women accompanying combat units in Iraq who ended up in fierce combat, Sens. Patty Murray, D-Wash, and Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., held a March 31 press conference to call attention to gaps in veterans programs for women.

Their bill, S 597, and HR 1211, sponsored by Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, D-S.D., include similar provisions that would improve current programs for female veterans and add new ones.

Among the additions, the Veterans Affairs Department would

BY THE NUMBERS

- Women make up 15 percent of current active, Guard and reserve forces.
- There are 1.8 million women among the 23.4 million living veterans.
- The number of women using the VA is expected to double in the next five years.
- About one in five women who seek treatment at the VA report they experienced sexual trauma while in the military.

provide pediatric care for the newborn children of women veterans who received maternity care from the VA, would expand professional training for mental health workers who care for women who suffered sexual trauma while in the service, provide group counseling for female veterans in alternative environments, such as retreats, and provide child care during

mental health appointments to make it easier for women to receive help.

Betty Moseley Brown, a Marine Corps veteran who coordinates female veteran programs for VA, said women are the second-fastest growing segment of veterans behind elderly veterans. The 1.8 million female veterans make up about 7 percent of the veterans' population, a number that is expected to grow.

Murray, saying she expected the number of female veterans to double in the next five years, said improvements need to be made now.

"Women have stepped up to serve at unprecedented levels, which means the VA is now faced with unprecedented challenges in caring for them as they return home," said Murray, a member of

the Senate leadership who serves on the Veterans' Affairs and Appropriations committees that are involved in authorizing and funding veterans programs.

Former Army Spc. Shannon Morgan, one of the military women featured in "Lioness," said one sign the VA isn't fully

prepared to help female veterans is the fact that she cannot find a female mental health counselor. Morgan, rated 100 percent disabled because of post-traumatic stress after her service in Iraq as a track vehicle mechanic that put her in combat, said the VA provides treatment from a male counselor — but a male therapist who doesn't understand that women have faced combat is of little help. "If you don't believe me, how are you going to help me?" she asked.

Another veteran in the film, Rebecca Nava, a former specialist who spent eight years in the Army, said she is having problems convincing VA personnel of some of her war-related injuries because they don't believe someone doing logistics work could

suffer the wounds she did in Iraq. "It just seems hard, too hard, to convince them."

They are not alone in their complaints. Carolyn Schapper, an Iraq combat veteran, testified March 24 before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee about how difficult it is to prove PTSD is



Morgan

service-connected for support and administrative personnel who were not in direct combat roles. Schapper, representing Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said women find it especially difficult to prove mental problems resulting from sexual trauma or assault if they did not file official complaints when the assault or incident occurred.

The health bills order two studies that could change how women are treated in the future. One is an assessment of barriers that women may face in getting veterans health care. The second is a study of the physical, mental and reproductive health of Iraq and Afghanistan female veterans to determine if their service has had ill effects. □