

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE THE

**U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
VETERAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

REGARDING

**H.R. 3849
MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA COUNSELING ACT OF 2004**

MAY 6, 2004

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to address HR 3849, Military Sexual Trauma Counseling Act of 2004. I am Marsha Four, and I testify today as Chair of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Advisory Committee on Women Veterans I served in the United States Army Nurse Corps with duty in Vietnam between 1969 and 1970 at the 8th Surgical Hospital, and I am presently employed as the Program Director for Homeless Veterans Services with The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center, a non-profit agency, serving veterans in Southeastern Pennsylvania and am serving as a Director on the National Board of Directors of Vietnam Veterans of America.

Today I am here to talk about H.R. 3849, which would permanently authorize VA's program to provide counseling services and care for sexual trauma. Currently, VA's authority for this program extends only through December 31, 2004.

This is a particularly vital treatment authority for VA. VA has been aware of sexual abuse among women veterans since at least 1991 when Dr. Jessica Wolfe, then at the VA's Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), found that 8% of the women Gulf War veterans who participated in her survey reported an attempted or completed sexual assault during deployment. In response, the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee held hearings in 1992 that resulted in the

passage of Public Law 102-585, which authorized VA to provide counseling services to women veterans to “overcome psychological problems which, in the judgment of mental health professionals employed by the VA, resulted from physical assault or sexual harassment that occurred while a veteran was serving on active duty.” As you know, Congress subsequently amended the treatment authority in 1994 to authorize VA to provide necessary related care and to make the treatment authority gender-neutral.

INCIDENCE of SEXUAL TRAUMA

Between March and October 2002, VA screened 1,761,591 veterans for military sexual trauma. We found that one in 20 women veterans reported experiencing military sexual trauma. It is important to note that one in 100 men who were screened also reported that they had also experienced military sexual trauma. Given the demographics of the Armed Forces, this means that about half of those reporting military sexual trauma are men.

IMPLICATIONS

It has been shown that military sexual trauma may result in mental health problems and in some cases may also produce physical/medical problems. Moreover, for some veterans, the experience of such trauma may contribute to

their risk of becoming homeless. Indeed, the Northeast Program Evaluation Center (NEPEC) reports that, out of a cohort of 443 homeless women veterans in the VA homeless women veterans pilot program, 38 percent reported they had been sexually harassed in the military and 43 percent reported they had been raped while on active duty.

VA's RESPONSE

VA has been very responsive to meeting the needs of veterans who have sought VA care and counseling for their sexual trauma. As you are aware, Military Sexual Trauma Counselors and Coordinators are in place throughout the system. Further, the system-wide screening process is well-established. In addition, educational programs have been designed to train primary care providers and practitioners as to the prevalence of, screening for, and treatment of the effects of military sexual trauma.

Assisting with the development, outreach, and advocacy of these initiatives and programs are the Women's Health Program Office, the Women Veteran Program Managers, the Center for Women Veterans, and the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans. The bottom line is VA has established the necessary infrastructure needed to support the counseling and treatment of victims of military sexual trauma.

PROPOSED EXTENSION

When we consider the large number of veterans who have accessed the system for military sexual trauma, both men and women, it seems apparent the need for this treatment authority exists and will continue indefinitely. Therefore, the Advisory Committee supports not only a renewal of the authority but further advocates that it be made permanent. This legislation assures that there never be a question in the minds of the victims that treatment for this trauma is seen as only temporary.

It is also the Advisory Committee's goal that those who need care and treatment for military sexual trauma have timely access to VA treatment. By making this permanent, the message is sent (1) that the pain these veterans suffered, and continue to suffer, as a result of their military sexual trauma is recognized and validated, and (2) that access to treatment will be available under this special treatment authority regardless of the veteran's eligibility for VA's general medical benefits package or enrollment priority category.

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to participate in these hearings. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony.

