

**BPW/USA and BPWF
Supporting Women Veterans
WPI – Women Veteran Briefing
Thursday, November 13, 2008**

Good morning, I am Debbie Frett, CEO of Business and Professional Women/USA and Business and Professional Women's Foundation. I am delighted to be here to talk with you about what our organizations are doing to assist women veterans' transition from military to civilian life. Today's theme, Staying Connected After Military Service, is an opportunity for us all to examine our role in supporting these sheroes.

Today, I am also going to talk about "necessity." And as you all know, Necessity is said to be "the mother of invention." Necessity has borne many new and innovative ideas, particularly for and about women. In 1919 **it was necessity** that motivated women to establish what came to be known as Business and Professional Women/USA - the first organization to focus on workingwomen's issues. Due to the lack of focused scientific research on women's issues, particularly with regard to the workplace, in 1956, **out of necessity**, BPW/USA established Business and Professional Women's Foundation. This was the first foundation dedicated to conducting research and disseminating information about workingwomen.

During the last few years as women were increasingly deployed and serving in the military, we began discussing the resulting impact: on them, their families and communities especially when they come home. Would the workplace support these new veterans? What about transferable skills? Are there dedicated services for them? Again, **necessity**... we needed to create a unique support system, network and collective voice for a new group of veterans.

Women have historically banded together to support one another, so reaching out to women veterans was a natural step for us. After all, between our two organizations, we have over 130 years of experience in supporting women, of women helping women! While we knew we wanted to help, we needed to be sure that we were meeting the **real needs** of women veterans. That meant we needed to gather the facts.

Preliminary research found that women veterans, in general, receive less support upon return from service and generally have a difficult transition back into civilian life. Readjustment difficulties coupled with the civilian workforce issues of gender discrimination, work life balance, and pay equity, made it apparent, and **necessary** that we needed to support our military sisters as they returned home to their careers, lives and families.

Studies demonstrate:

- Many women veterans do not self-identify as veterans and are unaware of the services available to them;
- Many women just leaving the military often experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty about post-military career plans;
- Women veterans are more likely to be underemployed than male veterans, and women veterans are **3.6** times more likely than women who are not veterans to become homeless.

BPW/USA, with our national network of women who can offer leadership training, professional skills development and most importantly mentoring, was uniquely positioned to help women veterans and we were ready for the challenge. In October 2005, BPW/USA became the first and only national non-governmental organization offering support to women veterans. Our program, *Women Joining Forces – Closing Ranks, Opening Doors* was created and launched to support the professional needs of transitioning women veterans. *Women Joining Forces* is a multi-year program offering a 1-year introductory membership to women exiting the military service at no cost, and discounted membership to other women veterans. We are proud to

recognize 3 of our early sponsor supporters: Lifetime, Bridgestone Firestone and Wackenhut.

In order to build the best possible program, we knew we needed to enlist experts and leaders currently working with women veterans. Our first step was to create an Advisory Council to provide advice and guidance for our effort. Some of Our esteemed *WJF* Advisory Council members include Major General Irene Trowell- Harris, director of the Center for Women Veterans; Brigadier General Wilma Vaught, founder and President of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation; Joy Ilem, Assistant National Legislative Director of the Disabled American Veterans; Velma Hart of AMVETS; Lucretia McClenney, Director, Center for Minority Veterans; and William Offutt, Executive Director, President's National Hire Veteran's Committee, Department of Labor. In addition to veterans and veteran agency representatives, we have policymakers who serve on the council: Congresswoman Susan Davis (D-CA) and Congresswoman Kay Granger (R-TX) supporting BPW/USA's commitment to nonpartisanship. The input of these women as well as other members of the *WJF* Advisory Council has been invaluable as we continue to build *Women Joining Forces*.

During our first three years, we have had many successes and challenges as we grow and shape this program. Leveraging partnerships and using creative solutions have resulted in progress for reaching and helping women veterans.

As I mentioned before, we knew this program would not be successful if created in a vacuum. We knew we needed input from past and present transitioning women veterans. In the absence of a publicly available database of women veterans, BPW Foundation researchers created a database with the help of partners including agencies that support women veterans. Our online survey, *Women Veterans in Transition*, was accessed by 2,117 women veterans with over 1,600 responses completed.

Respondents had the opportunity to provide comments and the option to participate in more in-depth research such as focus groups and interviews.

Fifty percent of respondents provided personal contact information for future follow up.

The *Women Veterans in Transition* survey was co-sponsored by the Harley Davidson Foundation, Inc. and Disabled American Veterans Charitable Service Trust.

We believe the data that resulted from the survey has helped us more effectively support veterans on a very real level. While we continue to work with the data, it has provided the first snap shot so to speak of a woman veteran's experience transitioning into the civilian workplace. This research can also be applied to male veterans as well as a wider range of workers.

BPW Foundation continues to work towards the following outcomes:

- Better informed women veterans
- Stronger support programs
- More supportive public policy
- Data to help create better standards
- Recruitment strategies to employ women veterans
- General tools to help any veteran or any worker in transition
- Information for employers to better engage (attract, retain) women veterans in the workplace

What we observed in our research is that the success of such career moves often rests on critical choice points—these include choices such as: which

sector to work in, employer characteristics, type of desired work schedule, what job search resources to utilize and even when to start a job search.

There were also several factors that impacted the types of choices made by women veterans. These factors were:

- educational status
- marital status
- whether or not they had dependents

The presences or lack/there-of of one or more of these factors in a woman veteran's life appeared to impact how soon she began to look for work, how quickly she found a job and how selective she was in picking an employer.

Overall, women veterans surveyed were more likely to report being satisfied with their first post-military position if they:

- Began looking for a job before they left the military
- Participated in the Transition Assistance Employment Workshop (TAP) before leaving the military
- Felt high-levels of comfort with job skills learned in the military

- Worked with a civilian mentor during the job search
- Took classes to improve job-specific skills
- Attended job fairs
- Found a job in the government or nonprofit sector
- Found an employer who displayed a high-level of appreciation for their military service

Through our research BPW/USA was able to refine and direct the WJF program to meet the needs and desires of women veterans. We established an e-community for WJF so that women veterans and members could communicate, share information and support one another across the nation. WomenJoiningForces.org is a unique source of information and serves as a clearinghouse of resources for veterans, which is continually updated through Connect-a-Vet. Members of our Advisory Council, urged us to create this resource to provide women veterans with a user-friendly, one-stop-shop of resources. BPW/USA members continue to be the heart of this program and offer a core deliverable to women veterans: support. Through mentoring relationships, professional skills training, the WJF Individual

Development program and grassroots advocacy, the members have rallied to network and share resources to make *WJF* successful.

We also launched the BPW/USA Career Center, which was customized to highlight employers' practices and benefits that support both women and veteran friendly workplaces. Our career center supports transitioning women veterans by assisting them to identify employment opportunities and to select employers that offer benefits dedicated to the career support and advancement of women and veterans. The site offers tool boxes for employers and job seekers. Women veterans post profiles and resumes for free at careers.bpwusa.org.

When necessity led us to our women's veteran's initiative we had three goals

- First to provide veterans with practical help and information they need to strategically make critical career choices.
- Second to help employers and others better communicate with veterans – from the interview process through orientation and career growth – and to enable employers to implement veteran-friendly workplace practices.

- And third, to empower women veterans to be more effective advocates as well as to advocate on behalf of women veterans in a manner that allows their collective voices to be heard by policymakers.

With the assistance of our membership, knowledgeable partners, advisory council and the women veterans' research participants, coupled with out-of-the-box thinking, positioning know-how and limited financial resources, BPW was able to turn necessity into reality by becoming the **first national non-governmental organization offering support to women veterans**.

Thank you to all the veterans for your service to our country. We are truly grateful. To the civilians in the audience, thank a veteran for their service- today, not just on Veterans Day, but everyday!

Through partnerships, communication of best practices and resources, and a public-private program model, BPW can and will support women veterans as they come home- they have done so much for us, it is our turn...Our turn to assist them as they transition back to civilian life and re-enter their rightful places at home, in the workplace and in there communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.