



**STATEMENT OF
KATIE A. PURSWELL, DEPUTY DIRECTOR
HEALTH POLICY
THE AMERICAN LEGION**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT & INVESTIGATIONS**

ON

**“SAFETY FOR ALL: ENDING SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS”**

JULY 22, 2020

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Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Bergman, distinguished members the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, and members of the Women Veterans Task Force; on behalf of our National Commander, James W. "Bill" Oxford and our nearly two million members, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the important issue of harassment at Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). The American Legion appreciates this opportunity and we look forward to partnering with you in an effort to better understand, address, and provide recommendations for eliminating sexual harassment within VA facilities.

The American Legion believes that above all, we must ensure that the institutions we built to care for our nation's veterans give every veteran regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or creed the quality of care they deserve as conveyed in our Resolution No. 377: *Support for Veteran Quality of Life*.¹ However, we are aware that existing barriers limit access to quality care for certain populations within the veteran community. Several recent studies, including a 2019 study from the Jacobs Institute for Women, found one in four female veterans reported inappropriate and/or unwanted sexual comments or behavior by male veterans on VA grounds.² The study found these behaviors included catcalls, propositions, derogatory and sexual comments, as well as denigration of veteran status. This is in stark contrast to the 5% of women who have reported harassment at non-VA facilities. In addition to veteran patrons who report harassment at VA, a 2018 study found "26 percent of women and 14 percent of men who work at the VA experienced sexual harassment."³ This is the "highest incidence of sexual harassment of employees of any federal agency."² These findings point to a larger systemic issue that is a confluence of lack of leadership and a complacent culture where incidents of harassment are unheeded.

Challenges Remain with Harassment at VHA Facilities

Multiple VA studies have shown there are issues with sexual harassment at various VA locations.² The American Legion believes that VA is aware of the culture change that needs to take place

¹ "Resolution No. 377: Support for Veteran Quality of Life." The American Legion, August 30, 2016. <https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5696>

² Klap, Ruth, et al. "Prevalence of Stranger Harassment of Women Veterans at Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and Impacts on Delayed and Missed Care." *Women's Health Issues*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2019, pp. 107–115., doi:10.1016/j.whi.2018.12.002.

³ Dyer, Karen E., et al. "Gender Differences in Veterans' Perceptions of Harassment on Veterans Health Administration Grounds." *Women's Health Issues*, vol. 29, 2019, doi:10.1016/j.whi.2019.04.016.

within its facilities to properly address the issue of harassment. VA has previously identified some of the more prominent issues the department currently faces through self-reporting along with comprehensive surveys and studies.^{4,5} The information gathered through these efforts resulted in campaigns such as “End Harassment” and the “Harassment Prevention Program,” as well as the reintroduction of no FEAR, Whistleblower Rights, and the Protection Policy Statement.³ Despite these efforts, the aforementioned changes are not making significant progress combating harassment. This creates a perception that harassment within VA is tolerated, ignored, and not a substantial issue. As stated in Resolution No. 3: *Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability*, The American Legion believes in accountability, reporting, tracking, and actioning of any dealings with sexual harassment and assault and supports a climate where all veterans feel safe.⁶

The American Legion will continue to advocate for VA anti-harassment programs, which includes ensuring they are fully and adequately funded, and that VA reports the progress and status of these programmatic changes to Congress. This is encouraged in Resolution No. 163: *Legislation to Provide Reporting, Tracking, and Action Dealing with Sexual Assaults at Department of Veterans Affairs Facilities*.⁷ The American Legion and our members have resolved to bring these critical issues to national attention by providing supporting resolutions to directly address harassment and safe access to care at VA facilities via Resolution No. 39: *Women Veterans Strategic Plan*.⁸

VA must continue to build trust among all veterans to make its system the premier medical provider that all veterans deserve. Efforts should include increased vigilance to support a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment, provide training to new employees and retraining current employees an annual basis at VA facilities, and adopt recourse for those who do not adhere to VA anti-harassment guidelines as advised in Resolution No. 3: *Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability*.⁶ VA should also increase a change in culture by acknowledgement of sexual harassment issues and interventions through posting campaign information in its facilities and by creating a safe and inclusive environment for all veterans as encouraged in Resolution No. 39: *Women Veterans Strategic Plan* and Resolution No. 147: *Women Veterans*.^{6,9}

Conclusion

Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Bergman, distinguished members the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, and members of the Women Veterans Task Force; The American Legion thanks you for the opportunity to illuminate the positions of the nearly two million members of this organization. It is a priority of The American

⁴ Hayes, Patricia M. “VA: It’s Our Responsibility to End Harassment.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 15 Aug. 2019, www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/64559/va-our-responsibility-end-harassment/.

⁵ Va. “Veterans Affairs.” Go to VA.gov, 14 Jan. 2016, www.va.gov/ORM/HPP.asp.

⁶ “Resolution No. 3: Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability.” The American Legion, August 30, 2016. <https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5677>

⁷ “Resolution No. 163: Legislation to Provide Reporting, Tracking, and Action Dealing with Sexual Assaults at Department of Veterans Affairs Facilities.” The American Legion, August 31, 2016. <https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5503>

⁸ “Resolution No. 39: Women Veterans Strategic Plan.” The American Legion, August 30, 2016. <https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/2298>

⁹ “Resolution No. 147: Women Veterans.” The American Legion, August 30, 2016. <https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5488>

Legion that all our nation's veterans receive the quality care and support we expect from VA. By the action of this subcommittee and taskforce, we see that addressing and eliminating harassment in VA facilities is a priority for you as well. We call on Congress to direct VA to foster an environment that is free from harassment and nurtures a climate of safety, dignity, accessibility, and acceptance of all veterans. As we move forward in identifying issues and establishing corrective action through training, The American Legion stands ready to support this subcommittee through observation and expertise.

As always, The American Legion thanks this committee for the opportunity to elucidate the position of the nearly two million veteran members of this organization. For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Ms. Alexandria Evers, Legislative Associate, at aegers@legion.org or (202) 263-2990.