

February 17, 2020

To Whom It May Concern,

We are writing in support of the Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program for Service Members & Veterans (SB0904/HB1515) that calls for the creation of a state fund to provide matching grants to community-based organizations providing evidence-based behavioral health treatments for service members (including the Guard and Reserves), veterans, and their family members. There is great need for behavioral health services among veterans, service members and their families in Maryland. There are approximately 399,000 veterans living in Maryland, of which an estimated 24,000 have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Across the state, approximately 10,000 veterans are dealing with post-traumatic stress or major depression. We know that veterans comprise 18% of all deaths by suicide in Maryland and this group is twice as likely as non-veterans to die by suicide. Community-based organizations play a crucial role in providing timely, evidence-based services that fill the existing gaps in the VA system.

The Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) is the voice of women who have served or are currently serving in the military. We are a member-driven network dedicated to supporting, connecting and advocating for the individual and collective needs of service women; past, present and future. SWAN is the only organization solely focused on the needs of service women *and* women veterans. We understand that the experiences that women have while in uniform have profound impacts when they leave military service. Their experiences are uniquely different from men's experiences and must be acknowledged and addressed differently.

On a range of indicators military women's mental health is not good. Service women, who often deal with a culture of bias, harassment and sometimes assault, as well as long family separations and combat deployments, can have long-term mental health impacts that must be acknowledged and addressed while on active duty and when they become veterans. Women veterans are significantly more likely to face mental health challenges than civilian women and veteran men. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) data shows that women veterans are 250% more likely than civilian women to commit suicide. Women's mental wellness appears to be negatively impacted during military service and this impact follows them after they leave service. In SWAN's 2017 mental wellness survey, 60% of participants said that military service had a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. Furthermore, 61% of survey participants said they have been clinically diagnosed with some form of depression and 51% have received a clinical diagnosis of a stress injury. Finally, 20% said they had engaged in some form of self-harm.

The VA clearly has not been able to adequately meet this growing need. Having a strong network of community-based organizations that understand military culture and in particular, the needs of women, is critical. The Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program is a step towards solving the problem. We encourage its passage.

Sincerely,



Deshauna Barber,
CEO, Service Women's Action Network