



Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

Office of the Secretary

LARRY HOGAN
GOVERNOR

BOYD K. RUTHERFORD
LT. GOVERNOR

GEORGE W. OWINGS III
SECRETARY

24 February 2021

The Honorable Shane Pendergrass, Chair
Honorable Members of the Committee
Health & Government Operations
241 House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

HB 775 - Task Force to Study the Establishment of Regional Centers for Women Veterans

Dear Chairwoman Pendergrass and Members of the Health & Government Operations Committee,

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs would like to share some information regarding HB 775 – Task Force to Study the Establishment of Regional Centers for Women Veterans.

The purpose of this Task Force is to study the establishment of regional centers for women veterans and to analyze the resources available to women veterans in the State. The Task Force will be required to make recommendations regarding ways to address identified specific needs for services for women veterans residing in the State and to report its findings to both the Governor and General Assembly by October 1, 2022. The bill requires two MDVA employees to serve on the Task Force, (1) the Secretary, or designee, and (2) an employee to provide staffing. Currently, the MDVA does not have a women veterans' program manager on staff. In addition, the Agency does not have personnel to adequately serve on, or to staff, the Task Force.

Approximately 14% of veterans in Maryland are women compared to 10% of the national population of women veterans. Therefore, MDVA recognizes the intent of this bill and the potential impact it would have on services to women who have served. Women veterans face unemployment and homelessness at a higher rate than women who are not veterans. In addition, women veterans die by suicide at nearly six times the rate of other women.

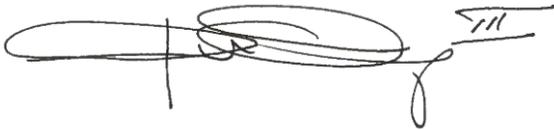
MDVA took a recent pulse on state veteran affairs offices across the country. Of the approximate 15 states with dedicated women veteran coordinators and programs, nine states responded. None of the respondents indicated the presence of regional centers for women veterans in their state. However, of those who responded eight have full time women veteran program managers, with some states appropriating funds for more than one. MDVA currently does not have a women veteran program manager although it has more than double the women veteran population compared to some states who do.

The mission of these programs and for these program managers is relatively consistent across the country. For example, the mission of the Oregon program is to provide leadership for statewide women veteran issues and facilitate proactive advocacy for women veterans across the state and serve as the point of contact between women veterans and the state legislature. The programs host recognition events and women veteran conferences. In addition, there is a National Association of Women Veteran Coordinators. Looking to best practices already implemented in other states alleviates the need to assess for the specific needs for services for women veterans. The National Association is available to provide the technical assistance necessary to NOW implement a women veteran program in MDVA. However, the only way to successfully implement and maintain such a program is to dedicate full time personnel to this mission.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs has a Center for Women Veterans. Women veteran program managers are located in all VA Medical Centers. These program managers provide women veterans with information on healthcare, veteran benefits, homeless services, and employment information. Creating one more layer of service to women veterans in Maryland would be duplicative in nature and possibly confuse veterans about where to begin when accessing services.

If it is recommended to establish regional centers for women veterans at the conclusion of the Task Force, the fiscal note attached would be monumental. However, if nationwide best practices were implemented and a women veteran program manager was created instead, the cost would be significantly less. The Department is proud to continue in its service to the veteran community and we do all that we can to ensure our women veterans have access to the benefits to which they are entitled. However, at this time, the MDVA does not have the personnel to meet the requirements contained in this bill or to implement any of the possible recommendations made by the Task Force.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Owings III", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

George W. Owings III
Secretary