

## **DACOWITS PUBLIC STATEMENT: SWAN SURVEY RESULTS**

For the past two years the Service Women's Action Network, the only nongovernmental organization exclusively advocating for both service women and women veterans, has conducted a survey of military women to assess their needs and challenges. Last year, we asked service women what their greatest unmet needs were— and mental health was number one for women veterans while bias and discrimination was number one for active duty women.

As a result of last year's needs assessment, this year's SWAN survey focused on the mental health needs of service women and garnered the response of more than 1,300 women across all branches, including the Coast Guard. About 17 percent of the women who responded were currently serving, while 61 percent were veterans and 21 percent were retired. Of the respondents, 76 percent were or had been enlisted, and 18 percent were officers. This survey is a major benchmark in documenting the mental wellness of military women.

SWAN is here today to present some of the survey results which were of the most concern to us as an organization whose mission is to connect, support and advocate for military women – past, present and future. We hope the results will inform your own work on behalf of service women.

- Our survey found that the #1 factor negatively affecting the mental health of service women was sexual assault. When asked what specifically about military service most positively or negatively impacted, or was impacting, their mental health, 30 percent of the responses identified Military Sexual Trauma, while only 9 percent said deployments or combat. For some women who responded, the sexual violence occurred while deployed.
- Additionally, 11 percent of the responses said that sexual harassment negatively affected their mental health, and 7 percent said gender bias and discrimination also negatively affected their mental well-being.
- What is most concerning about the survey results is that about 49 percent of responses attributed service women's negative mental health not to combat deployments but to the gender bias, harassment and/or assault service women say they received at the hands of fellow service members.
- Additionally, 60 percent of respondents said military service had a negative impact on their mental well being, while 21 percent of respondents reported having intentionally harmed themselves.
- Some promising results included 88 percent of respondents who agreed that mental health treatment can improve their quality of life.

SWAN compared the data collected in our survey to other national data samples and found that:

- A national sample of military veterans indicates that one quarter of military women have been diagnosed with a post traumatic stress injury or depression. Of the sample SWAN surveyed, that number is higher – 61 percent of respondents have a diagnosis.
- National averages indicate that approximately 10% of military and civilian women self-report symptoms that indicate the presence of an undiagnosed mental health condition. In the SWAN survey results, undiagnosed conditions (meaning a self-reported presence of

one or more symptoms that may indicate a problem), are low in retirees and veterans but high (20 percent) in active duty women, possibly indicating a stigma against care seeking in this community.

SWAN knows that the health of women veterans is directly tied to what happens to them while on active duty. Based on our data results, two ways the Services could actively address the poor mental health of women in the military is to directly work to: (a) reduce stigma associated with active duty women seeking mental health treatment; (b) eliminate gender bias, harassment and sexual assault by holding offenders accountable in a timely and appropriate manner; and (c) effecting a culture change to one in which women in the military receive equitable respect and treatment to their male counterparts.

What service women are telling us is that a military culture entrenched in gender bias, harassment and assault has a direct negative impact on their mental health, and this impact follows them after they leave the military. Women report to us that when they access services at the VA they face harassment from male veterans. Service members who harass women in the military become veterans who harass women at veteran affairs centers.

For years the military has attempted to address the problem of sexual assault and harassment through changes in policy and through training such as SHARP. But the sexual assault statistics show that the military cannot train itself out of this problem. Changes in personnel policy and SHARP PowerPoint slides have failed, and continue to fail, in transforming the current military culture into one that is intolerant of gender bias, harassment and sexual assault. Until the military commits itself to a transformation of a culture entrenched in misogyny, the sexual assault statistics will remain the same.

What is most intolerable about the current situation is that those statistics represent a very real service woman who is at this very moment dealing with gender bias, harassment and assault in her unit, and its after effects. At this very moment there is a service woman (thousands of them really), trying to continue to do her job while hiding the mental health impacts of her assault.

The negative impact the sexual assault epidemic in the military has on unit readiness, trust & cohesion, mission effectiveness and the professionalism of the military services cannot be dismissed. Since SWAN's inception nearly ten years ago, we have been committed to transforming military culture to one that treats service women and women veterans with the same dignity and respect afforded to men, and immediately and effectively responds when service members are sexually assaulted and discriminated against. SWAN is here to lend our assistance in transforming military culture and ending the sexual assault epidemic in the military. Thank you.

Lydia C. Watts, Esq.

CEO, Service Women's Action Network