

## Solano Veterans Scene – April 2012

### **VA benefits evolving with growing role of women in military**

Women are a vital part of the veteran population of California and the United States Armed Forces. Women are the fastest-growing demographic of the military services. Today, women are finding that military service is both a personally and financially rewarding career path.

The military was once a male-dominated profession, but a lot has changed since the Vietnam War era. Today women comprise more than 200,000 of our armed forces and 20 percent of the military recruits are women. The national population of women veterans is approximately 1.8 million from the WAVES of World War II to the helicopter pilots of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, only 225,000 women use the Veterans Administration (VA) healthcare services. The reason for this low participation rate may be many women veterans feel they are not entitled to this benefit, or they do not think the VA has the services that they need. Neither perception is true.

In California there are about 166,700 women veterans. In Solano County we have around 8,200 women veterans. Our office sees 10 to 15 women a week, and we are very excited to announce the hiring of a new veteran representative, Senior Master Sergeant (retired) Virginia A. Wimmer. Virginia was in charge of the medical records section of David Grant Medical Center at Travis Air Force Base. She brings a wealth of knowledge to the veteran service office in Solano County and a perspective that will help our women veterans with their disability claims and healthcare-related issues. We welcome all women veterans to come in and meet with Virginia and let her help you get connected to the benefits you have earned by serving in the military.

The Veterans Administration was not always woman friendly. In 1992 the Veterans Healthcare Act authorized new and expanded services for women veterans. These services include: counseling for military sexual trauma, specific healthcare designed for gynecological issues such as pap smears, mammography, and general reproductive health care. Mental Health services designed for women are also available, including substance abuse counseling, and evaluation and treatment of Post Traumatic Distress Disorders (PTSD) and military sexual trauma.

Women veterans have all the same medical and disability benefits that male veterans do and more. The requirements are the same. You have to have at least 24 continuous months of service or have a service-connected disability. A means test is also required unless you are an Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom veteran who was discharged in the last five years.

Certain conditions connected to military sexual trauma may be treated by the VA even if the female veteran is not otherwise eligible for VA healthcare.

Women veterans are now being assigned duties that bring them face to face with combat and combat-related situations. Truck drivers, medics and other so-called support functions often put women right into the face of the enemy and into hostile action that is considered combat. Helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft piloted by women are often in the sights of our enemy combatants and the woman pilot has to act accordingly. This combat can leave its mark on the person no matter the gender. The VA has services to help women veterans get through the residuals of combat just as they help men get through PTSD and related combat issues. Please contact the Solano County Veteran Service Office to get information on how to connect with services for the woman who was exposed to combat or has any service-connected disabilities or conditions.

The California State Department of Veteran Affairs has also hired a new Deputy Secretary for Women Veterans. Lindsey Wathen is very interested in helping any and all women veterans with issues so they can make a smooth transition back into civilian life. She can be reached at (916) 653-2551.

*Ted Puntillo is director of Veteran Services for Solano County. Reach him at 784-6590 or [TEPuntillo@SolanoCounty.com](mailto:TEPuntillo@SolanoCounty.com). The Solano County Veteran Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m.*