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Good morning. My name is Rebekah Havrilla and I am a former Army Sergeant who served in Afghanistan. I currently work for Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) as their National Peer Support Helpline Caseworker. SWAN is a human rights organization dedicated to ending employment discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault against service members and veterans, and demanding exceptional health care and benefits for women veterans and their families. Our National Peer Support Helpline provides support, guidance and referrals for service members, veterans and their families. Many of our clients are from the five boroughs.

I am here today to speak about the issue of suicide among women veterans. According to one study entitled "Self-Inflicted Deaths Among Women With U.S. Military Service: A Hidden Epidemic? (McFarland, Kaplan & Huguet, 2010)", the rate of suicide among women veterans who have served in the military is triple that of their civilian counterparts. Although this particular study did not give any data on potential causal factors, SWAN's experience working with survivors of military trauma, and our research on the issues service women and women veterans face can provide a deeper understanding of many factors that often give rise to suicidal ideation and attempted suicide among military women.

Today, women make up approximately 15% of Active Duty forces, and 20% of the Reserves. Well over 200,000 women have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. 137 have died in theater. Many more women have returned with severe physical wounds, and mental health injuries that often last a lifetime. Exposure to combat, as well as military sexual violence, presents a variety of risks for military women.

The Department of Defense estimated that there were over 19,000 sexual assaults in the military in 2010. According to a recent report from the Department of Labor Women's Bureau, the "prevalence of military sexual assault among female veterans ranges from 20- 48%, and 80% of female veterans have reported being sexually harassed (Foster & Vince, 2009)."

Military Sexual Trauma often poses additional risks to women's health and welfare after service. Our helpline has provided support to many veterans who have called expressing suicidal ideations and gestures because of the sexual violence perpetrated against them and their struggles obtaining benefits based on that trauma. SWAN recently discovered through extensive litigation against the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that women and men who file a VA claim for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) based on Military Sexual Trauma only have their claims approved 32% of the time. Alternately, veterans who file claims for PTSD based on combat trauma have their claims approved 53% of the time. This astonishing disparity is grounds for an overhaul of VA Military Sexual Trauma claims policy, something that SWAN is driving forward through Congress and the VA.

In addition to suffering a faulty VA benefits system, and a lack of institutional understanding of women's exposure to combat and the pervasiveness of military sexual assault and harassment, women veterans often face other challenges in reintegrating back home. They include finding and maintaining employment, finding child care, managing family and spousal relationships, recovering from substance abuse related to PTSD and other mental health conditions, and homelessness. According to the Department of Labor Women's Bureau, women veterans are even more likely to be unemployed than men veterans, and also more likely to earn a lower income than men veterans. Additionally, women veterans are four times as likely as their civilian counterparts to be homeless. It is no wonder, when we collectively look at these risk factors, that we lose many women veterans to suicide.

Our government must develop a comprehensive program to address the growing number of veteran suicides around our nation every day. Any new initiatives must also take into consideration the specific risk factors facing service women, including sexual trauma. SWAN is willing to take an active role in helping organizations understand the nuances and intricacies surrounding military suicides especially as it relates to women. Please join SWAN in our efforts to raise awareness and take action to prevent all military suicides. Thank you for your time.