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**NYC Council Testimony-Committee on Veterans and General Welfare's Joint Oversight Hearing
Homeless Women Veterans**

Good afternoon. 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 Legal and 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 Legal and Peer Support Helpline provides support, guidance and referrals for service members, veterans and their families. Many of our clients are from NYC.

I am here today to speak about the issue of homelessness among women veterans. In June 2010, the federal government released "Opening Doors", a strategic plan to address American homelessness. The survey estimates that veterans are 50% more likely to experience homelessness than any other group of Americans¹. On any given night in 2008, there were 139,000 homeless veterans in the U.S., 107,000² in 2010 and there are now an estimated 76,000 homeless veterans³. At the end of 2009, there were nearly 10,000 homeless veterans in New York City, on Long Island and in northern New Jersey, according to estimates in a new report from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which also found that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are falling into homelessness earlier than those who served in Vietnam.⁴ In New York City, there are an estimated 549 homeless veterans in the Bronx, 776 in Brooklyn, 629 in Manhattan, 910 in Queens and 358 on Staten Island, according to 2009 estimates from the Department of Veterans Affairs.⁵

Today, women make up approximately 15% of Active Duty forces, and 20% of the Reserves and over 255,000 women have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶ Many more women have returned with severe physical wounds and mental health injuries that often last a lifetime. Exposure to combat trauma, sexual harassment and/or assault, the lack of employment after military service and other issues present a variety of risks for military women. A number of factors are proven to contribute to veteran homelessness, including a lack of access to affordable housing, under-employment and joblessness, and incapacitating mental and physical conditions, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. These factors specifically burden veteran women. SWAN's experience working with service women and our research on the issues homeless women veterans face can provide a deeper understanding of many factors that often give rise to even greater issues such as suicidal ideation and attempted suicide among military women.

Veterans make up 8% of the U.S. population, but almost 16% of homeless adults. 18,000 veteran women currently use VA shelters.⁷ Additionally, there is much needed concern about homelessness amongst women veterans, with this population two to four times more likely to become homeless than women who are non-veterans. The number of women veterans has doubled in the past decade. According to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates, the number of women veterans will grow from 1.8 million (8.2% of all veterans) in 2010 to 2.1 million (15.2%) in 2036.⁸ In addition to suffering

a faulty VA benefits system, 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. These challenges include finding and maintaining employment, obtaining child care, managing family and spousal relationships, recovering from substance abuse related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions, and homelessness.⁹ 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, older women veterans struggle to get back into civilian sector. Being a single mother can add to conditions making women veterans susceptible to homelessness.¹⁰ Young veterans (between 18 and 30) are also at high risk of poverty and they are almost four times as likely to be homeless than their non-veteran counterparts. Many young homeless women veterans may not utilize assistance services simply because they don't know how to access them. Because women are less likely than men to utilize VA health services, their problems go untreated and often lead to homelessness.¹¹

Although homelessness plagues all veterans, the causes and consequences of having no home are different for women veterans. Women make up a growing number of homeless veterans. There are an estimated 24,000 homeless veterans of war since 2006 and homelessness among women veterans specifically of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars has also increased every year for the last six years, from 150 in 2006 to 1,700 in 2011.¹² These numbers do not include homeless women veterans who have not contacted the Department of Veterans Affairs. Outreach that specifically targets women veterans, especially the 11% who are single military mothers¹³, is needed in order to ensure that these women receive the help they need. In addition, according to a recent report from the Department of Labor Women's Bureau¹⁴, the "prevalence of military sexual assault among women veterans ranges from 20-48%, and 80% of women veterans have reported being sexually harassed" and further contributing to the problem of women veteran homelessness.¹⁵

Furthermore, since women are usually the primary caregivers to children, the fragile state discharged veterans are in is compounded and increases the likelihood of homelessness. Although many services exist to assist homeless women veterans, women are often reluctant to seek help. Practical obstacles such as transportation costs and lack of childcare preclude women from using services and psychological barriers also operate to keep women from getting help because women may feel ashamed of their situation and wish to avoid insensitive treatment.¹⁶ Finding shelters that permit children and offer a safe environment is a primary obstacle for homeless women veterans and fear of losing custody of their children is also a factor.¹⁷ It is no wonder, when we collectively look at these risk factors, that we not only lose many women veterans to homelessness, but also to suicide.¹⁸

Our government must integrate a comprehensive program to address the number of homeless women veterans and support agencies that provide services to military women. 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 homelessness especially as it relates to women. Please join SWAN in our efforts to raise awareness and take action to end the homelessness and systemic barriers impacting veteran women and their families.

The Service Women's Action Network thanks you for your time and encourages your partnership.

Key Statistics

- ♀ There are currently an estimated 18,000 homeless women veterans in the United States ¹⁹
- ♀ Women veterans are up to 4 times more likely to be homeless compared to non-veteran women ²⁰
- ♀ Women veterans are up to 2 times more likely to be homeless compared to men veterans ²¹
- ♀ Women veterans are at especially high risk of homelessness and the risk increases considerably if the woman veteran is poor; women veterans in poverty are more than three times as likely to be homeless as women non-veterans in poverty ²²
- ♀ Women veterans are more likely to become homeless because of their higher experiences trauma in the military ²³
- ♀ Homeless women veterans are more likely to experience severe forms of mental illness compared to men, mostly because of higher rates of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) ²⁴
- ♀ Research indicates that women veterans who experience MST, for example, are at a higher risk for a variety of problems, from PTSD to homelessness ²⁵
- ♀ Approximately 45% of homeless veterans suffer from mental health issues, 70% are affected by substance abuse issues and 40% of women homeless veterans report experiences of sexual assault in the military ²⁶
- ♀ Women are nine times more likely to exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, making them much more likely to have substance abuse issues, lower economic and educational outcomes and difficulty maintaining stable homes according to The Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor ²⁷
- ♀ The risk of death for homeless women veterans is substantially higher than for women in the general populations, especially among younger cohorts ²⁸
- ♀ About a quarter of women veterans in the VA's Homelessness Programs have children under age 18 ²⁹
- ♀ At the end of 2009, there are nearly 10,000 homeless veterans in New York City, on Long Island and in northern New Jersey, according to estimates in a new report from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which also found that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are falling into homelessness earlier than those who served in Vietnam ³⁰
- ♀ In New York City, there are an estimated 549 homeless veterans in the Bronx, 776 in Brooklyn, 629 in Manhattan, 910 in Queens and 358 on Staten Island, according to 2009 estimates from the Department of Veterans Affairs ³¹
- ♀ Many New Yorkers feel health and homelessness programs for veterans were underfinanced and ill equipped to deal with the new wave of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, many of whom suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental syndromes, drug addiction and other physical ailments. It is predicted that the numbers of homeless veterans will rise drastically in the coming years if the problem is not addressed immediately ³²
- ♀ In 2010, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, New York State, had the smallest percentage of veterans in the nation-6.6%, compared with 14.1% in Alaska. ⁴ A decade ago, veterans accounted for 9.5% of the state's population, but four states – California (home to 25% of homeless veterans), Florida, Texas and New York – still account for half of the homeless veterans in the country, despite accounting for 32% of the nation's population ³³
- ♀ Income inequality is greater in New York State and in the New York City region than in any other state or metropolitan area in the country, according to the Census Bureau. ⁶

Source:

SWAN's research is based on the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development 2010 reports. The Service Women's Action Network, in partnership with the Department of Labor, conducted discussion groups with homeless women veterans and practitioners serving homeless women veterans. The report that SWAN issued in August 2009 and updated in October 2011 serves as the basis for much of the information and data in this November 7, 2011 testimony to the NYC Council.

¹ U.S. Interagency Office of Homelessness (June, 2010). *Opening Doors: Federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness*. Retrieved November 2011 from http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/AnnualUpdate2011.pdf

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2010). *Demographics*. Retrieved November 2011 from www.va.gov/VETDATA/docs/Demographics/51.xls and <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/The-Facts-About-Homeless-Veterans-Video>

³ U.S. Department of Labor (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/traumaguide.htm>

⁴ Keh, A. (2009, November 11). *New York Times*. On Holiday, Considering the Plight of Homeless Veterans. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/on-holiday-considering-the-plight-of-homeless-veterans/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2010). *Veteran Homelessness Spring 2011: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010AHARVeteransReport.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2010). *Veteran Homelessness Spring 2011: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010AHARVeteransReport.pdf>

⁹ U.S. Department of Labor (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/traumaguide.htm>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Labor (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/traumaguide.htm>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Foster, L., & Vince, S. (2009). California's women Veterans: The challenges and needs of those who serve. Retrieved November 2011 from California Research Bureau, California State Library www.library.ca.gov/crb/09/09-009.pdf.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Labor (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/traumaguide.htm>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2010). *Veteran Homelessness Spring 2011: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010AHARVeteransReport.pdf>

²⁰ Gamache, G., Robert R., & Richard T. 2003. "Overrepresentation of Women Veterans Among Homeless Women." *American Journal of Public Health* 93 (7):1132-1136.

²¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2010). *Demographics*. Retrieved November 2011 from www.va.gov/VETDATA/docs/Demographics/51.xls and <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/The-Facts-About-Homeless->

Veterans-Video

²² U.S. Department of Labor (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/traumaguide.htm>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Labor (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/traumaguide.htm>

²⁵ Williamson, V. & Mulhall, E. (2009). "Invisible Wounds: Psychological and Neurological Injuries Confront a New Generation of Veterans." New York: IAVA.

²⁶ U.S. Department of Labor (2011). *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/traumaguide.htm>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cheng, A. & Hwang, S. 2004. "Risk of death among homeless women: a cohort study and review of the literature." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 170 (8):1243-1247.

²⁹ Mulhall, E. (2009). "Women Warriors: Supporting She 'Who Has Borne the Battle.'" New York: IAVA.

³⁰ Keh, A. (2009, November 11). *New York Times*. On Holiday, Considering the Plight of Homeless Veterans. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/on-holiday-considering-the-plight-of-homeless-veterans/>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Keh, A. (2009, November 11). *New York Times*. On Holiday, Considering the Plight of Homeless Veterans. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/on-holiday-considering-the-plight-of-homeless-veterans/>

³³ U.S. Conference of Mayors (2009). *Survey on Hunger and Homelessness: Working America AFL-CIO Project* Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.workingamerica.org/blog/2009/12/14/the-changing-face-of-homelessness>

³⁴ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Spring 2011). *Veteran Homelessness: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010AHARVeteransReport.pdf>

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau (2011). *Neighborhood Income Inequality in the 2005–2009 Period*. Retrieved November 2011 from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acs-16.pdf>

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