



Vietnam Women Veterans

November 2010

Dear Sisters:

Here it is - November already - time for a **VWV** update.

At the end of May I attended the National Association of State Women Veterans Coordinators (NASWVC) Conference in Portland, Oregon. Our own Precilla Wilkewitz is the President of this dynamic organization.

The NASWVC purpose is to exchange ideas, information and training to facilitate reciprocal veterans benefits and services for women veterans and secure uniformity, equality and effectiveness in providing those benefits and services to women veterans; furthermore to identify issues of concern to the women veterans community and develop recommendations to address those concerns through legislative, programmatic and outreach activities.

The Opening Ceremony began with the Presentation of the Colors by the Oregon National Guard, and was followed by the Invocation, Pledge of Allegiance, National Anthem, Roll Call, President's Welcome, and the Oregon Welcome by Jim Willis, Director, Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs.

Jane Shike, MS, MBA, VISN 20 Lead Women, Veterans Program Manager, gave an update on the Women Veterans Health Program. The number of Women Veterans is expanding rapidly - between 2008 and 2009 there was a 15% increase in women using VA Medical Care. The VA Medical Centers are working towards improving care by expanding access and enrollment for women veterans; improving outreach and advocacy programs; and engaging the women to become partners in their own health.

The average age of the female veteran is 49 years old (we **VWV** must be pulling that average up). The priorities for the Women Veterans are to expand VA Enrollment, Outreach to Women Veterans (community awareness), and partner in Health Care Management.

A shocker to me is the number of homeless women veterans - this appears to be on the rise. With our small number of **VWV**, I hope we do not have our women in this group. This is an area that Mental Health, as a Primary Care, will be of help. The VA is making strides in this improving Mental Health Care for all Veterans.

Bradley Mayes, Director of Compensation & Pension Service, Department of Veterans Affairs, spoke on Veterans Benefit Programs. He first spoke of the Women Veterans Coordinators (WVC) and the Veterans Service Officers (VSO). These are two people that we should all be familiar with at our local VA. They are there to help us.

He pointed out that the General Public and many veterans have the idea that one has to be "disabled" to receive VA Benefits and that is not true. Medication is available to all Veterans, for a fee and sometimes for much less than insurance prices - this is certainly worth checking out. VA Benefits are available to children of women who served in Vietnam who suffer with disabilities from herbicides related to birth defects.

Chris Marshall, Director VARO Portland, Department of Veterans Affairs briefed us on the backlog of VA claims. If you have not received info on your claim within 60 days, you should call the VA. They are striving to process claims as fast and efficiently as possible. As a matter of information, the most popular Women Veteran Claims are Military Sexual Trauma, Joints and

Back Pain, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment .

Dr Irene Towell-Harris, Director of the Center for Women Veterans, Office of the Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs, gave an update on the Center for Women Veterans.

Stephanie Moles, Grace After Fire, spoke on helping women come home. The program works with peer support and outreach programs. This is done through on- line, phone and ground contact with resources and information. Grace has members in 45 states with 13% Vietnam Women Veterans. The percentage of use increases with each era. Grace provides anonymous feedback to the VA concerning her findings. Grace can be contacted by dialing 211 Information Line for Social Services.

General Wilma Vaught, Foundation President, Women in Military Service For America (WIMSA), gave an update on the happenings at WIMSA. The Memorial started 23 years ago and General Vaught has been with the Memorial since Day One. Some highlights of 2009 at WIMSA were: Michelle Obama visited and had a tea at the White House for 40 women veterans; 1,072 Women Air Force Pilots received the Congressional Gold Medal. WIMSA is still trying to get all military women registered. Hopefully, all **VWV** are registered. If not, I encourage you to register. You may reach WIMSA by calling 1-800-222-2294. Also, General Vaught requests that obituaries be sent to WIMSA to update their records. Along these lines, I ask that you have **VWV** listed to be notified upon your death. A Memorial Ceremony was conducted by General Vaught and Precilla Wilkewitz.

I found the NASWVC Conference to be very informative as to what the VA is doing for women today. These Coordinators are great people, dedicated to helping women veterans. Since the Conference I have been able to get help from them concerning several of our **VWV**. There is a representative in each state and they want to do all they can to help us.

One of the problems the VA has faced is getting info out to Veterans in isolated areas. There are Program Managers in each State that work diligently to reach individuals. Coordinators can be found at

www.2.vagov/director/guide/home.asp

If anyone has a problem locating the VA Program Coordinator, please contact me either by email, phone or mail.

In July, I was fortunate enough to attend the Veterans Administration Women Veterans Forum in Washington DC. that was very appropriately held at The Women's Memorial in Washington, DC.

Dr Irene Trowell-Harris welcomed everyone and introduced The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs to give the Opening Remarks. Secretary Shinseki retired as the Army Chief of Staff and became Secretary of Veterans Affairs on January 21, 2009. Not only is he a Veteran, he served two tours in Vietnam and was wounded both times. Secretary Shinseki acknowledged that the VA is late in taking care of women and issues related to us. He has insured that changes have been made and that more will be made to accommodate us. Women are entitled to VA Medical Care and they will get it. Women Program Managers are now located at 144 VA Medical Facilities. **IF WE HAVE A PROBLEM THAT IS NOT BEING HANDLED PROPERLY, WE NEED TO SEE THOSE PROGRAM MANAGERS.** Secretary Shinseki also announced that the National Summit on Women Veterans' Issues will be held in 2011 instead of 2013 (exact dates are not available at this time). This tells me how important we women and our issues are to The Secretary, we have a real advocate here.

Dr Betty Moseley Brown gave the Overview of the Day and introduced Dr Patricia Hayes, Chief Consultant, VA Women Veterans Health Strategic Health Care Group. Dr Hayes presented demographics, needs and priorities, and what the VA is doing for Women Veterans Health Care. She pointed out that during Vietnam women were 3% of the total Military Services as

compared to today they make up 14% of the total Services. The VA is much more prepared to handle PTSD and sexual trauma cases than in the past.

Dr Hayes then introduced Amy Marcotte, LCSW, Team Leader of the Sanford, Maine Veterans Center. Amy discussed Readjustment Counseling in Veterans Centers. To locate Veterans Centers, call 877 927 8387.

Dr Laura Herrera, Consultant and Director of Comprehensive Women's Health, VA Women Veterans Health Strategic Health Care Group, Moderated a panel on Veterans Health Affairs. The Panel consisted of Dr Antonette Zeiss: Mental Health, Treatment, Recovery, MST. Dr Natara Garovoy: PTSD. Dr BJ Randolph: Prosthetics. Dr Samina Lqbal: Facility Perspective on Care to Women Veterans. This open discussion, that provided both education to the audience and brought issues to the panel members, was a good exchange of information.

Diana Rubens, MPA, Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations, Veterans Benefits Administration discussed Compensation and Pension, Post-911 GI Bill, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services. She pointed out that VA Benefit Programs annually pay in excess of \$31 billion to Veterans and their beneficiaries.

Peter Dougherty, Director, Homeless Veterans Programs, Department of Veterans Affairs presented statistics on Homeless Veterans. In the past three years the number of Homeless Veterans has decreased, unfortunately the number of Homeless Women Veterans has increased. The VA is working very hard to accommodate more women. There are several apartment buildings that have been built for women and there are more on the slate. I know in Cocoa, Florida (close to where I live) one is under construction. These are small apartments that can house women with children. This housing is known as Transitional Housing where women can stay up to two years. The VA Homeless Hotline is 1-877-424-3838.

We also viewed the "Women at War" film. As I viewed this film, I could not help but think that women have many of the same problems today that we had in our day. One big difference is that there are many more women out there today serving and that the Government and VA is more aware and ready to handle the problems.

I really do believe the VA is out there to do all they can for all Veterans and I hope you all will at least get registered with your VA.

The 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration Commission has been put on hold until next year. Pat Jernigan will keep us posted on this event.

The Department of Veterans Affairs puts out an Agent Orange Review Newsletter with updates on this dreadful disease. I would recommend you subscribe to it by contacting them at: Department of Veterans Affairs, AITC-ATTN: Mailing List Update (32B), 1615 Woodward Street, Austin, Texas 78772-0001.

Pat Jernigan has updated us on the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Gulfport, MS that has now reopened, five years after Hurricane Katrina so damaged the previous facility that it had to be torn down. Several hundred veterans from the AFRH, Washington, DC went down in groups over the past several weeks. The moves went smoothly and the new residents, including many who had not previously lived there, are settling in. This is an important benefit for retired enlisted, warrant officers, or those who served 50% of their service career as enlisted. The retirement homes provide Continuing Care from independent living through full nursing care, as needed for each resident. Detailed eligibility and application requirements are on the AFRH web site at <https://www.afrh.gov/afrh/newres/elig/elig.htm>

Dr Kathy Magruder stated that the Vietnam Women Era Veterans Study is moving along. A contract has been finalized with Westat who will be coordinating the mailed surveys and the telephone interview. They are now finalizing data use agreements, security clearances, etc.

