

NVTI Podcast Series

Serving Women Veterans

INTRO: Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

HOST: Hi I am Hannah and welcome to NVTI's podcast on Serving Women Veterans. We're going to be talking to several female veterans with personal experience in this topic. We are very excited to have them join us today.

HOST: Before we jump into this podcast, would each of you please take a few moments to introduce yourself and tell us a little about why you are passionate about serving women veterans? Heather, would you mind starting us off?

Heather: Hi yes, thank you! My name is Heather Deters and I recently retired from the Army. I work for the state of Iowa as one of five Home Base Iowa Career Planners. It is an honor to serve veterans in the state of Iowa and those relocating to Iowa. By the time I retired, I knew I wanted to continue to stand with the women with whom I served and those who continue to serve. So thank you.

Melissa: My name is Melissa Washington. I am a Navy Veteran and the CEO and Founder of Women Veterans Alliance. I also recently launched a publication for women veterans.

Nancy: My name is Nancy Glowacki, I am an Army veteran and I currently work at the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service, often referred to as DOL VETS. Specifically, I work in the Office of Research and Policy, and my main focus is women veterans. It is an honor to be part of the greater community that supports women veterans and is comprised of many women veterans. I think it gives all of us an opportunity to try to make things a little better for the women who come after us. Even when I'm digging through statistical data, I'm thinking of how I can package and convey those data points to overcome very old myths about who a veteran is in the hopes that one day it will be inconceivable that a woman veteran would be given a hard time about parking in a spot reserved for veterans or treated like the dependent when she uses her own hard-earned military or veteran ID card.

Nona: Hi everybody. My name is Nona Mallicoat, and I'm a Marine Corps veteran. After spending over 10 years on active duty in the Marine Corps, I got out and used the Veteran Readiness and Employment or VR&E program to finish my degree. As part of that program, they referred me to a Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (also known as a DVOP) specialist for job readiness and job search assistance, and during that time, they had a vacancy and hired me! My focus was helping women and disabled veterans re-enter the workforce and I loved it. I have now worked my way up to Deputy Director of the Employment Connections Division of the Washington State Employment Security Department, where I can use my role to help shine light on the challenges women, and frankly all veterans sometimes have with sustainable employment.



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HOST: Thank you all for your service and for joining us today to help us better understand this topic. Could you first help us understand some of the factors that influence women veterans' transition into civilian life? How does the transition experience differ for female veterans in comparison to their male counterparts? Heather, what are your thoughts on this?

Heather: Servicemen and women must decide why they want to transition into civilian life. There are so many factors. It might be for a career change or to go to school, start a family, or to lay down roots in a specific location. The reasons are endless. For men, the assumption is that the decision was made to change careers and to enter the civilian workforce. For women, more questions are asked. Are you leaving the military to have children? Or to focus on the family while your husband works? Did you have a negative experience that made you leave the military? The transition is just different for women. Women service members are already held to a higher standard and if we choose to leave the military for any reason, we constantly have to explain ourselves. We feel like we are being judged. As if we cannot handle it.

Nona: I totally agree with Heather. When I was in the military, I saw a lot of women transition, sometimes before they really wanted to, due to family or negative situations that occurred while they were in. I know a lot of work has been done on it, but there is still a long way to go.

Nancy: Those are really great points, and in addition to what Heather and Nona shared, I think it has to be understood that women veterans share many transition challenges that their male peers have, and they are newly facing many challenges that women in the civilian sector have been facing for a long time. As women veterans, we each have our own cocktail of issues that are not unique to us but are shared by different subpopulations—some of us are working parents, some are persons with disabilities—service-connected or not—some are trauma survivors, some also belong to racial and ethnic minorities. We may be facing ageism, may be unprepared for a poor economy or a new coronavirus and the closing of daycares and schools, and any other things that just make adulting hard for anyone.

Melissa: I would also like to add that some women veterans do not consider themselves a “veteran” and therefore do not utilize the resources that are out there.

HOST: Great point Melissa! When veterans don't see themselves as such, they are not going to seek out or use the resources at their disposal. And as Heather mentioned, there might be some judgment of women choosing to leave service. Coupled together, this might not provide for a very positive outlook. How do all of these factors impact female veterans' transition and access to resources and supports? Nancy, if we could, let's start with you.

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Nancy: Well, I think I've seen more assumptions than judgments. It's not uncommon for a male peer to generalize his wife's experience to an entire population of women, and it's not uncommon for a female peer to generalize her own experience. There was a time, years ago, where I'd be in one meeting where women veterans were generalized as all being married to male service members, so the challenge was being a military spouse. Then I'd go to the next meeting, and someone was talking about how we are all single mothers—well, which is it? Are we all married or are we all single? That's a rhetorical question of course... we are not all the same and assumptions and generalizations can really alienate women who can't relate. Now, as for transition, my military career ended early due to serious injuries and my first few years post-military were spent in the disabled veterans' field, so I immediately think of going through physical or mental health challenges—or both—in a male-dominated military and once transitioned, being a much smaller minority among women (only 1 in 67 American women) have served in the military. So, it can feel quite isolating, like there is no one around who can understand. Another consideration is that it's not a single transition—for many of us, things surface years later—maybe it's something that's hard to let go of, or maybe it's something that seemed normal to us at the time. A very recent, and very personal example—a few days ago, I was watching the show *SuperPumped – The Battle for Uber*. I've never worked in an even remotely related career field, but when they started showing what the male environment was like for the very small number of women employees, it triggered something in me. It was like watching what I once thought was normal, an environment I once strove to adapt to and prove I fit in to, but with someone else's eyes. With that comes a mixed bag of emotions—years after leaving the military.

HOST: Thank you so much for sharing that experience. Also I think bringing those assumptions to light is very insightful Nancy, so thank you for that as well, I think that is a great point. I'm glad you mentioned that the considerations aren't only physical but also emotional or related to mental health and that sometimes, past experiences surface when we least expect them to. Nona, I think you have some similar experiences to what Nancy just shared, would you mind telling us a bit more?

Nona: So when I first joined the Marines it was only 4% women, and while I was in, I constantly had to be better than all the men, just to have a chance to be considered equal. That takes a toll on your mental health, and going to counseling or asking for help makes you appear weak... so you constantly have to shove it down deep inside. I think that follows women veterans after they get out... they are so used to burying their thoughts and feelings and not being able to show weaknesses that they don't access the resources and supports they could have. But, like I said earlier, it's clear the military is trying to focus on breaking these stigmas... but they are still out there.

HOST: I think our candid conversation today is one great step toward helping to break some of those stigmas. Along with the potential assumptions, judgments, and stigmas, we know that sometimes, women warriors have negative impressions of their service or

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self, or as mentioned earlier, they don't see themselves as veterans, and this could make them reluctant to use available resources. What are some veteran service providers doing or what could they do better to address this? In this case, let's start with you, Heather.

Heather: Yes I think the military treatment facilities on installations and the veteran service providers are increasing the number of brochures, pamphlets, and other information sources on display that focus on women's physical and mental health. But, I believe the issue lies within the ranks of the branches of service. I know the issues are being discussed and leadership is continuously trying to break stigmas; however, military culture is an extremely difficult thing to change as we all know. As the older generation slowly leaves the military, it is really, really important that the newer leadership to continue to make that change.

Melissa: In addition to that, it is important to create community for women veterans whether that is in person or online. Getting women veterans to connect with other women veterans would be supportive of their transition and help them hopefully change their perception.

Nancy: I've seen a number of service providers get creative in this regard, some of whom may even be listening to this podcast. I've heard of asking "how are you sleeping?" instead of asking more direct, probing questions that could be off-putting. One male service provider started a women veteran peer group, and it started with him as the only member. But once it got going with even just a couple people, he then asked a women veteran to take lead and it grew and did a lot of good. I think it's about meeting her where she is, or what some would call trauma-informed care.

HOST: Absolutely. A lot of dignity and respect can be felt when someone is being met where they are. Continuing this line of thinking and knowing that there are endless reasons for why someone transitions out of the military and the stigmas that still might exist around women veterans' choosing to leave the military, what specific resources and supports are available to women warriors to aid their transition and life after the military? Are there any resources that have benefited you personally for instance? Nona, let's start with you. You mentioned earlier that you were referred to a DVOP specialist. Will you talk to us a little bit more about your experience as a DVOP client?

Nona: So every state has American Job Centers (AJCs), which in Washington are known as *WorkSource*. At the AJCs, there are specially trained veteran staff who work specifically with veterans that have significant barriers to employment as well as transitioning service members. They get that training at NVTI or the National Veterans Training Institute. You want to know my recommendation? Go use them! As I mentioned in my introduction, I participated in the VA's VR&E program, which, near the end of my degree, partnered me with a DVOP specialist. I found the value in their work, so I

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became one! Really, I am a success story for both the VA and VETS and the great partnership they have.

HOST: Oh wow! It is so wonderful to hear a firsthand account of how the VA and VETS resources at NVTI have benefited a veteran. I think the key that we are hearing, is taking advantage of the resources available, even if you may not know where they will lead. Melissa, will you talk to us a little bit more about how the Women Veterans Alliance is supporting women veterans in this regard?

Melissa: Women Veterans Alliance has a directory that connects women veterans with networking groups, local meetups, support groups, veteran service organizations, and other groups that specifically focus on women veterans. We also created a Women Veterans Magazine that has launched in California, and we are working on launching in other states. This is a publication available in print and digital formats that shares resources, directories, and relevant articles to keep female veterans in the know and connect with topics pertinent to them.

HOST: All those resources sound wonderful! We hope you're able to get your magazine out to the entire country so that it can benefit women veterans, regardless of location! Heather, is there anything you'd like to add?

Heather: Yes, the VA has a specific section for women veterans. The Center for Women Veterans page on the va.gov site has plenty of links that women can find. Also a quick Google search can also lead to the resources needed, and with everyone carrying smartphones, social media is a great resource. I am in several groups for women service members and veterans who ask a wide range of questions. The questions can be asked anonymously, but I have found that in the answers, there's always someone who has experienced a similar situation or works with women in those situations. I would encourage any servicewoman or veteran to join these groups for support and resources.

HOST: Great insight. I think we can all agree that social media can be a valuable tool in uniting those with shared experiences and it can really help connect people to the resources and information they are seeking! But with that said, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families reports that almost half of women veterans are unaware of community resources available to them, especially during financially difficult times. What steps are being taken to help them be more aware? Nancy, let's start with you.

Nancy: I think that most organizations, whether they be government or nonprofit, do their best to make people aware of the services they provide and depending on budget, personnel, geographic location, local culture, and countless other variables, they may be increasing their web presence, have an app in development, be on social media, speak at events, or use word of mouth. And for many, that's enough—a lot of information can be found online. I also think that it is very possible to drown in a sea of

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goodwill. I know that sometimes my own invisible service-connected disabilities can make it very difficult for me to take in information when I'm in an environment that prevents me from self-accommodating. Another barrier for some is that we are not always hanging out in veteran groups. I've been asked where to find women veterans and I say everywhere. Preschool pickup, domestic violence shelters, the student lounge—where to find us depends very much on where we are in our life. So, I think it's important to have a lifeguard in that sea of goodwill for those who maybe aren't currently in a position to swim. For some, that could be through social media groups, and I know Melissa's organization has a good Facebook group that shares information. For others, it may need to be a human face. Now, I cannot possibly know of every resource that may be helpful to an individual person, because the best resources for her may or may not have "veteran" anywhere on them. From my perspective, this is where many of the audience members listening to this podcast are so crucial—it's the boots on the ground, individual service providers who are willing to do the research, to know the more-common resources, and be willing to do more research on a case-by-case basis for clients that may just be drowning—at that time—who make all the difference, and I believe that most of the time, once you help someone get above water, they can do more of that research on their own. If I have less than a minute with someone, I tell them to go to servicelocator.org, type in their zip code, and call the American Job Center near them and be sure to tell them about their military service, because veterans receive priority. As you know, I work at a National Office, and I think that the things my peers are doing to increase awareness are fantastic—but it's really the service providers who are out there in the communities that can connect someone to the right service for her at the right time.

HOST: You are so right, Nancy. While many programs exist to support women veterans, it really is the people who are boots on the ground, interacting with veterans on a day-to-day basis that make the difference. They are the ones able to gauge the specific needs of each individual they come in contact with and try to meet them where they are.

Heather: I would also note, having recently gone through it, that the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) has been doing a great job of sharing the resources with servicemen and women during their transition. Military treatment facilities also post pamphlets specific to women service members and veterans.

HOST: I'm so glad you mentioned TAP program and the military treatment facilities Heather. The more awareness we can create about where resources can be found, the better! This takes me to our next topic: gender-specific healthcare. We know how important gender-specific healthcare is, but what are some ways women veterans can comfortably access this care? Melissa, let's start this one with you.

Melissa: Most VA's have a Women's Health Clinic. Make an appointment. Ask local woman veterans which doctor they would recommend. Some VA's have outreach

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events specifically for women veterans, such as baby showers, town halls, or resource fairs. The VA in my area in Northern California has great outreach to our women veteran community.

Nona: I would agree, my local VA Medical Center is great at reaching out to women veterans. We've got specific coordinators, you can choose from a list of female doctors (if you want), and they have areas set aside that are just for women. I would encourage all women veterans to reach out to the local VA to see if they have something similar.

HOST: It is great to hear that the local VA Medical Centers are putting a lot of concentrated effort into outreach for women veterans! This does topic makes me wonder if the experiences of urban-based female veterans differ from those living in rural-based communities? Nona, what are your thoughts on this?

Nona: Just through observation, the rural-based women veterans seem to have less support and resources than someone living in an urban area. They may be expected to travel farther or see more general support people rather than specialized. Traveling farther can be difficult to do around work, childcare, and family obligations, not to mention the increase in gas prices recently! I am hopeful that many service providers will expand upon what we learned during the pandemic and offer more remote and virtual options. I think that would make resources more available to our rural women veterans.

HOST: Agreed! Remote and virtual options are so much more accommodating, particularly when it isn't something urgent. Nancy, what are your thoughts given that I believe you live in a rather rural area, but your work is based out of D.C.?

Nancy: Yes that is right. I am currently working remotely out of a rural area in southeast Kansas, and the office I work for is in Washington, D.C., so I can relate to this question personally. When I left the D.C. area, all of my healthcare was at the D.C. VA or Walter Reed in Bethesda, MD. It was basically one-stop shopping at the VA for all of my doctors, and I (also) went to Bethesda for my maternity and pediatrician needs. I was also privately struggling with severe chronic pain, anxiety, and other issues related to trying to manage my own service-connected disabilities in a very populated area with long commutes, long waits, traffic, and crowds. So for me, the move to a quieter, less populated area with no daily commute has been tremendously beneficial to my quality of life and my productivity. But it was a rude awakening when I tried to transfer my healthcare here. Because I have another source of health insurance, I eventually opted to seek care in the private sector, something that was intimidating to me at first but turned out to be just fine for the most part. But if I did not have separate insurance, I would have to drive hours to get to a VA. Additionally, if I were to lose my current remote position, or if my agency had not agreed to keep me on in a remote capacity, I would have a very different work situation, which could put me right back to where I was in terms of chronic, debilitating pain and anxiety. I think that one thing we've learned

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from the past two years is that virtual options can work—for many health appointments and for many types of work. Working remotely may not be for every person or for every type of work, but it could really level the playing field for persons with disabilities, very qualified people who happen to live in rural areas, and probably many more people.

HOST: Thank you for being so candid in that response. I think what you said about not having the option of additional insurance a really important point. So many of our veterans rely on their VA benefits. And if services are too far out of reach, they may not be as willing to access them, at least not on a regular basis. That is a reality that we really need to be aware of. I really appreciate all of the insights, experiences, and information you all have shared today with our audience. Before we close out this podcast, are there any other thoughts you'd like to share about best practices in successfully serving women veterans? Melissa, what would you like to share?

Melissa: Remember that if you see a woman wearing an Army or any branch shirt, more than likely it's hers, not her husbands.

Heather: To Melissa's point, even today, women are often not recognized as veterans. I don't fault anyone for this, but I feel it is important to bring to light the number of women who have served, who will serve, and who are currently serving. Don't be afraid to thank a woman for her service.

Nona: Women veterans are veterans just like anyone else who served. Don't treat them as lesser or assume that they didn't participate in the same ways as male veterans, because many of them did. Last Veterans Day, we were in a parade and there were two male veterans on either side of me, and everyone came up and thanked them, and totally skipped over me. So as Heather said, if you are going to thank a male for their service, make sure you thank the female veterans as well.

Nancy: Those are really great points, and I would just add for service providers, meet her where she is, not where you'd like her to be. Throw away any assumptions and learn who she is and what she needs. Talk to your peers, share best practices, and also talk about the days you feel helpless to help. And remember, women veterans serving women veterans is fantastic, but the basic numbers suggest that isn't always possible, and that's okay. You don't have to be a woman veteran, and you don't have to apologize for not being a woman veteran—talk candidly to your peers and to women veterans who have used services like yours. Do research on trauma-informed care—something that I would recommend to all boots-on-the-ground service providers—no matter who their clientele is. You got this, and we thank you for it. Women veterans are very strong and capable, and we are also human and may need a little help now and then. That's where what you do—as service providers—makes all the difference.

HOST: Melissa, Heather, Nona, and Nancy, thank you so much for imparting these last words and for joining us for this podcast today. To our listeners, if you would like more

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information about serving veterans, please visit NVTI.org to access resources such as this podcast and our podcast on serving rural veterans or the recorded webinar on Resources to Serve Veterans: A Comprehensive Guide to Frequently and Successfully Used Resources. We are constantly adding new material at NVTI.org in the form of articles as well, so check back often. Thank you so much.

CLOSING: Thanks for listening in on today's episode of the NVTI Podcast Series. This podcast is brought to you by the National Veterans' Training Institute, whose mission is to further develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service and administered by Management Concepts.

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