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Ore. legislators seek support for female military veterans

More women enlisting; bill aims to offer services to help women cope with combat stress, trauma

By: Lauren Fox

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Since 2002, 170,000 women have served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. With women making up 10 percent of the troops on duty, two legislators are concerned that the needs of returning female veterans are not being met in Oregon.

HB 2718, sponsored by Rep. Sara Gelser (D-Corvallis) and Sen. Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose), would create a task force to study and make suggestions about services Oregon should offer to women veterans. The bill passed unanimously in the House and has moved to the Senate floor for consideration.

"Woman veterans have unique needs that must be addressed when they come home from serving our country," Gelser said. "With more and more women enlisting, we must be sure our services are responsive to their needs. All of our veterans deserve comprehensive, quality services."

Gelser said women do not have access to the same number of in-patient treatment facilities as men. Although the state has several clinics for men, there are no in-patient facilities in the state for female veterans who need substance abuse treatment or extensive mental health therapy to cope with the trauma they experienced in combat.

University psychology professor Jennifer J. Freyd said it is common for women coming back from combat to have

experienced the same trauma of war as men, but also to have encountered some form of sexual abuse, which makes their need for treatment and support even more essential.

"Some people can walk away from trauma without any side effect, but the combination of sexual assault and combat trauma makes that scenario less likely," she said.

Brandon Jackson, a spokesperson from the Veterans' Services of Lane County, said the organization offers post-traumatic stress disorder counseling specifically for women returning from the military at no cost.

Freyd explained that some of the side effects of combat stress for women include difficulties feeling safe, problems with alcohol or drugs and depression.

"There are severe consequences for victims of betrayal trauma," Freyd said. "It is not unusual for a woman to feel betrayed by a commander who has put her in a dangerous situation. That kind of betrayal affects how a woman fosters relationships for quite some time after the incident."

Freyd added that women are forced to cope with combat stress differently than men because of social conditioning. Gelser understands the adjustment time for women is often cut short because of family responsibilities.

"Women are unique because they tend to have significant family responsibilities that they must nurture for when they return home," Gelser said. "Women have to balance their recovery with the role they play in their family."

However, Maj. Joelle Rankins Goodwin, who teaches in the University's military science program, said she doesn't notice any discrepancies between the state's support for women and its support for men.

"We do an awesome job providing services to all of our soldiers," she said. "At the same time, it can't hurt to do research just to find out if there are any gaps in the state."

As a woman who served 22 years in the military, Rankins Goodwin said she has never felt as if she has been treated any differently than her male counterparts.

Women in Eugene have started to form community groups in an effort to bring military women camaraderie.

Eugene veteran Sonja Fry started a women's veterans club in Eugene in November, which has already grown to include 32 members. She said services from Veterans Affairs have improved dramatically since her time in the service in the 1980s.

"It has gotten so much better that I can't believe it, and it will probably keep getting better in the future," she said.

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