



## **Summary of the Panel: Report Presented Sept. 30, 2011**

### ***The Road to Stability:***

#### ***A discussion about the barriers women veterans face when they come home.***

**Presented to the WDVA Women Veterans Summit, June 18, 2011, by  
Catholic Community Services; Seattle University's Project on Family Homelessness; and WDVA  
*Special thanks to the Compass Center and WDVA for their help in presenting this panel.*  
9:30-10:30 a.m., Room 408, Meydenbauer Center**

#### **Panelists:**

- **Sally Mary de Leon**, Healthcare Professional; Veteran, U.S. Army
- **Sheila Sebron**, Veterans Advocate; Disabled Veteran, U.S. Air Force
- **Emily Stoutsenberger**, Service Provider, Partners in Careers; Veteran, U.S. Navy

*Note: Additional contributions to the findings were offered from female veterans in the audience.*

**Moderator:** Nancy Amidei, Civic Engagement Project

*Moderator and Panelists Biographical Information follows at the back.*

**Why This Topic:** It seems unthinkable, yet female veterans and their families -- including young children -- are considered to be one of the fastest-growing homeless populations. Overall, the number of veterans with dependent children is increasing, as is the number of homeless veteran families. 23 percent of female veterans in the VA's homelessness programs have children under 18 years old. Women soldiers now make up 15 percent of the armed forces, and as soldiers and veterans they face different challenges than their male counterparts, as well as from their female civilian counterparts, some of which are risk factors for homelessness.

In this interactive workshop, female vets shared their experiences of homelessness and described the special challenges they still face navigating the system. Vets and providers shared a dialogue about solutions.

#### **Panel Coordinators; For More Information**

- Lisa Gustaveson, at the time with Catholic Community Services of Western Washington; now at Seattle University, School of Ministry & Theology's Family Homelessness Program. [gustavel@seattleu.edu](mailto:gustavel@seattleu.edu)
- Catherine Hinrichsen, Seattle University, Center for Strategic Communications Project on Family Homelessness, [hinrichc@seattleu.edu](mailto:hinrichc@seattleu.edu), 206/755-7904

**How panelists were chosen:** Our intent was to demonstrate a broad range of challenges, including family homelessness and its contributing factors, as described by female veterans who had experienced and overcome them sufficiently so that they could speak from a perspective of stability. The panelists had all entered the military as teens; their dates of service ranged from the 1980s to just prior to 9/11. They represented three different branches: U.S. Army, U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force. We recruited them through several channels: via referrals from those working on veterans issues such as King County (Washington) Veterans Program; via providers at organizations such as Compass Housing Alliance; and via independent research. All three had experienced family homelessness as mothers of dependent children at different points after their military service, and all three are now advocates for veterans issues, either professionally or on a volunteer basis (or both).

**Structure:** Moderator Nancy Amidei asked each panelist a question related to her specific experience, and audience members joined the discussion. The audience included other female veterans, leaders of the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs and service providers from organizations such as Catholic Community Services of Western Washington, the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (American Lake), and the YWCA of King-Pierce-Snohomish Counties.

## PANEL FINDINGS

**Issues that Lead Women Veterans to Homelessness:** Four issues generated the most discussion.

- 1. Poverty.** Many join the service to “escape” poverty, but return to it after serving.
- 2. Discharge while still young.** Many enter the service right after high school and miss out on the life skills development of their peers. Said one audience member, “I had great professional skills when I got out, but I lacked maturity.”
- 3. Marrying young.** Many women vets marry young -- often to other soldiers/veterans -- and start a family while still serving. [More than 40 percent of women on active duty have children, according to the Department of Defense.] For example, Emily got married at age 20, which was “part of the culture in the Navy,” she said. Female soldiers/vets are more likely to get divorced than male soldiers/vets and civilian women, and this was the case with the panelists, all of whom got married while in the service and divorced after discharge.
- 4. Domestic violence.** All three of the panelists had experienced domestic violence at the hands of a spouse/partner, and in two of the three situations, it was the precipitating factor for homelessness.

**A surprising fact observed by the WDVA, which was echoed numerous times here too, is that *many female veterans don't realize they are considered veterans and therefore eligible for benefits.* Many mistakenly believe that if they did not serve in combat, they do not qualify for veteran status.**

## Other key issues.

- **Combat-related issues such as PTSD and TBI.**
- **Gender roles.** Women soldiers/vets often feel that they need to suppress being a woman while in service. Sheila commented, “To survive means to cover up being a woman. It’s go hard, or go home.” Conversely, by filling a female role such as becoming a mother while a soldier, women soldiers were sometimes berated by male counterparts for being “lazy” or “trying to get out of hard work,” Emily reported.
- **"Always fighting."** Women soldiers/vets may feel they are always placed in a situation where, as women, they have to fight for what they need.
- **Immediate caregiver role.** Women often come out of the service and immediately become a caregiver (children, parents) with no time to transition nor to take care of themselves.
- **Isolation.** Alienation from other female soldiers and veterans is common, as is feeling alienated with civilian women after discharge.
- **Military culture.** It can be difficult to transition from the mindset of “you belong to us now, we know what’s best” – having all basic needs provided for – and not learning life skills their civilian peers learned.
- **Feeling vulnerable after conforming for so many years.** Noting the fact that all three panelists had been subjected to domestic violence, Sheila commented that it can be difficult to fight back against that violence, after having lived in the controlled environment and strict boundaries of the military, where you don’t protest about how you’re being treated.
- **Being taught to “push down” feelings.** Another military culture issue for both men and women is the belief that one must face things alone – “just deal with it, and don’t ask for help.” This conflicts with how women deal with challenges.

## Barriers to Navigating the System for Female Veterans

- **Lack of Consistent and Accessible Information.** Panelists reported that it's hard to know what you need to know about benefits, and what you are entitled to. Commented an audience member, a female veteran who was homeless in the 1980s, "No one ever told me about the benefits I was entitled to – and I worked at the VA."
- **Rules.** There are complicated rules for receiving benefits, and the answers to your questions are never the same, several commented. Sally said she wrote her own pamphlet on benefits after working as a nurse at the VA, designed to help answer common questions. She said that though a lot of information is available on Web sites, "I don't like to go on the Internet for this kind of information -- and I'm 35."
- **The System is designed for and by men.** For example, though services have improved, military healthcare services were not appropriate for the special needs of women such as OB/GYN care. In a moving moment, one panelist described being pregnant in a military hospital unit with a wide range of patients. Due to the heightened sense of smell and sensitivity that is common in pregnancy, the smell of blood and infection filled her nostrils constantly. There was no effort to place her in a more suitable location. This panelist was among the female veterans who fought for the establishment of a Women's Center at the VA.
- **The veterans services buildings are intimidating – and women don't feel welcome.** Emily described her first trip to the VA after discharge as "terrifying." She entered "this big building and in the lobby there was a bunch of old guys, some of them in wheelchairs, some missing limbs, wearing Vietnam-era hats. I thought, 'Am I even a vet? I don't look the part.' I was in tears. I would have loved if someone had come over to me to offer me help." She said she didn't even know if she deserved the services; "maybe I wasn't even a veteran because I hadn't been in combat." As a result, she hadn't enrolled in the VA system. When she later became homeless briefly, after fleeing her abusive marriage with her young daughter, she learned through a social services provider that she could qualify for housing benefits as a veteran – something that came as a surprise.
- **The face of the people coming in for help is changing,** but the system isn't changing fast enough. Said Sally Mary, "At the VA, before, you would never see a 19-year-old petite young lady asking for help, but the faces are changing. The males have a 'mucho macho' approach but women are learning to have a voice."

## Changes and Recommendations

Panelists and audience members contributed ideas for several solution areas:

- **Helping newly discharged women establish an Independent Living Plan** that includes 1) how to “be a woman” again; and 2) how to function in this new role. “I had been a young sweet girl of 17 when I went in,” Sheila said. “When I came out I could never be that person again.”
- **Connecting with a Network of Women Veterans** who can make changes, reach out, provide and receive support, identify others and offer help.

Family are extremely important as well, said Sheila’s mother, Brandy, who was in the audience. “I ask each of you, connect with other women, and get support,” she said. “We need to put our arms out to all female veterans when they leave the service; they need us more than than at any other time.”

- **System Response** must be changed:
  - Those who work with at-risk women should **ask all women if they served in the military**. Emily, who now runs a program for women veterans experiencing homelessness in Vancouver, Wash., said that everyone who works with women – DSHS, victims assistance, YWCA, etc. – must ask women at intake, “Have you ever served your country in the military,” not “Are you a veteran?” That way, they can work to connect female veterans with services they might not be aware they are entitled to.
  - Those who work with women vets should build in a mechanism for women-to-women response, from health care issues to day-to-day reintegration. “We need each other,” Sheila said. “We need our peers and we need to learn how to be a woman again.” Emily said that many women vets avoid the VA system because of negative experiences while on active duty – the hostile work environment, sexual trauma and so on – and they have anxiety about possibly experiencing that again. Emily’s solution: “I help them by walking in with my sister vets to get them enrolled.”
- **Support each other as providers**. Sheila, who now provides peer counseling and prevention of homelessness and suicide, said that among vets who become service providers, “we push stuff down.” She noted that of the many veteran suicides she has dealt with lately, more than half were veterans who had become providers. “Don’t face this alone,” she advised. “Have a support system for yourself. There is no shame in needing it.”

## **Provider Mini-Presentations**

At the conclusion, the providers in the audience were invited to give brief “pitches” about their services and to invite participants to their tables in the exhibition hall. This is a brief capture of their remarks.

**Catholic Community Services (Lisa Gustaveson)** – Community Services and Catholic Housing Services offer a variety of programs and services to assist families in need. CCS Family Centers throughout Western Washington offer support services to families in crisis, as well as services for children who are struggling with family breakup or mental health issues.

**U.S. Department of Labor (Betty Lock)** – Betty described their development of policy and standards for services to women veterans, grants for homeless women vets and families, and a Trauma Guide in development with the VA.

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, American Lake (Katie Cook)** – Katie said 1/3 of her clients are female vets and many didn’t know they qualify as veterans. The VA participates in Stand Downs and partners with Catholic Community Services on homelessness prevention, for which CCS provides case management. In addition to VASH, the VA provides family housing in Seattle, Shoreline and Tacoma.

**Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (Mary Forbes)** – Mary described the WDVA’s approach to ending veteran homelessness in five years, as directed by U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki. The WDVA provides housing for both single men and women vets (Port Orchard); the Reintegration Program to get ready for employment; and other programs in which the WDVA works with other agencies to obtain federal grants and coordinate local government and wraparound services.

**YWCA of King-Pierce-Snohomish County (Margie Heywood)** – The YWCA provides housing such as the Angeline Shelter; domestic violence shelters and advocacy; and the landlord liaison project, said Margie. They also help clients connect with services via the WDVA, Compass Center and other system navigation.

## **Moderator and Panelists Biographical Information**

### **Moderator: Nancy Amidei, Director, Civic Engagement Project**

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Nancy Amidei is known to thousands of Washingtonians for her passionate work engaging citizens in advocacy. From 1992-2008, she was on the faculty of the University of Washington School of Social Work. Today she continues to direct the Civic Engagement Project, which works with non-profit organizations throughout the country. CEP offers advocacy training, speeches, workshops, and resource materials, for work at federal, state, or local levels. A writer, teacher, and advocate, Ms. Amidei has been involved in social policy from both inside and outside government. She is a former Director of the Food Research and Action Center (a national anti-hunger group). She also served in the Carter Administration as a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now DHHS), and in the early 70's she was on the Staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. For many years she wrote a weekly email bulletin that described the Washington State legislative process. Focused chiefly on health, human services, and civil rights issues, POLICY WATCH helped readers understand what happens as a legislative Session unfolds. Among her writings are: a guide to policy advocacy called, "So You Want To Make A Difference;" and a Play called, "How Ms. Bill Became A Law." During the 1980s she wrote a weekly column that appeared in newspapers around the country, and did commentaries for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." Her activities include co-authorship of a Legislative Simulation, co-authorship of a curriculum for an annual 3-day Advocacy Camp, and service on a variety of national and local non-profit agency boards.

### **Panelist: Sally Mary de Leon, Healthcare Professional Veteran, U.S. Army**

Sally Mary de Leon served in the Army 1996-1999 as an aircraft re-fueler stationed in Germany. After her discharge, she attended college on the GI Bill and became a nurse in 2003. For 10 years she had also been a military spouse whose husband was repeatedly deployed, causing the significant family difficulties that members of the public often do not understand. She described this experience last Veteran's Day, in a speech about the "emotional roller coaster" of being a military family, and the always-present feelings of isolation, heartache, lack of support and anxiety. Compounding this stressful day-to-day life was the fact that Sally Mary was in an abusive relationship. These pressures led to the breakdown of her marriage. After a difficult divorce that coincided with the recession, Sally Mary lost her home, and she found herself fearing for her safety and that of her two children. But, she says she clicked into survival mode and moved very quickly, anchoring her path via the King County Veterans Assistance Program and the Compass Veterans Center, where she was connected with case management, housing, employment assistance and mental health services that she says have given her much-needed peace of mind and are enabling her to heal. Like our other panelists, Sally Mary has the perspective of both a client and a provider; her work as a nurse at the VA Hospital in Seattle for two years gave her additional insights into the needs of veterans. She wants to share her advice with other women veterans on how to work within the system to gain stability and is studying to become a paralegal. *Continued*

**Panelist: Sheila Sebron, Veterans Advocate  
Disabled Veteran, U.S. Air Force**

Sheila Sebron has been an advocate for people experiencing homelessness since age 11. During her service in the Air Force, 1977-1984, she sustained serious non-combat injuries in an auto accident that left her “unfit for duty.” She left with a medical discharge, but faced barriers trying to access healthcare services (including OB/GYN) from a system traditionally set up to serve men. Accustomed to being a respected professional and self-sufficient, she found it difficult to understand or reduce the impact of her disabilities. Isolated from fellow veterans and close family members, she had no support system to help her deal with her situation. She struggled for 20 years to recover before doctors recognized the brain injury that continues to impact her ability to function. During that time, declining health and denial of VA benefits had left her unable to work, and she became homeless – as a single parent. Despite being a published author and international trainer with many years of experience in government, for-profit and non-profit work, she says, at that point she felt like a failure and a “throw-away” in a wheelchair. Fortunately, her professional experience had taught her about navigating the system and eventually she found permanent housing. In the years since, she has made significant strides in her physical health and she has become a respected advocate for veterans, doing the work that she calls “bottom up” to connect veterans with other vets and with services available from the VA and other sources. She serves on the Governing Board of the Committee to End Homelessness in King County and the King County Health Care for the Homeless Network Planning Council, and is program manager for the Veteran-Community Network ([vcn@vetcomnet.info](mailto:vcn@vetcomnet.info)).

**Panelist: Emily Stoutsenberger, Service Provider, Partners in Careers, Vancouver, Wash.  
Veteran, U.S. Navy**

Emily Stoutsenberger is a former Navy journalist who cares deeply about veterans and their families hard hit by today’s economic times and the often tough road home. She coordinates a program that helps women veterans and veterans with families find housing, basic services and employment. Her military service included assignments at Navy Fighter Weapons School also known as Top Gun, Naval Air Station Miramar, Antarctic Development Squadron Six, and Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 40. In addition to her military service, Emily formerly assisted veterans seeking work through the State of Oregon Employment Department. She has developed partnerships with community non-profits and local businesses and coordinated events. Emily has volunteered since 2005 at the YWCA of Clark County providing facilitation in a women’s support group. She is now putting these talents to work in the Veteran Women Program (VWP) in Vancouver. A graduate of Washington State University (WSU) in Vancouver, WA, Emily majored in Digital Technology and Culture and earned a professional writing certificate. The VWP is a program at Partners in Careers, a Vancouver non-profit. The VWP program was launched in late 2009. Recently, the program began to reach out to homeless veterans and their families in a new effort called Homeward Bound. Emily works to provide one-on-one assistance to veterans in developing individual plans to become self-sufficient. She helps them navigate community and veterans services acting as an advocate. Emily herself briefly experienced homelessness in 2005 while fleeing from domestic violence in her marriage of 11 years.

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