

The first Women Veterans Day should not be the last

Laura McKee is the women veteran coordinator for the Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs

Have you ever parked in a spot designated for a veteran and been told your husband had to be with you to legally park there? Have you ever visited a Veterans Affairs hospital or clinic with your spouse and been told your appointment cannot be verified because the front desk staff are looking for your spouse's name? Have you ever attended a conference for the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans or American Veterans and been told you were not registered, because they were looking for your name under the Women's Auxiliary? Many women veterans, including me, have dealt with these scenarios and more.



There was a time when women were forbidden to serve in the military. Prior to 1917, if a woman wanted to serve, she had to disguise herself as a man, change her name and risk being thrown in jail. During World War I, women were finally granted legal permission to enlist in the armed forces reserve. They facilitated the replacement of men who were trained in office, managerial and clerical work.

During World War II, women could enlist in the military in emergency capacities and fill non-combat positions. Although women served bravely, they found themselves jobless and unrecognized when the war ended. They were expected to walk away as if they had never worn the uniform and rejoin civilian life. It wasn't until June 12, 1948, when President Harry Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, that women could serve as full, permanent members of all branches of the military.

Women fought for so long for the right to serve in the military and when they became veterans, they discovered a new struggle. VA health care and benefits, traditionally designed for male veterans, did not take into account the unique needs of women veterans. Additionally, women often felt isolated, unacknowledged and invisible after returning as a civilian. According to a 2016 Service Women's Action Network survey, 74% of respondents said the general public did not recognize their service.

But as the number of women veterans continues to grow, efforts are being made to ensure we have equal access to resources, benefits and health care. The Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs is working to address the needs of women veterans. In 2015, IDVA hired me as the first full-time women veteran coordinator. In fall 2019, the IDVA partnered with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to host a photoshoot for female veterans. The *I Am Not Invisible* photoshoot was a national campaign and photo exhibit aimed at highlighting the impact of women veterans and their service.

This year, Indiana joins many other states in acknowledging women veterans on June 12. This opportunity is a way to recognize the contributions and sacrifices of women who are currently serving and have served in all branches of the military. We are mothers, grandmothers, wives, aunts, sisters, daughters and friends.

We are more than 33,000 strong in Indiana, but without a uniform there is no outward indication we are veterans. If you aren't sure if a woman has served, ask her. If she says yes, thank her for her service. Women veterans must continue to be accepted and supported by their communities so that more of us are inspired to serve.