

# Women in VFW Share Ideas for Growth Potential

## Assuming females are not eligible for membership in VFW is a hurdle many women vets still face

Mar 19, 2025

As the number of women serving in uniform has grown significantly over the past 25 years, so, too, has the number of female VFW members. At press time, VFW has nearly 41,000 women members. That is nearly 14,000 more than in 2019 when the organization finished the year with 27,281 female members.

VFW magazine asked women leaders in the organization as well as those employed by VFW their thoughts on what more VFW can do to attract more female vets. The most common responses included continuing to make the Posts more “family-friendly” and offering child care during Post meetings.

The comments from those who responded to our request are as follows and have been edited for length.

### ON THE COVER

*Carol Whitmore, Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief*

“The VFW is slowly turning a corner in acceptance. Treat women as any other veteran ... on their merits. When I joined the VFW, I did so because VFW is THE tip of the spear over any other service organization.”

*Debra Anderson, Former VFW Quartermaster General*

“Female veterans need to see people like them (in terms of gender, age, and race) to feel comfortable and accepted in the VFW. Otherwise, they see no reason to join. I was invited by a friend and fellow Gulf War veteran to join. I enjoyed the camaraderie and a shared sense of accomplishment. Veteran organizations like the VFW are great for helping you connect with like-minded veterans. You don’t know how much fun you’ll have until you

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jump in.”

*Mary Spencer, VFW Unmet Needs Coordinator*

“The main thing for me is to present more of a family-friendly atmosphere. Between work and family obligations and our children’s schedule, time is very limited. Posts need to be innovative and branch out from what has always worked and create new programs and/or offer some sort of child care during events or meetings. Many service members have families and children and if they see that other children/family members are involved in the VFW community, then that can be a factor in whether they see it as a good fit for their family. I joined the VFW on the recommendation of someone I trust and respect. It also was a way to stay connected to the military when I was done wearing the uniform.”

*Stephanie Butler, Administration Operations Assistant Coordinator*

“I believe that having an incoming female Commander-in-Chief is a huge start in attracting more female veterans. The VFW has so much potential with younger veterans, especially female veterans if they would support women the way they have supported men in the past. The VFW could most definitely work with the VA to fix the women’s clinic.”

## **VFW EMPLOYEES**

*Donna Yawn | Pre-Discharge Rating Representative, NVS*

“I think it would be beneficial and important to show that more women and women of color are in leadership positions within the VFW. I joined the VFW when I was in the Army stationed in Hawaii. I joined the VFW because of the camaraderie I witnessed and seeing VFW help active-duty service members who were in need.”

*Cynthia Archuleta | Regional Quality Assurance Specialist, NVS*

“Many female veterans are never asked about what they did. By the time someone else may say ‘Oh she served,’ it’s too late. Everyone always assumes the man served. We must ask every female if they served before we just assume they are a spouse of a veteran. This question should be as common as asking a male.”

*Brittany Dymond Murray | Associate Director, VFW Communications and Public Affairs*

“It’s going to take time for VFW to appeal to more women veterans. Depending on what their service looked like, they may fear a repeat of an in-service experience. We must do better telling the stories of women veterans engaged in VFW from the Post to national levels, and not just during specific times of the year. I joined my first Post because it was part of the student veteran community at the university I attended immediately after I was

discharged from the Navy. Upon joining the Post, I was quickly welcomed, accepted and integrated into Post leadership roles.”

*Nancy Springer | Associate Director, VFW National Legislative Service*

“I think part of it will be a ‘showing by doing’ and by personal contact with women combat veterans — those currently serving and those no longer serving. I have learned that veterans join VFW to do things that serve veterans, not to sit around and watch TV. Women VFW members should be an active part of their Post’s recruiting drives and should serve in Post (and above) officer positions, both appointed and/or elected. My Post is fortunate in that aspect as it currently has three women Post officers, one woman who serves as a District officer, and recently had a woman commander. I had been an At-Large member for a few years prior to military retirement. I attended a Post meeting where the Post officers approached me to learn my name and to welcome me. I returned and quickly transferred from At-Large status to this Post. A few weeks later, I became a Life member.”

*Sonia Coley | National Pre-Discharge Claims Representative*

“The VFW could attract more women to the organization by doing outreach and letting women know that they are eligible for the VFW. I joined the VFW because I retired with no help from a service officer. I learned that the VFW does claims and wanted to help people that were in my position have an easier transition.”

*Abigail Heffernan | National Pre-Discharge Claims Representative*

“I think that highlighting women more will show that the VFW is not just a men’s club. Focus on the diversity and the uniqueness of the individuals that the VFW has within its ranks. I think articles like this are important as well because it sheds light on the fact that there are quite a few women that are in the VFW. I joined the VFW because I was offered a job by the VFW, and I felt I needed to become a member. However, since I became a member, I have found a family. I now tell any veteran I see that they need to join and get involved because it is an amazing group of people.”

*Denise Southall | National Pre-Discharge Claims Representative*

“A lot of women veterans feel that they’re not recognized for their service. I feel that programs or events that are specifically designed for women veterans would attract more of them. I joined the VFW because of the claims assistance that I received from Tom Parker, Fort Cavazos National Pre-Discharge Claims Representative, when I retired. I appreciated it so much, and I wanted to pay it forward.”

*Katherine Cassell | Assistant Director of National Veterans Service*

“It is important to lead by example, meet them where they are and understand their needs. When I became active in the VFW, I worked with my Post/Department leadership in having meetings that were family-friendly. It is good for VFW members to recognize that military/veteran children represent more than 63 percent of those who join the military. My initial experience in joining the VFW was initially unfavorable and felt like a slap in the face from the VFW Post that I grew up in as a child. Fast forward 10 years and another move across the country, and I was at a veteran-engaged event sponsored by my university’s student veteran program. At that event, I ran into another woman veteran of a VFW Post who was in a leadership role. After talking with her and seeing the positive changes that VFW had made offered me hope, and I joined.”

*Cindy Noel | Assistant Director, Field Operations, NVS*

“Even in 2025, the older male VFW members still don’t see us as veterans while we are wearing our hats. At each convention, the female combat veterans like myself are never represented. We are given 45 minutes in a small room with no participation. No men show up to support. I deployed during numerous campaigns — Saudi Arabia, Kosovo, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, and Kuwait — but none of that counts to my male VFW counterparts who still see me as a girl. We are educated, we served and we are still serving. When female non-members see themselves in the organization, they will come. I joined the VFW after an excellent, patient and kind VSO who assisted with my VA claim prompted me to join the VFW.”

*Kristina Keenan | Deputy Director of VFW National Legislative Service*

“The best way to attract more women veterans to the VFW is to be welcoming and open to all veterans when they walk into a Post for the first time. The VFW does a great job highlighting women veterans in the VFW magazine, on the VFW website and through social media. I was excited to join the VFW as soon as I was eligible, which was just after my first deployment in the early 2000s. When I returned to the United States and stepped on to American soil, there were veterans from the VFW waiting at the gate. They shook my hand, handed me a cell phone and said, ‘Welcome home. Now call your mother and let her know you’re OK.’ That gesture really moved me, and soon after, I was motivated to join the organization that I had heard about my whole life.”

## **VFW DEPARTMENT COMMANDERS**

*Kimberly Napoleon | Department of Michigan Commander*

“It is imperative that veterans’ organizations such as VFW intentionally seek to create safe opportunities for female veterans to share their perspectives. Many female veterans served in male-dominant units and feel isolated when it comes to a male-dominant organization. The newly formed National Women’s Veterans Committee by Commander-in-Chief Al

Lipphardt is a start. With representation from each state, female members have the opportunity to develop initiatives that focus on the issues that are most relevant to the female veteran. I joined VFW because I was invited by a Vietnam veteran who happened to be a family friend. I was the only female in my Post, and today I am one of three after 20 years. Furthermore, I am the first female to be elected in 105 years of Department of Michigan's chartering.

*Deborah Johnson | Department of California Commander*

"Most people assume that it takes women in the VFW to recruit women into the VFW. Although that helps, I have seen a better response with male members telling women their eligibility and their value. Most women are resistant to membership in male-dominated organizations because of their personal experiences in the military. Leadership in the VFW as a woman is very challenging. Although I have been a member for more than 30 years, I still get comments about why my service or my gender does not qualify me for a leadership position. I returned home from Desert Storm in 1993 and was asked to join a local VFW Post where I lived. It was an honor to be asked to join the VFW because I was not aware that I was eligible since I served in the National Guard."

*Andrea Summerlin | Department of Oregon Commander*

"As the first female commander in our Department's 103-year history, the responsibility is not lost on me that I am a role model. My mentor, John Wrinkle, (past Department Commander and Council member) was a visionary leader. He created the Department's Women's Veterans Committee, and I was the first Chair. The Committee is now chaired by a dynamic and energetic leader, and she is doing outreach, surveys, meetings, has created a resource guide and so much more. Despite us being in the 21st century, the majority of women are still primarily responsible for child care and household duties. Having child care for meetings would be helpful as well as having meetings at convenient times. Not all women will be like I was, seeking out the VFW, and that is why it's so important to spread our message to others. Ignore the naysayers and be a part of the team."

*Barbara Loncar | Department of Pennsylvania Commander*

"When having a recruiting event, seek out the females in the crowd. Don't just ask the males because they are wearing a veteran hat or shirt. I was raised in the VFW starting as a Junior Girl then transferred to Auxiliary at 16. My mom's family were very active in our VFW. When my husband and I came back from Desert Storm, my uncle was the Post Commander. He encouraged us to join the VFW. Join so you can help keep your VA benefits. We encourage members to attend meetings, but if the female veterans are raising a family, it isn't easy. We need to have Posts provide child care during meetings."

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF ADMINISTRATION**

*Ingeborg Conley | Department of Texas*

“To attract more female veterans to the VFW, I would suggest more advertisement on our female veterans who are currently in the VFW, from the top down all the way to Post commander and Post member. I served 20 years on active duty in the U.S. Army from 1975-1995. I joined as a WAC, and I missed the family atmosphere, and the feeling of belonging. I would tell female veterans the many advantages you receive while joining the VFW, such as the satisfaction of helping your community, the patriotism and being with comrades that understand what you have been through.”

*Dawn Napier | Department of California*

“It takes just one man to tell a woman trying to join the VFW that she needs to join the Auxiliary and she will not forget that. This continues to happen to this day and then that story blows up on social media. I think now that more women are holding positions of leadership, and we will finally have a female Commander-in-Chief at the helm is why we are seeing growth. Stand up for yourself you earned your eligibility to be a member of the VFW. Find a great female mentor because we’re out here to help you.”

*Barbara McKean | Department of South Dakota*

“The VFW needs to continue to advertise to attract more female veterans to the VFW to remind them it is not the old veteran’s club some remember it to be. They need to show that it is a family-friendly organization. Local Posts need to reach out to their female veterans in their communities and invite them to join in veteran activities and Post events. They need to make sure they review options for child care so females can attend meetings and bring their children if necessary. When I retired and moved to the community my local Post was in, I saw the need for more veteran involvement in our local VFW Post. I felt I could make a difference, so I went to a meeting and joined that same night. Contrary to everything I’d heard about this male-dominated veteran’s group, they were welcoming, kind, encouraging and supportive of my involvement in the VFW and our Post.”

*Denise Perry | Department of Maryland*

“Women veterans are serving in more roles than in the past. A significant number have served in combat with distinction. More women are considering the benefits that they would receive and the opportunity to serve in the military and to make a difference in their communities. I joined the Army about a year after I graduated from high school. I was born on the Fort Meade Army base. I joined the Army in 1976 for a four-year term. There were very few career opportunities where I lived, so I used the G.I. Bill to complete my education. The Post only had one female veteran. The Post commander took the females under his wing and showed us the ropes in the VFW.”

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