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House of Representatives

A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR OUR WOMEN VETERANS!

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. Speaker, I recently introduced important legislation to establish a women veterans bill of rights, H.R. 809.

There are now 1.8 million women veterans, and the number of these women turning to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for treatment and services is increasing every day. In fact, current VA estimates project that the percentage of women among the total number of veterans enrolled in the VA health care system will have risen to 10 percent by 2018, up from 7.7 percent now.

Mr. Speaker, men have long been the dominant stakeholder within VA, but it is past time that VA recognizes women veterans as an equally important stakeholder.

During hearings and roundtables over the past Congresses, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs has asked women veterans to come forward with their own stories about their experiences

with VA. From their accounts, it is clear that while VA has made some strides in caring for women, significant gaps remain.

The veterans testifying before the Committee have told us of an unwelcoming culture within some VA facilities that makes women veterans feel alienated, disrespected, and reluctant to pursue the benefits and services that they have earned with their sacrifices.

VA must recognize and be equipped to treat the unique medical concerns that women veterans have. They must respect privacy concerns and eliminate cultural insensitivity that may otherwise bar women from accessing VA health care and they must ensure that women and male veterans are always treated equally in their ability to secure quality VA benefits and services.

This legislation would take us closer to achieving that long overdue standard.

H.R. 809 would require VA to display in all of their facilities, 24 fundamental principles governing their treatment of women veterans. Veterans who may have felt isolated and unwelcome in VA facilities before will be able to read these principles and understand VA's responsibility to them.

The principles lay out women veterans' right to state-of-the-art medical technologies and procedures for treating their unique medical concerns, VA's responsibility to provide vigorous outreach to inform women of the VA benefits and services they are entitled to, and other important guidelines for what women veterans can and should expect of VA.

Above all, the principles make clear that VA must always treat women veterans as they should treat any veteran, with sensitivity to their unique concerns and the dignity that their service to this country demands.