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Women Veterans Network Continues Growth

(Bradenton, FL) Celia Szelwach, organizer of the “Women Veterans Network” says the network has grown to over 35 members since mid May with new members joining weekly. For now, the network stays connected through monthly meetings at the Women’s Resource Center (WRC) of Manatee County and via an email newsletter which highlights upcoming events. Szelwach, a 1990 West Point graduate, former Army Captain and paratrooper hopes to create a global online community of women veterans spanning all services, experiences, war eras, ranks, and geographies. The group will serve not only as a support network for current women veterans but also for future veterans, particularly those from the latest conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

When asked why she started the network, Szelwach says, “Part of my role as an appointed member of the VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans is to facilitate more outreach to women veterans. Our stories and transition needs are unique, and we need a safe place to share them. Women veterans from past eras continually describe the sense of isolation we feel when leaving military service. Many of us struggle when losing our identities as military officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted soldiers. Those who haven’t served often misunderstand us or have prejudices because we served in the Armed Forces. Some women vets actually hide their service experience because of past mistreatment, particularly Vietnam era vets.”

Szelwach hopes the network will make the transition smoother as women vets from previous eras identify themselves and reach out to mentor a new generation of women veterans. Six members met on Friday, June 29th at the WRC. Women veterans from the WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Shield/Desert Storm eras participated in this monthly meeting to share service stories, humorous experiences, and lessons learned. Future meetings will include VA health and benefits for women veterans, professional development, career transition, business networking and service projects including Stand Downs for homeless veterans.

The next meeting of the Women Veterans Network is scheduled from 530-700pm on Friday, July 27th at the WRC. Szelwach has invited guest speakers from the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System in St. Petersburg, FL. Mary Ellen Smith, Registered Dietician (RD) and Chief Clinical Dietician will share information about the VA MOVE program and relevant health and fitness tips. Susan L. Young, RN, MSN, a former Air Force Nurse and VA employee for over 25 years will share a general overview of her role as the Women Veterans Program Manager (WVPM) and the VA Women’s Health program. Healthy snacks and door prizes will be included.

For additional information about the Women Veterans Network or to receive e-mail updates, contact Celia Szelwach at 941-795-0928 or email cszelwach@creative-collaborations.com.

Celia Szelwach, DBA (ABD) is the President of Creative Collaborations Consulting, Inc. and specializes in organizational development, change management, leadership and career coaching, and diversity. In October 2006, she was appointed by the Honorable R. James Nicholson, the Secretary of the VA, to serve on the 14-member Advisory Committee on Women Veterans for a two-year term. Her active duty service from 1990-1995 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina included redeploying troops and equipment from Desert Storm/Desert Shield and two humanitarian service missions—for Haitian migration to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and for Hurricane Andrew disaster relief in Miami, Florida. Her awards and decorations include the National Defense Service Medal, two Army Commendation Medals, two Army Achievement Medals, two Humanitarian Service Medals, and the Senior Parachutist Badge.