

News

Women veterans take key roles at the party conventions

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Na'ilah Amaru seconds the nomination of Hillary Clinton for President of the United States during the second day of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia , Tuesday, July 26, 2016. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

PHILADELPHIA — Women veterans have become a key talking point at both political conventions this month, but community leaders say that attention alone won't be enough to address the challenges facing their population.

"I think that the core problem we need to address is that when people think of veterans, they don't think of women," said Allison Jaslow, chief of staff at Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "Until we break through that wall, we're still going to have a challenge."

Both Republicans and Democrats highlight women serving in the ranks in their party platforms, and both GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton promised in speeches this week to improve health care options for female veterans.

Democrats also held a party forum on Monday at their convention in Philadelphia to further discuss how women veterans still feel overlooked or ignored. In the event's first two nights, three women who served in the ranks were among the featured speakers.

New York delegate Na'ilah Amaru drew loud cheers from the crowd when she talked about path from an immigrant to a soldier to an activist for the Democratic party.

"I joined the Army as an ammunition specialist and gave the best of myself to a country that had given me so much," she said during Tuesday's speeches. "I returned from Iraq deeply committed to restoring the faith of America's promise for everyone."

Republican Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst drew similar cheers a week earlier at her party's convention, speaking about her time deployed in Iraq as with the National Guard and the importance of strong leadership for the military.

Few of the speakers have focused on their role as women in the ranks, instead simply focusing the same themes of service and sacrifice as male veteran attendees.

That's an important image for the country, women veterans said. Once more Americans see the role women are playing, they'll be more receptive to the need for additional policies and resources to uncomplicate that service.

"The good news is that we're talking about it, and it's a conversation," said Verna Jones, executive director of the American legion. "The more we talk about it, the more people are going to become aware."

"Women veterans are the fastest growing population coming out of the military, but our resources pale in comparison to those of our male counterparts."

According to VA statistics, women make up about 10 percent of the U.S. veterans population. But women at the Democratic event said too often their peers view their service as unusual or different, a problem that can't be changed through legislative action.

"The first step is putting women veterans on stage and shining a spotlight on their service," said Kate Hoit, director of communications for Got Your 6. "As a country, we need to see the faces of the women who have served in our military."

But cultural changes won't happen "if we can't even recognize the women who have worn the uniform," Hoit said.

"At times we are ignored, our issues pushed to the side, because we don't fit the mold for what a 'veteran' looks like. It's time we're recognized."

She said seeing women veterans showcased at the national stage of both conventions is a significant step forward. Jaslow agreed, saying without the visibility, none of the underlying problems can change. But both said they hope it's just the first of many steps.

Jones said she doesn't think the problem as one of malice but instead ignorance.

"For so long, women were seen only as spouses of the military. And there are always going to be people who have that mindset," she said. "But the vast majority of people understand the value that women bring to the military and to this country."

"Are we over the hump yet? Maybe not. But we're standing dead on top of it."

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