



Sisters in Arms Center

From Our Home to Theirs: Emergency Housing for Women Veterans

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Good morning Senator Hickman, Representative Supica and the Honorable Members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee.

My name is Rebecca Cornell du Houx and I am here as the executive director of the Sisters in Arms Center, which provides support to women veterans and their children without homes. I am here in support of **LD 662 "An Act to Fund Military Sexual Trauma Liaisons."**

I have been in the military service both on active orders and National Guard for nearly 22 years, initially as an engineer then as a medic and currently as a Behavioral Health Officer. I am a LCSW and have worked at the Veterans Health Administration, both in the homeless department and the mental health department as a therapist. None of my testimony reflects the views of the DOD or any other governmental organization.

This is our third time trying to secure funding for unhoused women veterans, their children, and survivors of military sexual trauma. Last year, the previous funding bill LD 2263 (original bill in 2023 was LD 1783) sailed through the house and senate and was funded off the Appropriations table but was never signed.

I will be deploying overseas to provide mental health care to troops in the Middle East in a couple months. When this deployment opportunity came up, I had been hopeful that LD 2263 would be funded, because I was worried about the stability of the organization while I am away. It was then that I first thought that maybe we should just close our doors.

But it seems that any time I have that thought, the phone rings and a veteran is calling from their car while it's snowing out, tearful because they have no place to go; or a another call that veteran is fleeing a violent relationship with her four kids and needed a safe place; or a veteran who was stranded in the emergency department with their dog because their pipes burst in the dead of winter. So, we won't close but our organization's future remains at risk and we are asking you to provide us with the funding necessary to grow into a fully operational organization.

All of the data is there. We know this is an issue. Even though homelessness is decreasing with the veteran population we know it has increased with the women veteran population. We have narrowed it down and figured out that suicide in the women veteran population is

directly linked to a history of MST. We also know there has been a recent spike in suicide in the women veteran population. Additionally, women veterans who experienced MST are twice as likely to be homeless (Dept. of Veterans Affairs data).

The building is there. The data is there. The need is evident. The community surrounding the veterans is strong and dedicated. Everything is there except the sustainable funding source, which is what we are reaching out to you for. LD 662 is vitally important to the future of the Sisters in Arms Center. It is the compassion demonstrated by the community that drives us to continue to do this often-difficult work. With proper funding, we can support not only the homeless female veterans, their children, and also all veterans suffering from MST.

Thank you for your consideration of LD 662, I am happy to answer any questions.

Data derived from the Dept. of Veteran Affairs research and is cited in other testimony:

- **Data: Children are a significant additional struggle for women veterans who are homeless- we are the only shelter that provides services exclusively for women veterans and their children in Maine**
- **Data: 1 in 3 women veterans have experienced military sexual trauma**
- **Data: Women veterans who experienced MST are twice as likely to be homeless**
- **Data: We have seen a recent spike in women veteran suicide largely associated with a history of MST (need for therapist)**
- **10,000 women veterans in the state of Maine**

Maine's female veterans emphasize importance of Sisters in Arms Center amid funding struggles

"We're always overlooked," Andrea Johnson said. She served 13 years in the Air Force and took to the Sisters in Arms Center for support after a traumatic assault.



Author: Pearl Small Published: 7:49 PM EDT June 10, 2024

AUGUSTA, Maine — As a mom of four, nothing can get in the way of Andrea Johnson playing with her kids. A permanent shoulder injury she received during her 13 years in the Air Force is no exception to that rule. With the way she was swinging her daughter around, you wouldn't even be able to tell, but if you get a little closer, you can hear her wince.

"I pick up a laundry basket full of my kids' clothes and my arm gives out and I almost drop it on my daughter who's crawling around." The way she says it, makes it clear she's frustrated.

Johnson stays strong, but her injury is debilitating and managing it is a struggle she faces every day. On top of this, an added struggle is revealed when she explains how she got the injury. It's not from combat or training, but rather from an assault she endured.

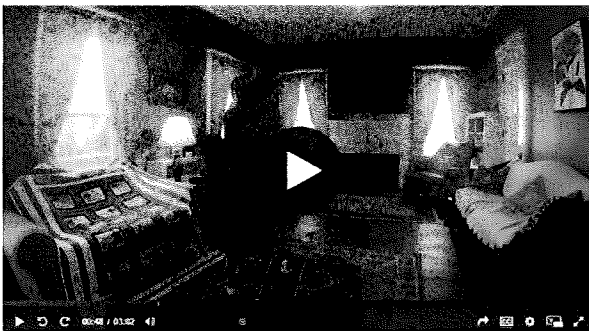
In 2007, when she was deployed in Iraq, Johnson says she was carrying 100 pounds of Kevlar gear over her left shoulder when a male tech sergeant, who was also her superior, assaulted her. "He yanks the Kevlar gear over my shoulder and whipped me around because he didn't like the fact I walked away from him," Johnson said.

Unfortunately, incidents like the ones Johnson described are far too common in the military. The statistics are staggering. In Maine, more than 40 percent of female veterans report experiencing military sexual harassment or military sexual trauma, according to the Journal of Military, Veteran, and Family Health. Nationally, it is about 1 in 3.

Johnson can see traces of the statistics in her own experiences. "In my first year of the military, there were 15 female airmen in my unit. Eight of them were either physically assaulted or sexually assaulted that year," she said.

The shoulder injury wasn't the only assault Johnson endured while serving, but it was the most significant one, and also left her with an emotional wound. "I was so emotionally drained and emotionally charged by dealing with my traumas."

Even years after leaving the service, Johnson continued to suffer. She had never truly processed what had happened and was struggling to cope with the mental toll it had taken on her. "You don't move on, you don't go through it, you experience it and it becomes a part of you."



Last October, during one of her lowest points, Johnson became homeless. She says, at that time, she had lost all hope for a better life. That is, until she was welcomed into the Sisters in Arms Center in Augusta, where Johnson says they gave her back nearly everything she had lost. "These women helped me get back to my husband and get

back to my children." At the residential center, Johnson was able to find women who had gone through the same struggles, connect with them and work towards healing.

"It helped me push through my grief and my anxiety and my depression and my anger in regards to what had happened to me," Johnson said.

The residential center has been open since 2022, providing housing and help to struggling female veterans, many of whom have experienced physical or sexual trauma. "This is just a place for them to feel safe and connect with their sisters and then get back on their feet," Executive Director at the Sisters in Arms Center Rebecca Cornell du Houx said.

Relatively new, the center is still finding its footing, and several challenges have popped up along the way.

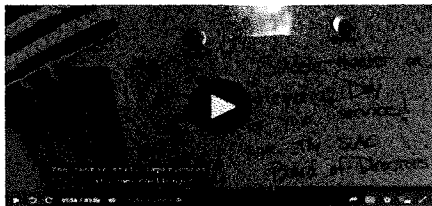


"Our biggest barrier right now is a staffing issue,"

Cornell du Houx said. The center relies mostly on volunteers, but because of that, they don't have anyone working there full time, which du Houx says is not

sustainable. She says they experience a lot of delays when taking women in because they don't have someone available to watch over and support them. **"If we had a full time position we could increase the amount of women veterans we are able to take."**

For those reasons, Cornell du Houx says the SIAC made efforts to gain funding for two full time positions. They received a sponsor from Democratic Representative Morgan Reilly who helped introduce LD 2263, a bill that would fund staffing for the SIAC. Those at the Sisters in Arms Center thought they were in the clear when the bill passed through the Maine House and Senate with flying colors, but then it hit a roadblock when it got to the Legislature's Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee.



"I didn't expect it to be such a tremendous hurdle,"
Cornell du Houx said.

In appropriations, they made adjustments, only approving funding for one full-time position. The bill was then sent back to the Legislature to be voted on again, but did not make it through the House in time before the legislative session ended. A spokesperson for the Legislature's House Democratic Office said the House did not put the bill up for a vote because the Governor had indicated she would not accept any additional bills on veto day.

However, representatives for Gov. Mills say it was a legal decision made by the House Republican leader that stopped the bill. The Senate approved the bill on May 10, known as Veto Day and also the last day of the legislative session. The bill was then sent to the House, but because of timing, was not voted on.

"The House Republican leader had informed the governor's office that if the House was going to take up the bills passed by the Senate [including LD 2263], he would object to its doing so, which would raise serious legal questions about the Legislature's ability to enact bills on that day."

Either way, Cornell du Houx believes if the bill had been seen from the right level of importance, passing it wouldn't have been so delayed in the first place. "If it didn't get into the budget and it didn't go through until the end, then it ultimately wasn't something that was a priority for them."

The same feeling is felt by women like Johnson, who know what it's like to rely on the SIAC's care.

"We're always overlooked, a lot of people don't realize that. It makes me so angry because I served my country. I willingly signed my life away and the one trauma that stood out from my entire time being deployed was my assault."

Rep. Reilly says he looks forward to working with colleagues, advocates, and Gov. Mills to secure this funding in the next legislative session, of 2025. **Until then, the Sisters In Arms Center will have to make do, something Cornell du Houx says will be hard, but not impossible. "We don't really have a choice. There's a need there and we have an obligation to fill it."**

Cornell du Houx is even leaving her current job to take up a full-time position at the center. It's a risk she's willing to take, and with women like Johnson around her, she's reminded everyday why it's so important.

"I'm stronger by these women, I'm stronger by the organization, and I'm stronger because I had a safe place to go to when I was at my lowest," Johnson said.

Link to article:

[Center supporting Maine's women veterans amid funding struggles | newscentermaine.com](https://www.newscentermaine.com/story/news/local/2024/03/28/sisters-in-arms-center-funding-struggles/11800000001)



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Sisters in Arms Center

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From our homes to theirs, strengthening resilience through emergency housing and compassionate services for veterans and their families.



We are committed to...

- strengthening the inner determination & perseverance of veterans
- creating authentic and compassionate communities
- growing awareness and advocacy

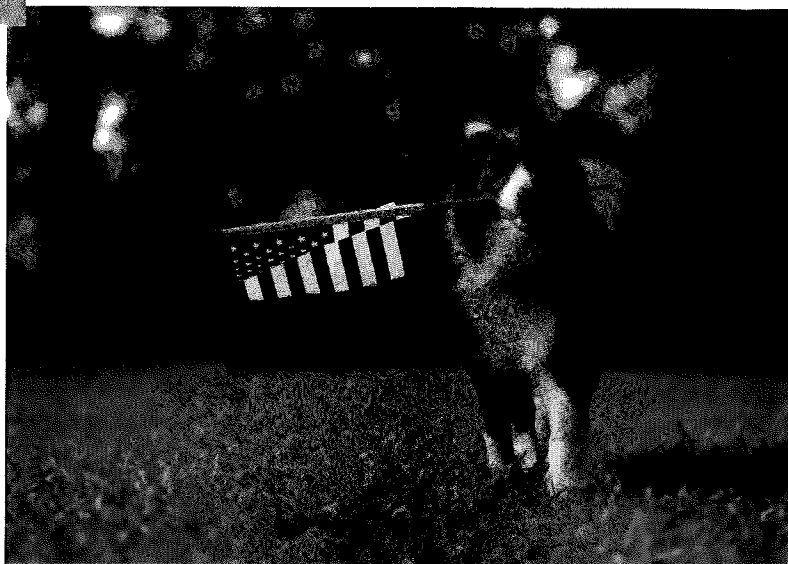
...through providing emergency housing, advocacy and community engagement.





Our Services
Emergency Housing
Essential Items
Community Engagement
Advocacy
Therapeutic Services
Emotional Support Animal Care

We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in Augusta, ME that provides emergency housing to women veterans and their children. Veterans need a DD214 to start receiving services. We also provide housing navigation services to support veterans with locating permanent housing. Our reach extends to veterans who are at risk of losing housing and need essential items. We provide medical care for emotional support animals through a partnership with Windsor Veterinary Clinic.



Our Leadership

The majority of our talented and disciplined Board of Directors are veterans, many who have experienced a time when they had to lean on their sisters or brothers for support. A couple have experienced poverty and being unhoused. Others are open about experiences with post-trauma symptoms. All of which are dedicated to supporting their fellow veterans with strong integrity and compassion.

Contact Us

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