Background
Women who have served in the U.S. military are often referred to as “invisible veterans” because their service contributions, up until the 1970s, went largely unrecognized by politicians, the media, academia, and the general public. Women's participation in the U.S. Armed Forces demonstrates the persistence of generations of women who fought against a traditionally male-dominated institution. It has also paved the way for today’s military women who have the privilege of serving their country, not as women, but as Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen.

Today’s women veterans — our mothers, sisters, daughters, and nieces who served in uniform — make up approximately 10% of the veteran population. While AMVETS, the most inclusive Congressionally chartered veteran service organization in the country, has always considered meeting the needs of women veterans a priority, these needs remain largely unmet by systems that haven't evolved fast enough to keep pace with their needs.

About 1 in 5 women who use the VA healthcare system have reportedly experienced Military Sexual Trauma, or MST, during service. Also, while domestic violence is prevalent among women living in the U.S. overall, one third of women veterans experience domestic violence in their lifetime compared to less than a quarter of civilian women.

These trends cannot be allowed to continue. But the statistics tell only part of the story. Women who have served in the military underutilize VA care and access benefits, largely due to a lack of knowledge about VA benefits and available services. Also, post traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder remain the two most prevalent service-connected disabling conditions for women veterans.

This partially explains why women veterans have the fastest growing rate of suicide among veterans overall, with women who served being 1.8 times more likely to die by suicide than women who did not. According to research, unhealthy relationships, including family problems, friend problems, and...
problems with a partner each increased odds of suicide attempt more among female than male veterans. Tenuous or unsupportive relationships observed in qualitative work among woman veterans who died by suicide.

Perceived burdensomeness is associated with suicidal ideation among female veterans with history of MST, and past or current physical or sexual abuse, including MST, is more strongly associated with suicidal ideation among males than females. Sexual harassment is also linked to suicidal ideation among woman veterans, after accounting for mental health conditions.

The “Respect Our SHEROES and their Experiences” (ROSE) Act of 2019

Concerns related to women veterans, both systemic and within the individual, contribute to the hardships of being a woman veteran, especially when the lack of support systems available to help them deal with the risks factors for suicide exacerbate those problems. AMVETS intends to confront two major suicide risk factors, sexual trauma and domestic violence, through support for new legislation intended to improve the women veterans experience by meaningfully and more comprehensively addressing those problems in a continuum-based approach.

AMVETS believes a bill that addresses the entire women veterans experience as it relates to both domestic violence and military sexual trauma, rather than deal with them as single issues, is the most effective way to proceed and should be introduced in the Senate and House this session. The Military Justice Improvement and Violence Against Women Veterans Acts, both of which were introduced during the last session of concern, offer the best path forward in addressing the issues discussed.

We also propose that this multidimensional bill be entitled the “Respect Our SHEROES and their Experiences Act, or ROSE Act, of 2019, in honor of WWI Nurse Rose Heavren. Rose Heavren served overseas with the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I. Her work led directly to the creation of the Army Nurse Corps in 1901 and the Navy Nurse Corps in 1908. With the creation of these two nursing corps, women became official members of the American military for the first time in history.

ACTION: AMVETS seeks bipartisan Congressional support for the ROSE Act. Ideally, the bill should be introduced in the Senate/House of Representatives either by a woman veteran whose life embodies the importance and necessity of caring for her fellow veterans in their time of need or by any member who did not serve in uniform but is willing to take up this cause on behalf of the women veterans with which they have served either in the military and/or Congress.