

Women's Outreach Program Overview

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The Women's Outreach Program lays the foundation for working with partners to improve our understanding about the challenges faced by women who served in the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP, as well as former women First Responders. The program is designed to advance the capacity for sharing information about services and best practices, create bridges between the support communities and guide future initiatives.

Life After Service

For the remarkable women in uniform, whether military, RCMP and former First Responders, service means accepting the risks of performing hazardous duties or being placed in harm's way, and for Veterans, putting one's life on the line for their country. Their duty was often physically and psychologically demanding, at times dangerous, especially during exercises, operational deployments, and combat operations. They pushed their limits and accomplished the extraordinary with highly motivated teams almost every day.

While this brings great pride to the women who served, some aspects of their service had undesirable lasting effects. They were prone to occupational injuries and illnesses, including wear and tear from intense training and service with ill-fitting equipment, conducted in a manner that did not consider biological differences due to gender neutral policies. Some were exposed to toxic chemicals potentially affecting their reproductive system or a pregnancy, or placing them at risk for serious diseases such as cancer. The devastating short- and long-term impacts of the LGBT purge, harassment, discrimination, racism, and sexual misconduct within the organisation for those with lived experiences, cannot be understated.

The transition to becoming a Veteran or a civilian can be quite challenging. Many women have significant service-related health or social issues when they complete their service. Some may feel aimless, lonely, and have difficulty finding new purpose. Chronic pain, mobility challenges, poor mental health, lack of a family doctor, underemployment, poverty, turbulent or broken couple and family relationships, housing insecurity, homelessness, and even suicide, can affect this community. The challenges are further amplified for people with intersecting lived experiences, including gender diverse, Indigenous, black and visible minority communities, and women with disabilities. If women were the subject of harmful conduct during their careers, it adds a layer of

complexity to their needs. Some women have an ongoing battle to prove their illness and/or injuries are service-related, further creating stress and barriers to wellness. How well women adapt, heal, and live their new lives once no longer in uniform is much dependent on having a strong social network and appropriate community support, benefits and services that help them transition and meet their unique needs.

Women's Outreach

Respect Forums recognizes that women's experiences and needs are different from those of men, hence the creation of a program focused on women. Women's Outreach seeks to connect organizations that are truly designed for women in uniform and help champion their interests. To achieve this, the Women's Outreach Program consists of three (3) areas of activity, or Lines of Effort (LoEs).

Lines of Effort (LoEs)

1 - Understand the environment

Understanding the existing community services and how to access them, and being aware of both current and past research studies can help further shape and guide initiatives that will benefit women who wore the uniform.

The goals for this LoE are to:

- Review the literature and attend conferences regarding the support needs of women who wore the uniform and identify the common themes in regards to their needs
- Search the various organizations supporting women in uniform across Canada and identify potential gaps in support services
- Support the needs for collaboration and learning within the support community
- Help identify potential research initiatives and support them as appropriate
- Bring a greater gender perspective to Respect Forums and to other events
- Create and maintain a central repository for current research and reports, publications, and other resources related to servicewomen.

2 - Expand the support network

Engaging community supports, experts, advocacy groups, and external partners fosters greater sharing of strategies, successes and lessons in supporting these women in the

community. Maintaining the RespectMap is key to helping organizations find each other to offer the best combination of services and resources.

The goals for this LoE are to:

- Engage contacts and establish new ones within all uniformed services
- Promote trust and collaboration through professional communications and follow-up
- Develop and grow strategic partnerships when opportunities present
- Educate and recruit more organizations to the RespectMap

3 – Advise and collaborate on forums/events focused on women

The main effort of Women’s Outreach is to collaborate on forums, conferences and events, and to network, discuss and advise about women’s specific needs. These knowledge-sharing events help open dialogue on the challenges women experience, encourage collaboration to find solutions, and help inform organisations about major initiatives.

The goals for this LoE are to:

- Participate in events for or about women Veterans and former First Responders
- Conduct forums and collaborate with other partners in additional information sharing events

National Women’s Outreach Coordinator

Reporting to the Director of National Programs, the National Women’s Outreach Coordinator (NWOC) is responsible for implementing and updating the Women’s Outreach Program. Leading the program, the NWOC engages with and connects supporting organizations, identifies opportunities for collaboration, reports on activities, and ensures the goals of the program support those of Respect Forum.

The NWOC works closely with the Respect Forum Regional Coordinators and Local Meeting Facilitators to learn about networking opportunities and leverage their forums and community connections.

Conclusion

Connecting like-minded women and support organizations through collaboration, creates communities of understanding, support and encouragement for our incredible women Veterans and former First Responders across the country. Together with our partners, we will continue to build an even more robust safety net and help women face adversity, break down barriers, rise and move forward towards a new healthy and fulfilling life.