

'This Event Offers So Much'

For a decade, the VFW Department of Pennsylvania's Women Veterans Conference has provided women veterans with a safe place to learn and connect with one another

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In its 10th year, the annual VFW Department of Pennsylvania's Women Veterans Conference boasted its largest turnout during Women's History Month in March.

Hosting more than 165 women veterans from across Pennsylvania at the Pittsburgh Marriott North on March 24-26, the conference provided everything from seminars and workshops to VFW service officers and opportunities to build camaraderie.

"It was amazing to see the women have a great time and, aside from the seminars and materials we send home with them, get to embrace and renew friendships with one another," Women Veterans Chairperson Amy MacKenzie said. "Getting them to network and connect is our biggest goal, and I think we accomplished that this year."

A Legacy Life member of VFW Post 3376 in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, MacKenzie, who became conference chairperson in 2019, welcomed women of all ages and branches of the military, including two World War II-era veterans. She was joined by a team of five VFW members in Claesa Whitfield, Megan Regan, Kacy Crowley, Roxanne Shearer and Kathryn Tate.

"While I am the chairperson for this event, the conference would not happen, nor be a success, without the hard work and dedication of my team," MacKenzie said, "as well as the VFW Department of Pennsylvania's officers, staff, Posts and Auxiliaries who provided tremendous support for which we are very grateful."

The weekend event, funded by contributions from the VFW Department of Pennsylvania's Districts, Posts and Auxiliaries, provided VA benefits and health care help, advocacy groups, leadership seminars, motivational speakers and networking opportunities.

Among those in attendance were representatives from the Pittsburgh and national VA

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system, Wounded Warrior Project, Million Veteran Program, as well as the Center for Women Veterans' "I Am Not Invisible" photo campaign.

With more than a dozen informational vendors, some of the presentations and seminars included the PACT Act, homeless veterans, leadership and TAP, legislation specific to women veterans and military sexual trauma.

"Though topics vary from year to year, this year's military sexual trauma presentation was a pretty powerful one," MacKenzie said. "For some, it helped them cope with their own stressors in a safe space. It was moving for me to see women deal with these memories that some might not have dealt with before."

In the spirit of the weekend, more than 90 women veterans in attendance allowed their photos to be taken for the "I Am Not Invisible" campaign.

Nearly 50 of them also participated in the Million Veteran Program's research study conducted on site.

"The Center for Women Veterans bringing a photographer to take photos of our women veterans for their 'I Am Not Invisible' campaign was a special one for me," MacKenzie said. "It's a way to let women veterans know they are validated and seen and accepted as veterans because some women don't feel like they are accepted as such."

The event, open to all women veterans in Pennsylvania or assigned to a military unit in the state, also served as a recruiting tool on behalf of the VFW.

From a speech by VFW's National Chaplain Deborah Halter to service officers volunteering their extensive knowledge on veterans' benefits, the Women Veterans Conference, according to MacKenzie, procured seven new VFW members this year.

Through the Women Veterans Conference, the VFW also had four claims filed, 16 with intent to file, 18 power-of-attorney documents filed, 52 individual Q-and-A sessions held, 11 phone appointments scheduled and 10 referrals altogether.

"We were extremely proud to be able to connect with and provide services to so many women veterans this year," MacKenzie said. "This event offers so much. Our women veterans each year renew friendships and, for the many first-timers, it's rewarding to get them connected to other women veterans in Pennsylvania as friendly voices they can phone for the rest of the year."

With next year's Women Veterans Conference already in the works, MacKenzie hopes that the event's example could set a precedent moving forward.

“We want to see this keep growing and hope to encourage other VFW Departments to engage their women veterans and do the same,” MacKenzie said. “I’ll hopefully help facilitate a breakout session to discuss how to engage and host a women veterans conference at this year’s VFW National Convention in Phoenix.”

This article is featured in the June/July 2023 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.