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WOMEN'S LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS DEDICATES THEIR 2012 PACKAGE TO THE BRAVE WOMEN WHO SERVED IN OUR ARMED FORCES

By Representative Marilyn Lee (Co-Chair) & Representative Cynthia Thielen (Co-Chair)

For more than 20 years, the Women's Legislative Caucus (WLC) has worked to improve the lives of Hawaii's women and their families. This bipartisan group of legislators from both the House and Senate comes together each year to create a legislative package addressing issues affecting women in Hawai'i.

The WLC usually dedicates its package of bills each year to a woman who exemplifies its mission. However, instead of choosing an individual this year, the WLC dedicated its 2012 legislative package entitled "Service and Sacrifice" to our women veterans. Our women have a proud history of service on and off the battlefield in our armed forces, and the Caucus greatly appreciates and honors our women in uniform for their bravery and service to protect and uphold our freedoms.

Women soldiers face an additional and intolerable danger while serving their country. As the female presence on the battlefield has become more common over the years, unfortunately and tragically sexual assaults are prevalent. A Veterans Affairs survey reported by NPR found that 1 out of 3 female veterans were raped while serving in the military, and 71% of women veterans treated for post-traumatic stress disorder reported being sexually assaulted or raped. These attacks by their fellow soldiers, often of both superior and inferior rank, leave female military personnel with lasting physical, emotional and mental trauma which affects them both on the battlefield and back home. They have to then function in a battlefield environment, often in direct contact with their assailants, which is pervaded with fear, lack of safety, and challenges to their authority. At home, they face difficulty in adjusting to family and spousal life and even as they seek further medical care.

Accordingly, the WLC introduced House Concurrent Resolution 19 (HCR 19 and its Senate companion SCR5) urging the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Hawaii Office of Veterans Services to develop comprehensive programs and services to address the needs of women veterans. The WLC envisions that the U.S. Department of

Veterans Affairs and the Hawaii Office of Veterans Services will assist women veterans in obtaining medical and mental healthcare, child care services, housing, and financial assistance.

The WLC introduced other measures on women's health and related issues for this year's package, such as the requirement of birth defects warnings in liquor establishments, cervical and breast cancer screenings, funding for the reintegration of female offenders from incarceration back into the community, and mandatory reporting requirements concerning child abuse.

Included amongst these is HB138, Relating to an Automated Victim Notification System to ensure the protection of victimized women. HB138 requires the Department of Public Safety to establish a statewide automated victim notification system to provide victims of crime, surviving family members, and concerned members of the public with information regarding the custodial status of the offender. This statewide notification system will automatically notify a registered victim of whether or not the offender is in the custody of the Department and when the offender has an upcoming parole or change of parole status.

With each year's legislative package, the Women's Legislative Caucus seeks to improve the health and well-being of Hawaii's women and their families. We were moved to draw special attention to our women veterans this year, and hope that this focus will help stop the internal culture of hostility and degradation towards women which has enabled the high incidence of rape and sexual assault within the military. Our women soldiers should not be faced with this additional violence as they serve our country with the utmost dedication and bravery.

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Optional caption:

Rep. Marilyn Lee (Co-Chair), Sen. Michelle Kidani, and Rep. Cynthia Thielen (Co-Chair) (left to right) of the Women's Legislative Caucus presenting the 2012 "Service and Sacrifice" legislative package. *(Photo courtesy of the office of Rep. M. Lee)*