Manatee County Board of Commissioners 1112 Manatee Avenue West Bradenton, FL 34205

Dear Members of the Manatee Board of County Commissioners,

For the record, my name is Stephanie Petersen and I am a Manatee County resident. I am here address several important matters that are of great concern to me, as well as to advocate for the well-being of our community, particularly focusing on current housing initiatives and the alarming increase in suicide rates among women veterans.

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Commissioner Mike Rahn for meeting with me last week. His explanation of the workforce housing initiatives in Manatee County was enlightening. I appreciate the dedication and effort being invested in addressing the critical issue of affordable housing within our community.

Moving on to a matter of great urgency, recent findings from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) report on Women Veterans 2024, reveals an alarming increase of 24.1% in the suicide rate among women veterans between 2020 and 2021. This rate is nearly four times higher than the 6.3% increase among male veterans and significantly higher than the 2.6% increase among nonveteran women. As a woman veteran and single mother who personally experienced struggles, including homelessness. In January 2021, I checked myself into the Manatee County Salvation Army family shelter and I witnessed firsthand barriers to access services in Manatee Count. I am deeply concerned about the unique challenges faced by women veterans, such as military sexual trauma, intimate partner violence, pregnancy, postpartum, etc.

I urge the Manatee Board of County Commissioners to address this crisis by implementing targeted outreach programs for women veterans, including homeless prevention services, transitional supportive housing, and permanent supportive housing, and increase the socialization of women veterans. The report highlights significant gaps in the care of women veterans and suggests communities should take proactive measures to provide the necessary support.

Last but not least, I would like to express my concern regarding Commissioner Bearden's proposal to for the Veteran Memorial Park without an effective system to address the needs of current homeless veterans. While I appreciate the intention behind the memorial park, it is disheartening to see the lack of consideration for immediate sheltering, transitional housing, or permanent supportive housing for our homeless veterans. The decision to deplete the veteran fund without exploring alternatives from the general fund raises questions about the optics and public perception of the commission's priorities.

I suggest considering a memorial for the 22, perhaps in the most prominent space, to honor those who died by suicide. However, I want to emphasize that the urgent matter of women veteran suicide takes precedence over this discussion. As a subject matter expert on women veterans of reproductive age, combat veteran, and MST survivor, I am committed to sharing my life experiences to contribute to meaningful solutions.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and commitment to the well-being of our community. I am hopeful that together, we can address these issues and create positive change for the residents of Manatee County.