

Consolidated Responses
Volunteers of America's Event, May 13, 2014:
"After the Uniform 2014 – Responding to America's Women Warriors"

How do we locate women veterans who are homeless? Women tend to "double up" with other women and/or family, which makes it hard to locate women in need and to provide them with services.

- VA conducts extensive outreach to locate Veterans who are homeless on the street, as well as those at risk of homelessness. This outreach takes place directly in the community, including locations where individuals who are homeless gather, and in working with agencies that those at risk of becoming homeless may use for support. Within VA medical centers, Veterans are screened for homelessness risk during primary medical care visits to identify Veterans who don't self-identify and seek homeless services directly. In the community, VA advertises homeless program services on billboards, bus benches, and television ads, promoting the 877-4AID-VET homeless program hotline. Finally, resources are also available on the VA's Homeless Program website, including a brochure with information specifically for Women Veterans, available at:
http://www.va.gov/homeless/for_women_veterans.asp .

How will integration of women into the combat branches of the military affect women veterans? What steps are the VA and partner organizations taking to prepare for this unprecedented integration?

- Women have been serving and supporting combat roles for years. Now, they will have the validation of such combat-related service in their military records that may be used during the adjudication process for VA benefits and services.
- VA's Advisory Committee on Women Veterans (ACWV) is addressing these issues. The ACWV recommended that the VA/DoD Joint Executive Council (JEC) adopts, in its annual report, a component on women Veterans and female Servicemembers which outlines the barriers that impede women Veterans' receipt of VA's benefits and services and establishes a joint plan--which the JEC would oversee--that would close the gaps in information that may exist, and develops health care service deliverables for enhancing health care for women Veterans. VA responded that VA and DoD continue to work together to coordinate the transition of women from active duty to Veteran status to enhance care of women Veterans. A proposal to establish a joint working group is under consideration.

Do you have any advice for women veterans seeking employment? Despite qualifications and a desire to give back, it can be very challenging to find appropriate opportunities. How are the VA and others addressing this issue?

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- The Veterans Employment Center on eBenefits provides job seeking resources for Veterans, transitioning Servicemembers, spouses and dependents. The Veterans Employment Center includes a skills translator, resume builder, job search and resources for job seekers. It also includes Veteran hiring commitments, job postings, a searchable resume bank and resources for employers. We encourage all Veterans to visit the site today, create a resume and post it so that committed employers can connect with them directly. The Veterans Employment Center is available here: <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/jobs>. For a step-by-step introduction to the site, watch this video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWfhl-eSoWk>).
- VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service (<http://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/>) Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) and Employment Coordinators (ECs) assist women Veterans (who have service-connected disabilities and need reasonable accommodations) find meaningful, sustainable careers. Services provided include training and career assessment to help them reach their career goals, individual counseling and direct assistance to VA specific services that may include limited childcare assistance, homeless placement services and referrals for VA medical services.
- The Center for Women Veterans is collaborating with the Office of Economic Impact and Diversity at the Department of Energy to connect women veterans with employment pathway information, skills training programs, and energy literacy to enter into high-paying energy jobs. Resources like [Troops to Energy Jobs \(www.troopstoenergyjobs.com\)](http://www.troopstoenergyjobs.com), a project of the Center for Energy Workforce Development started in 2011, help veterans translate their military experience into the skills that will help them excel in energy jobs and identify additional training resources. The Center for Women Veterans is working to build on these resources, educating Veterans about energy career opportunities and showcasing successful women Veterans in the energy industry on the Department of Energy’s [Women @ Energy](#) series.
- For employment opportunities in the federal government, particularly within VA, we encourage Veterans to visit the VA for Vets Web site at www.vaforvets.va.gov.

Many veterans do not use VA services. Does the VA share its best practices and provide education to community agencies? If so, must an organization identify a specific program or sizable Veteran’s population?

- One of VA’s three priorities is increasing access. This priority is to specifically increase awareness of, and access to the benefits, services, and supports that Veterans have earned. This is accomplished through a variety of national, regional, and community outreach efforts with both public and private sector organizations.
- The Center for Minority Veterans provides educational workshops on VA’s benefits and services to community agencies, without consideration of Veteran population size requirements. Workshops usually include representatives from VA administrations.

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- The VA Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships does provide education to community agencies and/or organizations. The Center provides training to clergy and others regarding the moral and spiritual challenges Veterans and their families face with reintegration. The Center also assists organizations with developing/starting a ministry/program for Veterans and Military personnel. The Center can and will also share best practices of organizations that are successfully working with Veterans and their families.

How can better collaboration among nonprofits/VA/state and local government improve outreach to our women who need a hand up, not a handout?

- Better collaboration allows for a synchronization of both public and private sector services, supports, and resources. Through this synchronization, organizations are better connected leading to services and supports that are more easily accessed from multiple entry points, needs are more readily met, and successful outcomes are increased. Ultimately this enables women Veterans to have increased access to the government services they have earned and connect with other community based organizations to meet unfulfilled needs.
- Enhanced collaboration produces an extended service network that can provide a holistic approach to addressing the varied needs of women Veterans by leveraging resources, eliminating duplication of services and facilitating timely support and assistance. Additionally, it promotes community engagement in directing much needed resources to women veterans in need.

As we have heard recently, the VA is having problems serving the physical needs of wounded veterans. What financial resources has the VA dedicated to the mental health needs of our veterans, especially women Veterans?

- According to Veterans Health Administration’s (VHA) Office of Finance, in Fiscal Year 2013, VHA spent \$618 million for 156,411 women Veterans for mental health care.

The most effective means of addressing behavioral health and mental illness among homeless adults is to first get them into safe housing. What is being done to improve the effectiveness of behavioral health treatment of homeless Veterans?

- The Veterans Health Administration Homeless Programs connects with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) social workers and clinicians who work with community and faith-based partners to conduct extensive outreach programs, clinical assessments, medical treatments, alcohol and drug abuse counseling and employment assistance for homeless or at-risk Veterans. To improve the effectiveness of behavioral health treatment within the homeless programs, VA has provided training to staff at a

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number of facilities on Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Homeless Veterans; as well as specific educational material/offerings on topics such as Trauma Informed Care and Serious Mental Illness and Homelessness. VA follows the principle that every VA medical center (VAMC) campus and Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) will refer homeless Veterans when they are identified to both the Homeless Programs and mental health services at the local facility, as appropriate.

- VA has put processes in place to facilitate access to Mental Health providers in Community Resource and Referral Centers (CRRC) and the Homeless Patient Aligned Care Teams (H-PACT). H-PACT focuses on the primary healthcare needs of homeless Veterans in coordination with housing programs. There are three distinct types of H-PACT clinics: (1) a clinic co-located within a VAMC or CBOC; (2) a service built on an outreach model, in which H-PACT staff arrange for and accompany homeless Veterans to a primary care clinic visits; and (3) services that are integrated into a CRRC where Veterans can receive a wide range of services including job training, access to benefits, and health services. All H-PACT clinics are structured as multidisciplinary teams (i.e., medical and behavioral health providers, peer advocates, benefits managers, nurses, and nurse care managers) with regular case management.
- The diversification of staff on the Department of Housing and Urban Development – VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) teams is a similar approach for improving the incorporation of mental health care. The Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Specialist supports the HUD-VASH Program by providing continuity of care between Homeless Programs through services to Veterans with SUDs as they transition from programs such as Domiciliary or Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Programs, Health Care for Homeless Veterans Contracted Housing, and Grant Per Diem Programs to HUD-VASH. The social worker provides on-going substance use case management and early treatment interventions to promote sustained stability and abstinence in HUD-VASH subsidized permanent housing.
- Housing First is a key facilitator to engaging mental health care and services, as well as improving the effectiveness of any clinical interventions/therapeutics. Housing First currently centers on the HUD-VASH Program, which provides services to the most needy, most vulnerable homeless Veterans to obtain and maintain housing quickly and then provide services as needed. By providing housing and robust case management services, VA can significantly reduce the duration and frequency in which the Veteran experiences homelessness and prevent further episodes of homelessness. Once housed, the Veteran receives comprehensive support and treatment services so that he or she can achieve a greater quality of life, improved health outcomes, and long lasting strides to recovery.

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The frequency of suicide is another alarming statistic among veterans. What is being done to reverse this trend? Are the reasons women veterans attempt/commit suicide different than those of men?

- Please review the Fact Sheet (<http://www.voa.org/vafactsheet>) regarding what is being done to reverse this trend. In addition, VA is currently trying to understand the differences in characteristics between male and female Veterans who attempt and die by suicide. Research and program evaluation efforts are ongoing to best understand these differences, and findings will be distributed as soon as they are available.

How can we raise awareness of issues surrounding MST without creating a narrative/stigma that all women Veterans have PTSD from MST? After all, more men report MST than women.

- Raising awareness is a core part of VA’s response to the issue of Military Sexual Trauma (MST). VA uses two main approaches. Direct outreach to Veterans and community groups that support Veterans helps to raise awareness about the availability of VA services for MST and increase the likelihood that Veterans will seek help if they need it. At the same time, VA provides education and training to its staff members about MST. This helps ensure, for example, that health care providers are knowledgeable about the impact of MST on survivors and how to treat their particular health care needs. VA also provides training to frontline staff like telephone operators and clinic clerks to ensure they are prepared to provide sensitive, capable assistance to Veterans seeking information about MST services.
- One key component of VA’s awareness-raising effort is universal screening: All Veterans seen in VA health care facilities are screened for MST, in order to ensure they are aware of and offered free MST-related care available through VA. Also, every VA facility has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a point person for Veterans and staff on MST-related issues and can assist Veterans in accessing care. In order to facilitate outreach more generally, a national level MST Support Team has developed and distributed to facilities MST-related educational handouts, posters and brochures to educate Veterans about VA services, normalize symptoms associated with sexual trauma, and highlight the availability of effective treatments. The Team has also engaged in efforts to facilitate discussion amongst MST Coordinators about the best use of these materials. Annually, the team also conducts a national campaign to encourage and facilitate MST Coordinator efforts to host events in honor of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The VA Mental Health Services office has also developed a section on MST on its Internet webpage, which is accessible to Veterans (www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp).

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- Several themes are emphasized across all of these outreach and education efforts, to ensure that the narrative is both accurate and balanced. One key message is that MST affects both women and men. Data from VA’s universal screening program show that the number of men seeking VA care who have reported MST is only slightly smaller in recent years than the number of women. As such, VA’s outreach and education materials prominently feature both women and men, and use inclusive language. VA is committed to ensuring that its MST services are accessible to both women and men and sensitive to the needs of both.
- A second key message is that MST is an experience, not a diagnosis. MST affects Veterans in different ways. Many Veterans are resilient and recover from their experiences without the need for professional help. Those who do develop longer-term difficulties have a range of both mental and physical health conditions. Among Veterans who seek care at VA, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a common diagnosis, but so are depression and substance use disorders, as well as some medical conditions like chronic pain. Therefore outreach and education efforts do emphasize that not all MST survivors want or need treatment for PTSD. Again, VA is committed to ensuring that MST survivors have access to a range of treatment services to meet them where they are at in their recovery.