

# WOMEN VETERANS HEALTH CARE

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Department of  
Veterans Affairs

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## Fact Sheet

### Women Veterans Health Care

- 1) Rapid Population Growth, Demographic Changes: The population of women Veterans is growing rapidly. Such growth brings increasing demands for health care as well as an influx of younger Veterans. VA is committed to and equipped to serve the health care needs of older women Veterans as well—the largest subpopulation of female VA health care users.**

Today, women comprise approximately:<sup>1</sup>

- 15% of all active duty military
- 18% of all National Guard and Reserves
- 6% of VA health care users

Since 2000, the number of female Veterans using VA health care has more than doubled, from nearly 160,000 (FY00)<sup>2</sup> to more than 360,000 (FY12).<sup>3</sup> This growth rate has outpaced that of the male Veteran population.

Among women Veterans returning from the current conflicts, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND):<sup>4</sup>

- 80.4% were born in or after 1970 (aged 43 or younger)
- 53.1% were born in or after 1980 (aged 33 or younger)

57.4% of female OEF/OIF/OND Veterans have received VA health care. Of this group, 89.8% have used VA health care services more than once; 54.7% have used VA health care 11 or more times.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Defense Manpower and Data Center, unpublished data as of 30 September 2010. Compiled by the Women's Research & Education Center, April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Sourcebook: Women Veterans in the Veterans Health Administration. Vol. 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics and Use of VHA Care.* Women's Health Evaluation Initiative (WHEI) and the Women Veterans Health Strategic Health Care Group, VHA December 2010.

<sup>3</sup> VHA's Office of Finance Allocation Resource Center (ARC)

<sup>4</sup> VA Healthcare Utilization among OEF/OIF/OND Veterans, 4th Quarter FY12, V1a, Environmental Epidemiology Service, Environmental Health Strategic Health Care Group, Office of Public Health, VHA January 2013.

Average age of VA users in FY10 was:<sup>6</sup>

- Female Veteran = 48
- Male Veteran = 63

In FY10, 56% of women Veteran VHA patients had some level of disability that occurred during, or was exacerbated by, their military service (service-connected disability status). More than one quarter (27%) had a service-connected disability rating of 50% or higher.<sup>7</sup>

VA is committed to serving the needs of older women Veterans.

- Women Veterans aged 45 to 64, many of whom are Vietnam- or Gulf War 1-era Veterans, are the largest subpopulation of women VA health care users, comprising 45%.<sup>8</sup>
  - Growth of this age group has outpaced that of younger women Veterans.
  - These Veterans may require more intensive health care services as they grow older.
- Women aged 65 and older make up 13% of women VA health care users.<sup>9</sup>

VA is stepping up to meet the needs of a growing women Veteran population and enhancing primary care to meet their needs. This is a major undertaking for VA.

## **2) Leadership in Women's Health: VA strives to be a national leader in the provision of health care for women, thereby raising the standard of care for all women.**

- Women Veterans are entitled to the same benefits male Veterans receive.
- VA performance evaluation indicates high quality care delivery (averaging better than the private sector); however, small but persistent gaps exist by gender, including gaps in cholesterol and diabetes control and influenza immunization.
- Gender disparities in clinical performance are not unique to VA, but in striving to be the national leader in the provision of care for women, one goal is to eliminate gender health disparities. VA has made significant progress in reducing gender disparities for most measures.

## **3) Comprehensive Primary Care: Women Veterans deserve health care provided with privacy, safety, dignity and sensitivity to gender-specific needs. VA understands the needs of women Veterans and is best equipped to meet their needs.**

Comprehensive primary care for women Veterans ensures that any female Veteran seeking VA care receives complete primary care from one primary care provider at one site, including:

- Care for acute and chronic illness
- Gender-specific primary care

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Women's Health Evaluation Initiative (WHEI), Analysis of FY10 WHEI Master Database.

<sup>7</sup> *Sourcebook: Women Veterans in VHA, Vol 2.*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

- Preventive health services
- Reproductive health services
- [Mental Health services](#) (see below)
- Coordination of care

**VA is enhancing primary care for women Veterans across the country.**

The ultimate goal is for each VA facility to develop its own “right fit” for providing comprehensive primary care to women Veterans. Currently, three models of care exist for delivering women’s health primary care. Women’s health primary care may be delivered 1) from within a gender-integrated primary care clinic; 2) adjacent to, or in a special section of, a gender-integrated primary care clinic; or 3) in a separate women’s health center. Many sites use more than one model to meet the needs of their population of women Veterans. VA wants to ensure women Veterans receive comprehensive care from a proficient women’s health provider, no matter where a woman Veteran accesses care. Currently, all VA health care systems and 65% of community based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) have a designated women's health provider.

The emphasis on quality, comprehensive primary care goes further:

- More accessible and flexible clinic hours as well as technology access — for working women who may have childcare/eldercare responsibilities and difficulty getting time off for appointments
- Tele-health for users in rural areas
- Maternity care coordination
- Assessment of and enhancements to emergency services for women
- Specialized prosthetics for seriously wounded women and women with disabilities
- Providers who recognize and can address:
  - Homelessness and special issues for homeless women
  - Age-related health effects: Cardiac, obesity, diabetes, cancers (breast, cervical, lung, colorectal, etc.), osteoporosis and more.

**Patient Centered Care**

Women’s Health is coordinating closely with Primary Care Services to redesign the delivery of primary care to women Veterans to include gender-specific care at every VA site. Through Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs), VA is implementing [patient-centered care](#). PACTs provide accessible, coordinated, comprehensive care, and encourage patients to have an active role in their health care. Women’s comprehensive health care — **complete primary care from one designated Women’s Health Primary Care Provider at one site** — serves as a model for VA’s PACT initiative.

Implementing comprehensive primary care is part of the New Models of Care, **Women’s Health Initiative**. New Models of Care is one of VA’s **T21 Transformation Initiatives** created by Secretary Shinseki to transform VA into a 21st Century organization. Women’s Health New Models of Care Initiatives focus on:

- Redesign of Comprehensive Primary Care for Women
- Improved care coordination
- [Homelessness](#) (see below)

- [Women Veterans Call Center](#) (see below)
- Privacy and Environment of Care
- Telehealth

#### 4) **Women's Health Education**

VA is recruiting and training providers who are interested and proficient in women's health. Developed by the national Women's Health Services program office, a 2.5-day national mini-residency program has been delivered across the country since 2008. Nearly 1,500 Primary Care providers have been educated in Women's Health Care through this Mini-Residency training. This is a flagship education model for VA. VA has adapted the course into a Mini-Residency program for Primary Care nurses and continues to expand large-scale provider and nursing education programs. VA has also developed online trainings for core topics in emergency women's health, with a virtual patient platform, videos and traditional e-learning modalities.

#### 5) **Women's Health is collaborating closely with other VA programs and offices to enhance access to benefits and services for women Veterans.**

##### **Women's Health Grant Program**

In FY13, VA invested \$2 million in the form of 32 grants to VA facilities for projects that will improve emergency health care services for women Veterans, expand women's health education programs for VA staff and offer telehealth programs to female Veterans in rural areas. Administered jointly by Women's Health, the Office of Rural Health and the Office of Health Care Transformation, **these mark the largest number of one-year grants ever awarded by VA for enhancing women's health services.**

##### **VA Mental Health Services for Women**

VA has responded to the growing number of women Veterans by offering a wide range of [mental health services](#) to meet their unique needs. Such services include psychological assessment and evaluation, outpatient individual and group psychotherapy, acute inpatient care and residential-based psychosocial rehabilitation. Specialty services are offered to target problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use problems, depression, and homelessness.

VA also has outpatient, inpatient, and residential specialty services for Veterans who experienced military sexual trauma (MST), and provides free care for all mental and physical health conditions related to a Veteran's experience of MST. Veterans may be able to receive this free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA care. For MST specialty services, many of VA's standard requirements are waived. For example, a VA service-connected disability rating is not required, nor is the Veteran required to have reported the incident when it happened or have documentation that it occurred. Every VA medical center has an MST Coordinator to help Veterans access care. To accommodate female Veterans who do not feel comfortable in mixed-gender treatment settings, many VA facilities have women-only programs or have established specialized women's treatment teams.

## Standards for Mental Health Services for Women

VA policy states:

- All VA facilities must accommodate and support women with safety, privacy, dignity and respect.
- Mental health services need to be provided in a manner that recognizes that gender-sensitive issues can be important components of care.
- Facilities are strongly encouraged to give Veterans treated for other mental health conditions the option of a consultation from a same-sex provider regarding gender-specific issues.
- Facilities are strongly encouraged to give Veterans being treated for conditions related to MST the option of being assigned a same-sex mental health provider or opposite-sex provider if the trauma involved a same-sex perpetrator.
- All inpatient and residential care facilities must provide separate and secured sleeping accommodations for women. Mixed-gender units must ensure safe and secure sleeping and bathroom arrangements, including but not limited to, door locks and proximity to staff.

## Available Services for Women Veterans Who Are Homeless

- Women Veterans constitute nearly 8% of the homeless Veteran population. They are two times more likely to be homeless than non-Veteran women.<sup>10</sup>
- In FY 2012, VA served over 230,000 homeless, at-risk, or formerly homeless Veterans. Of those, 9 percent were women.

VA offers an array of [special programs and initiatives](#) designed to help homeless Veterans live as self-sufficiently and independently as possible. VA's continuum of care includes services for special populations who may be at greater risk for homelessness, such as [women and families](#). Programs incorporate outreach and prevention, temporary and transitional housing, and permanent housing with supportive services.

- The Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program is an essential and critical part of providing a gateway to VA and community supportive services for eligible Veterans who are homeless.
- VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) funds projects that offer communities a way to help homeless Veterans with housing and supportive services. **GPD-funded services include Special Needs Grants for segments of the homeless population, including women as well as women with children.**
  - **In 2012, 7% of Veteran recipients were women**
- The Department of Housing and Urban Development - VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program combines case management and clinical services provided by VA with HUD "Housing Choice" voucher rental assistance for homeless Veterans and their families to obtain and maintain permanent housing.
  - **13% of HUD-VASH recipients are women**
  - **14% of HUD-VASH vouchers go to homeless Veterans with children**

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<sup>10</sup> 2010 Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR).

- **Among women housed in HUD-VASH in FY12, 38.4% were housed with children**
- VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program awards grants to private non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives who provide supportive services to very low-income Veterans and their families residing in or transitioning to permanent housing. The grantees will provide a range of supportive services designed to promote housing stability.
  - **In its first year, SSVF assisted 21,000 Veteran households comprising over 35,000 adults and children; 15% of recipients were women Veterans**
- Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program (HVSEP) provides a preventive and reparative approach to ending homelessness, offering Veterans improved quality of life, increased self-confidence and independence, and decreased reliance on institutional care. HVSEP provides vocational assistance, job development and placement, and ongoing supports to homeless Veterans and those at-risk of becoming homeless each year to improve employment outcomes. These supportive vocational services will result in increased residential and personal stability, affording Veterans the opportunity to return to healthy productive lifestyles within their own communities.
  - **Approximately 25% of HVSEP hires are women Veterans**
- Veterans Homeless Prevention Demonstration Program (VHPD): 3-year pilot to prevent homelessness among recently discharged Veterans through early intervention; 22% served were women

Veterans can also contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans (1-877-424-3838) or the VA Homeless Coordinator at their nearest VA Medical Center for information or assistance with homeless issues. For more information about VA Homeless programs and services, visit the web at: <http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/index.asp>

**6) Culture change: Women Veterans Health Care is working to enhance the language, practice and culture of VA to be more inclusive of women Veterans. A key piece of this is communications and outreach.**

**Women Veterans Call Center**

Women Veterans who use VA health care have a much higher perception of its quality than those who don't. In 2010, VA established an outbound call center to contact women Veterans to, in part, dispel this misperception and encourage them to try VA care. Veterans who are contacted and referred to VHA or VBA responders will receive a 30-day follow up call from the contact representative to ensure their needs are met.

The goals of the call center are to:

- Increase women Veterans' knowledge of VA services and benefits;
- Increase women Veterans' access to benefits information and facilitate eBenefits registration;
- Increase enrollment of women Veterans in VHA; and
- Increase utilization of VHA health care services by women Veterans.

Other ongoing communications initiatives include:

- Convening a National Women Veterans Communications Work Group to advise on communications and outreach strategies;
- Initiating proactive, regular media calls to connect with the press and inform them about how VA is enhancing access and services for women Veterans;
- Videos raising awareness of women as Veterans, VA health care and benefits for women, and a new PSA that delivers the message: “VA is ‘The Right Place’ for women Veterans;”
- Ongoing enhancements to [www.womenshealth.va.gov](http://www.womenshealth.va.gov) that make health care information for women Veterans easier to find online