

Lindsey Sin

Deputy Secretary, Women Veterans Affairs
California Department of Veterans Affairs

Although many of the issues women veterans face are similar to the issues faced by men, there are specific challenges that are unique or more prevalent among women veterans that deserve special attention and support. Women are also the largest growing demographic of the Armed Forces and of the veterans population.

Women veterans, even today, are not immediately recognized as having served in the military and consequently may be overlooked or not considered when seeking services or benefits. When accessing services, women veterans often request gender specific accommodations and may have a difficult time receiving them. Therefore, simply raising awareness that women have always served and continue to serve in the U.S. military is an important challenge that we in the women veterans community continue to address.

Additionally, women veterans are twice as likely to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as men. They may experience PTSD related to combat, sexual assault/harassment or another traumatic event. Approximately one in five women veterans report experiencing Military Sexual Trauma (MST) to the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). Yet the numbers of reports filed by women while still in the military are far lower. Even lower still are the number of sexual harassment/assault cases actually prosecuted by the military.

On average, women veterans tend to be younger than male veterans. Their national average age is 48, compared to an average age of 62 for men. Therefore, women veterans have unique needs that may have not been the traditional focus of veterans' services and benefits in previous decades. To that point, women veterans are more likely to be single or divorced and more likely to be parents than male veterans. Therefore, there is an increasing need to provide healthcare services that focus on women's reproductive health. Additionally, more services needs to address family support, employment and housing services for women who are the heads of their households.

If a woman veteran is married, she is more likely to be married to a fellow veteran, which presents an added challenge to support her as a caregiver or primary provider to her veteran spouse, who may have experienced injuries related to military service.

Unfortunately nationwide, the rates of women veteran homelessness are rising, although they are declining for male veterans. Although there are DVA programs and non-profits that offer various housing models to women veterans, more still needs to be done.

A December 2011 report by the Government Accountability Office, reported that information about homeless women veterans is not adequately collected by either DVA or HUD (Housing and Urban Development). Furthermore, the report found that women face barriers to accessing appropriate housing, either permanent or temporary.

Additionally, women veterans still face issues regarding their sexual orientation and service prior to and since the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”, as a disproportionately high number of women were discharged under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” They, along with Gay, Transgender and Bisexual servicemembers and veterans continue to experience discriminatory policies, a lack of access to benefits and the need for a larger advocacy network.

Native American women veterans also face unique challenges regarding their service and after separating from the military. They may experience a lack of services or limited access to services, depending on where they live and a lack of cultural competency of service providers and veterans organizations overall.

Women veterans are also exposed to traumatic situations such as domestic violence and submit claims for disability due to mental health disorders at higher rates than male veterans. They also experience issues that many male veterans struggle with, such as unemployment and difficulty transitioning back into civilian life.

California women veterans identified specific needs and challenges in the 2011 California Women Veterans Survey, conducted by the California Research Bureau (CRB), at the request of the Commission on the Status of Women and Girls and the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet). The approximately 900 survey respondents identified several major needs. Highest among those needs were: employment, housing, education, peer-to-peer programs and gender specific services. Women veterans also greatly underutilized or did not know about state veterans benefits.

To address the unique challenges that women veterans face, both the Department of Veterans Affairs and the California Department of Veterans Affairs have undertaken steps to assist and support this population.

Although I cannot speak officially DVA, I will mention a few ways they have grown their services to women veterans, as they are often the primary service provider to them, either directly or indirectly.

Federal Services: Under the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has expanded its services to women veterans by offering more gender specific healthcare services, building women’s clinics at its hospitals/outpatient clinics and supporting a Woman Veterans Program Manager or Women’s Coordinator at each of its facilities. DVA also provides homeless outreach coordinators and social workers at its facilities. It also supports advocacy offices for women veterans at the national level to ensure continued clinical research, policy development and informational support. DVA also supports a center for women veterans and a center for minority veterans in Washington D.C.

State Services: Over the last year, the Division for Women Veterans Affairs and the Department expanded some of the pre-existing programs and created new ways to provide information, advocacy, outreach and support to women and their communities throughout California. The areas of focus are informed and continue to be informed by California women veterans, national reports on women veterans and women in the Armed Forces and the 2011 California Women Veterans Survey.

One example of a recently expanded program is the Women Veterans Roster. The purpose of the Roster is to better inform the Department about California's women veterans and to provide a specific forum for women veterans to obtain up to date information about benefits, services, employment, education, housing and outreach events throughout the state. So far the Roster has been successful. Within two months, we doubled the number of women on the Roster and expect to at least repeat that over the Spring of 2013. Additionally the Division coordinates with the Veterans Services Division to obtain the contact information of women veterans who contact that office.

The Division of Women Veterans Affairs also formed a coalition with the California Research Bureau and the Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, announced in October of 2012, in order to continue ongoing research, coordinate events and advocate for women veterans down to the most local levels of government and community outreach. Both the CRB and the Commission have been instrumental in providing new ideas and connections for outreach to women veterans.

With great support from the entire Department and from various women and men in the veteran community, we organized and hosted a Women Veterans Leadership Conference in Sacramento on October 4th, 2012. The conference hosted a total of 230 attendees, one the highest numbers of attendees to date.

The Division also accomplished several other initiatives in 2012 such as: the development of a Women Veterans Newsletter, several women veterans round table meetings, which will continue in 2013, a March reception in honor of Women's Military History Week and collaboration with several women veterans events, such as sponsorship of the U.S. Vets Women Veterans Standdown at USC in July, 2012.

In 2013, the Division will expand its support to women veterans and explore new areas to address the unique needs of this population through initiatives such as:

- Sponsoring a three-day workshop for women veterans at the YWCA of Glendale.
- Exploring potential housing projects for women veterans and their families.
- Supporting the third women veterans statewide survey.
- Hosting the annual Women Veterans Leadership Conference.
- Participating in monthly statewide women veteran conference calls.
- Hosting monthly conference calls with VHA Women Veteran Program Managers.
- Providing increased advocacy and support to very underrepresented populations within the veterans community, such as children/families of veterans, LGBT veterans and Native American women veterans.