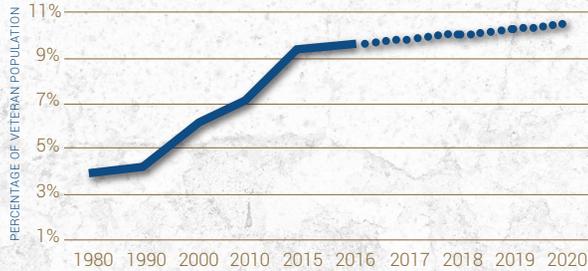




WOMEN VETERAN POPULATION



With the increase of women wearing our nation's uniform and their increased role in military operations, it has never been more important to ensure VA is ready and able to care for women veterans when they embark on the difficult transition from military service back to civilian life.

To gauge how well VA is serving women veterans and to identify areas where it needs to improve, the VFW has established a women veterans' advisory team comprised of four female veterans who are national leaders of the organization. To collect direct feedback from women veterans around the country, the advisory team commissioned a survey of women veterans that was distributed through the VFW's grassroots advocacy network "Action Corps" and our partners at The Military Coalition.

After analyzing survey responses and direct feedback from nearly 2,000 women veterans, the VFW has identified nine recommendations to improve VA health care, outreach, training, homeless programs and other benefits.



About the VFW

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is a nonprofit veterans service organization comprised of eligible veterans and military service members from the active, Guard and Reserve forces. Founded in 1899 and chartered by Congress in 1936, the VFW is the nation's largest organization of war veterans and oldest major veterans organization. With nearly 1.7 million VFW and Auxiliary members located in more than 6,700 Posts worldwide "NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS." The VFW and its Auxiliary are dedicated to veterans' service, legislative advocacy, and military and community service programs. For more information or to join, visit our website at www.vfw.org.



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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IN THEIR WORDS



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WOMEN VETERANS

Evaluating VA Health Care and Benefits for Women Veterans





I refused to use VA because I didn't think it was woman friendly. I was wrong.

I now get all my care at VA.

- Amber Putnam, Gulf War Veteran



Health Care

To meet the unique health care needs of women veterans VA has established a number of women specific health care programs, including the Designated Women's Health Primary Care Provider (DWHP). While VA requires DWHPs to have experience and training in women's health, it does not require DWHPs be women. The VFW has learned that 89 percent of women veterans are at least slightly more likely to prefer a health care provider of the same gender. In fact, those who received care from a woman primary care provider were more likely to be satisfied with their VA health care experience.

Women veterans also report concerns regarding the gender-specific competencies of VA specialty clinics. For example, survey respondents were concerned that VA mental health services are not properly tailored to meet their gender-specific mental health care needs. They also reported that they often face problems finding prosthetic options suitable for women, leaving them with no choice but to use uncomfortable products that do not fit properly.

Women veterans were also concerned that VA is not required to comply with the Affordable Care Act's requirement for health programs to cover preventative prescriptions at no cost. This is a particular concern for women who receive VA family planning services. While VA offers a broad array of birth control options for women veterans, it is not authorized to exempt preventative birth control prescription from copayments.



Solutions:

- ✓ VA must offer women the opportunity to choose the gender of their health care providers.
- ✓ VA must expand its DWHP program to ensure all women veterans have access to women-specific care at all VA specialty clinics.
- ✓ VA must hire and train more female mental health care providers.
- ✓ Congress must eliminate cost share requirements for preventative care prescriptions and services for women veterans.

Recognition and Outreach

Veterans of all gender, race and creed have honorably served our country and have all equally earned the benefits and services to which they are entitled. That is why the VFW was disturbed to hear that VA employees continue to confuse women veterans for spouses or caregivers and even challenge their veteran status.

Furthermore, VA noticed a much lower utilization and awareness of benefits among older women veterans compared to their younger counterparts. The VFW's survey found that older women veterans were less likely to report receiving disability compensation, but equally as likely to have been injured or made ill as a result of their military service. Similarly, older veterans were less likely to report that they use VA health care, but equally as likely to report being eligible for VA health care than their younger counterparts. We were also concerned that several respondents who reported being 55-years-old and older believed they do not rate the same benefits as their male counterparts, which is an egregious misconception that must be addressed.

Solutions:

- ✓ VA must properly train its workforce to treat women veterans with the respect and dignity they have earned and deserve.
- ✓ VA must conduct targeted outreach to older women veterans to ensure they are aware of all the benefits and services VA provides.



All veterans have earned VA benefits, regardless of gender.

- Katherine Keleher, Afghanistan Veteran



Homelessness

VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development have made significant strides toward ending veteran homelessness. However, the VFW's survey shows that much work remains.

Seventy-two women veterans reported being homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Unfortunately, 38 percent of them also reported having children. The VFW has learned that homeless veterans with children experience unique challenges when obtaining the benefits and services they have earned. In fact, homeless or at risk veterans with children were significantly more likely than their nonhomeless counterparts to report that having children impacts their ability to receive health care and that child care services would help them obtain health care.

The VFW also learned that homeless veterans are significantly more likely to be dissatisfied with VA employment benefits and the Transition Assistance Program. They were also concerned that those offering assistance do not understand the difficulty of being homeless.

Solutions:

- ✓ Congress must expand Vocational Rehabilitation and Education benefits to homeless veterans, without regard to when they were discharged from military service.
- ✓ VA must ensure homeless and at risk veterans have access to childcare services when they receive health care and employment services.
- ✓ VA must expand the peer support program to ensure homeless veterans have assistance navigating housing, employment and education benefits.