

ISSUE BRIEF: WOMEN VETERANS

The Situation

- Today, women are serving in greater numbers in the U.S. military and make up 20% of new recruits, 16% of personnel serving on active duty, and 19% of the National Guard and reserve forces. Approximately 1.9 million women veterans live in the U.S. today. By 2040, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that 18% of veterans will be women.
- Women are now eligible to serve in all military occupations, giving way to increased exposure to combat and hazardous occupations, which results in increased risk for serious injuries such as amputations, traumatic brain injury, war-related environmental exposures as well as the consequent risks of developing post-traumatic stress or other post deployment behavioral health issues.
- Likewise, the number of women veterans seeking VA health care services continues to increase. The number of women veterans using Veterans Health Administration (VHA) services has tripled since 2001, growing from 159,810 to over 550,000 today. In fact, women make up 30% of all new VHA patients.
- 63% of women veteran patients in VHA have a service-connected disability. Many have complex health care needs and are eligible for a lifetime of treatment, readjustment services, disability compensation, education and other VA benefits.

The Challenge

- DAV's special report [*Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home*](#), as well as a follow-on report, [*Women Veterans: The Journey Ahead*](#), highlights gaps in services for women across the landscape of current federal programs. Both reports note that one of the most persistent problems is a military and veterans' culture that is not perceived by women as welcoming and does not afford them equal consideration for benefits and health care.
- Current wartime deployments and the recent integration of women into all military occupations have resulted in new transition and reintegration challenges for women veterans. For example, VA research indicates there are higher rates of homelessness and suicide among women veterans relative to non-veteran women peers and that women veterans are high users of VA mental health services.
- A rapid increase in the number of women veterans seeking VA medical care has resulted in challenges in providing timely, gender-specific primary care at all VA facilities, further compounded by a shortage of primary care providers with expertise in women's health capable of providing high quality comprehensive care for this patient population.
- According to the VA, one in four women seeking VA health care services reported experiencing inappropriate comments or harassment from male veterans. Researchers found that women who reported harassment were more likely to feel unwelcome, unsafe and delay getting needed care.

The Solution

- We urge Congress to enact legislation that is in line with the 45 key recommendations made in DAV's most recent women veterans report, [Women Veterans: The Journey Ahead](#), to ensure all federal programs meet the needs of women veterans, and are equal in effectiveness and health outcomes when compared to the services provided to male veterans.
- We urge Congress to conduct oversight, hold hearings, and provide the necessary resources to correct identified deficiencies, gaps in services and improve programs and services to meet the unique needs of women veterans.
- We urge the VA to evaluate its Stand Up to Stop Harassment Now! campaign, to ensure the department has sufficient resources and staff to achieve the stated goals of the initiative—specifically, to advance a culture where harassment is never tolerated; create a safe, respectful and welcoming environment for all VA patients; empower veterans and staff to recognize and report harassment; and hold leaders accountable for tracking and addressing reports of harassment.