Improve Care for Women Veterans

In 2018, DAV released the special report *Women Veterans: The Journey Ahead*, which identifies gaps in federal programs and includes 45 recommendations to improve VA health care and specialized services for women veterans of all service eras.

Today, women are serving in greater numbers in the U.S. military, and likewise, the number of women veterans seeking VA health care services continues to increase—more than doubling over the past decade. This unprecedented growth in the number of women veterans coming for care required the Department of Veterans Affairs to make significant changes to improve access and the quality of care for women patients.

The VA dedicates significant resources to recruit and train hundreds of health providers who have an interest in treating women patients. To ensure those providers have the necessary skills and are proficient in women’s health, the VA began conducting mini-residencies that provide hands-on training and mentoring. VA researchers have been key to identifying specific challenges in caring for this population by looking at the specific demographic characteristics, health care utilization patterns and medical conditions of women veteran patients so that policymakers can determine how they can improve health outcomes and better serve this growing population.

VA research indicates women veterans are more intensive users of VA outpatient services and mental health services compared to their male veteran counterparts, and are at higher risk for homelessness and suicide relative to nonveteran women. Notably, 63% of women veteran patients in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) have a service-connected disability and are eligible for a lifetime of treatment, compensation, education and other VA benefits. The recent integration of women into all military occupations has increased exposure to combat and hazardous occupations, and thereby women are at increased risk for serious war-related injuries such as limb loss and traumatic brain injury, as well as the consequent risks of developing post-traumatic stress disorder or other post-deployment behavioral health issues. Wartime deployments have also resulted in a number of new transition and reintegration challenges for women veterans and additional challenges for the VA.

Not all women veterans’ gender-specific health care needs can be met at all treatment sites within VHA, such as maternity care; therefore, women are more likely to use contract care than their male peers. Changes in community care plans proposed under the VA MISSION Act are more likely to affect the care of women veterans. Based on the complex health needs of many women veterans, it will be essential that care coordinators, policies and best practices are in place to carefully coordinate and monitor women veterans’ care, especially for women veterans with service-connected conditions that place them at higher risk for complications during pregnancy.

While the VA continues to make progress in meeting the needs of a rapidly growing women veteran population, there is far more to be done to ensure that programs and services are designed to meet their unique needs and that women veterans have access to timely, comprehensive health care services at all VA points of care, including its network of community providers.

The VA must:

- Provide women veterans equitable access to the same health care services and programs as male veterans, including specialized services for substance use disorders, homelessness and treatment for PTSD related to combat or military sexual trauma. Most importantly, these programs must be tailored to meet the unique needs of women veterans.

- Ensure proper coordination of care for women patients with complex care needs who must frequently access gender-specific health care services in the community and especially for women veterans with war-related injuries and/or service-related conditions who are at higher risk for poor health outcomes.