
Enact Legislation to Address Gaps and Inequities in the VA's Women Veterans Health Care Program

DAV is committed to ensuring our nation's women veterans have access to high quality, gender-sensitive and specialized health care services to the same extent as their male peers. We support legislation to improve the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) women's health program, and innovative methods to address barriers to care women veterans often experience.

According to VA, women veterans' use of VA health care increased by 175% over a 15 year period. This upward trend that continues today reflects women's growing presence in the military and veteran populations. Today's women service members are eligible for all military assignments which greatly increases the likelihood of exposure to combat hostilities, war-related injuries and environmental hazards. According to the VA, in 2015, 63 percent of women veteran patients had a service-connected disability, and were eligible for a lifetime of treatment, compensation, education and other VA benefits.

The rapid growth of the women veterans' population in addition to the influx of younger veterans returning from wartime service has, at times, overwhelmed the VA, resulting in unmet needs and gaps in programs designed to help this population. DAV's 2018 report—Women Veterans: The Journey Ahead confirmed persistent gaps and problems in the range of VA programs available to women veterans and their access to them. The report also noted that many women veterans require not only veteran-focused care but unique, gender-sensitive services and programs to achieve a successful transition and recovery from post-deployment health and mental health challenges.

Providing women veterans the care and services they need remains challenging as the VA must focus on: a more diverse, clinically complex and younger population seeking care; increasing demand for gender-specific and specialized services; expanding access through its community care network; improving care standards; and training clinical providers to offer expert care to women veterans at all sites of care.

To address these challenges the House of Representatives formed a Congressional task force in 2019, and held a series of roundtables and hearings to seek stakeholder feedback on issues and proposed legislation to improve women veterans' health services. The VA also established an internal task force and initiated a Stand Up to Stop Harassment Now! campaign that proposes to create a safe, respectful and welcoming environment for all veterans as they seek VA care or their earned benefits.

DAV supports the following comprehensive measures aimed at changing culture, stopping harassment and improving health services for women veterans:

- ▶ **Congress should enact S. 514 /H.R. 3224, the Deborah Sampson Act—and a final version of the bill that includes the following provisions:**
 - **A plan to change VA culture and create an environment that is harassment free, welcoming to women veterans and recognizes their contributions in military service.**
 - **Elevation of VA's Women's Health program to an Office of Women's Health, along with the necessary resources to fix existing privacy and safety deficiencies, recruit and train a sufficient number of providers that have expertise in women's health, and ensure comprehensive, quality gender-specific care at all VA sites of care.**
 - **A plan to ensure community partners are well-prepared to address women veterans' health care needs by making training about their unique needs widely available and developing standards that assure appropriate access to care and quality of services.**
 - **Initiate VA policies and practices to coordinate and monitor care for women veterans with complex care needs who are at risk of experiencing adverse health outcomes due to military exposures.**