

ISSUE BRIEF: WOMEN VETERANS

Given that an unprecedented number of women are serving in the military and participating in Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, the VA is challenged in providing consistent, comprehensive, quality health care services to women veterans.

The Situation

- Although women have historically been a very small percentage of patients in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system, VA estimates that the number of women using VA health-care services will double in less than five years, if the current enrollment rate continues.
- More than 102,000 women have served and separated from military service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among this group, 44 percent have received health care from VA.
- According to VA's own data, women veterans receive lower quality health care than men and are not consistently receiving the recommended health-care services that meet current VA standards.
- In recent years, VA has moved away from comprehensive women's health clinics in favor of a health services model that is fragmented and fails to adequately address the comprehensive needs of women veterans. It is critical that women veterans gain access to high quality primary and gender-specific care, as well as mental health services by qualified clinicians.

The Challenge

- Women returning from combat theaters have unique physical and mental health care needs. The increasing demand for services and changing demographics of this population coupled with the need to have more clinicians with women's health expertise will challenge VA resources and service delivery systems. Additionally, more women servicemembers are being exposed to combat, have experienced sexual trauma during military service, and need specialized post-deployment and mental health services.

The Solution

- Legislation is needed that would ensure women veterans' health programs are assessed and enhanced so that access, quality, safety, and satisfaction with care are equal for women and men; improve VA's ability to assess and treat women who have experienced combat and/or military sexual trauma; increase the use of evidence-based treatment practices that are gender specific; and conduct a long-term study on the unique health challenges facing women veterans who have served in combat theatres.
- VA should identify and implement the best clinical model of care to meet the comprehensive health care needs of women veterans using the VA health care system.
- VA should receive sufficient resources to have at least one provider with women's health care expertise at every VA medical facility.