

Homeless Women Veterans

The Facts



Although homelessness plagues all veterans, the causes and consequences of having no home are different for women veterans. Young female veterans, including many with children, are increasingly adding to the homeless population. Outreach that specifically targets female veterans is needed in order to ensure that these women receive the help they need.

- **There are currently an estimated 13,100 homeless female veterans in the United States¹**
- **Women veterans are up to 4 times more likely to be homeless compared to non-veteran women and male veterans²**
- **Approximately 45% of homeless veterans suffer from mental health issues, 70% are affected by substance abuse issues, and 40% of female homeless veterans report experiences of sexual assault in the military³**
- **Homeless women veterans are more likely to experience severe forms of mental illness compared to men, mostly because of higher rates of Military Sexual Trauma (MST)⁴**
- **The risk of death for homeless women veterans is substantially higher than for women in the general population, especially among younger cohorts⁵**

¹ Mulhall, Erin. 2009. "Women Warriors: Supporting She 'Who Has Borne the Battle.'" New York: IAVA.

² Gamache, Gail, Robert Rosenheck, and Richard Tessler. 2003. "Overrepresentation of Women Veterans Among Homeless Women." *American Journal of Public Health* 93 (7):1132-1136.

³ Williamson, Vanessa and Erin Mulhall. 2009. "Invisible Wounds: Psychological and Neurological Injuries Confront a New Generation of Veterans." New York: IAVA. ; Mulhall, Erin. 2009. "Women Warriors: Supporting She 'Who Has Borne the Battle.'" New York: IAVA.

⁴ *Ibid.*

- **About a quarter of female veterans in the VA's Homelessness Programs have minor children⁶**
- **Finding shelters that permit children and offer a safe environment is a primary obstacle for homeless women veterans**

The Special Needs of Women

Women who become homeless after leaving the military often end up that way gradually, following a "downward spiral." Women are more likely to experience trauma in the military, like MST, and subsequently develop mental health issues such as PTSD.⁷ Mental instability often interferes with getting and/or keeping a job and also leads to substance abuse problems.⁸ Because women are less likely than men to utilize VA health services, their problems go untreated and often lead to homelessness.⁹ Furthermore, the fact that women are the primary caregivers to children only compounds the fragile state discharged veterans are in, and increases the likelihood of homelessness.

Although many services exist to assist homeless women veterans, women are often reluctant to seek help. Practical obstacles, such as transportation costs and lack of childcare preclude women from using services. Furthermore, psychological barriers also operate to keep women from getting help. Women may feel ashamed of their situation and wish to avoid insensitive treatment. Fear of losing custody of their children is also a factor.

Male-Bias of VA Services

Women may also be reluctant to seek help because of the perceived male-bias of VA services. Female veterans often describe the VA environment as uncomfortable and unwelcoming; many have also reported experiences of sexual harassment. Furthermore, most VA hospitals are staffed primarily by men, and there are usually no separate floors or areas specifically for women.

Lack of information

Many homeless women veterans may not utilize assistance services simply because they don't know how to access them. Outreach services targeted towards women veterans is lacking. Women need information about what kind of assistance is available to them and how to get it. Furthermore, future research should examine how women who *do* utilize services learn about the help available and what motivates them to seek assistance. This information would yield valuable insights that could guide the outreach effort.

⁵ Cheng, Angela M. and Stephen W. Hwang. 2004. "Risk of death among homeless women: a cohort study and review of the literature." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 170 (8):1243-1247.

⁶ Mulhall, Erin. 2009. "Women Warriors: Supporting She 'Who Has Borne the Battle.'" New York: IAVA.

⁷ Street et al. 2008. "Sexual harassment and assault experienced by reservists during military service: Prevalence and health correlates." *Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development* 45:409-420.

⁸ Skinner et al. 2000. "The Prevalence of Military Sexual Assault Among Female Veterans' Administration Outpatients." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 15 (3):291-310.

⁹ Kelly et al. 2008. "Effects of Military Trauma Exposure on Women Veterans' Use and Perceptions of Veterans Health Administration Care." *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 23 (6): 741-747.

What SWAN Does

--SWAN partners with local community organizations to design therapeutic and empowering programs for homeless women veterans, such as digital story-telling and creative writing groups.

--SWAN has hosted discussion sessions with both service providers and homeless women veterans in order to identify the barriers women face in overcoming homelessness

--SWAN provides peer support and referrals to women veterans in need of shelter or other assistance

--SWAN is creating a Community Gardening Project in NYC for homeless veterans and their families

For more information, please contact policy@servicewomen.org or call (212) 683-0015 x324.

Note: The Service Women's Action Network, in partnership with the Department of Labor/Women's Bureau, conducted discussion groups with homeless women veterans and practitioners serving homeless women veterans. The report that SWAN issued in August 2009 serves as the basis for much of the information and analysis in this fact sheet.