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Homelessness and Trauma in the Lives of Women Veterans

November 2013

This fact sheet is intended to raise awareness of the prevalence and impact of trauma in the lives of women Veterans, particularly those experiencing homelessness. Included is a discussion of trauma-informed care, an organizational response to meeting the unique needs of this population.

HOMELESSNESS AMONG WOMEN VETERANS

Women Veterans are two to four times more likely to be homeless than non-Veteran women.^{1,2}

- According to the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), the number of homeless women Veterans doubled from 1,380 in 2006 to 3,328 in 2010; however, these numbers only include women Veterans who receive VA health care, which is approximately 57.4% of women Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND).^{3,4}
- Almost two-thirds of homeless women Veterans are between the ages of 40 and 59 years old.⁵
- Over one-third of homeless women Veterans have disabilities.⁶
- 23% of homeless women Veterans have children under the age of 18.^{7,8}

GREATER RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

Women Veterans are 2-4 times more likely to be homeless than non-Veteran women



Source: Foster & Vince, 2009; Gamache, Rosenheck & Tessler, 2003

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INTERSECTION BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND TRAUMA

Exposure to trauma is a significant risk factor for homelessness.⁹⁻¹² Women Veterans experience trauma at higher rates than the general population.¹³

- More than 50% of women Veterans experience some type of interpersonal violence before joining the military.¹⁴
- 27-49% of women Veterans have experienced childhood sexual abuse.¹⁵
- 35% of women Veterans have experienced childhood physical abuse.¹⁶
- As adults, 24-49% of women Veterans have experienced sexual assault.¹⁷
- 46-51% of women Veterans have experienced physical assault.¹⁸
- 39% of women Veterans report that they have experienced intimate partner violence.¹⁹

Exposure to trauma while serving in the military is prevalent.

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is the term used by the Department of Veterans Affairs to refer to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening acts of sexual harassment.

Of women Veterans accessing VA services:

- Approximately 1 in 4 women Veterans screen positive for MST.²⁰
- Prevalence of sexual assault in the military among women Veterans ranges from 20-48%.²¹
- 80% of women Veterans have reported being sexually harassed.²²
- 20% of women Veterans who served in OEF/OIF have been identified as having experienced MST.²³

In addition to MST, 41% of women Veterans have been exposed to combat-related stress.²⁴

Women Veterans experiencing homelessness report even higher rates of trauma.

- 52% report pre-military adversity (including child abuse and intimate partner violence).²⁵
- 79% describe some experience of being traumatized, victimized by a colleague or superior, or otherwise rejected and stigmatized during active duty.²⁶
- 53% have experienced Military Sexual Trauma.²⁷

MAJORITY FACE TRAUMA



81-93%

of women Veterans have
been exposed to trauma
over their lifetime

Source: Zinzow et al., 2007

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IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON WOMEN VETERANS

Exposure to traumatic stress increases risk of developing significant health and mental health challenges.

- According to the VA, approximately 20% of women Veterans of OEF/OIF have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).²⁸
- Women Veterans with histories of civilian sexual assault are up to 5 times more likely to develop PTSD than those without sexual assault histories.^{29,30}
- Women Veterans with histories of sexual assault in childhood are 7 times more likely to develop PTSD.³¹
- Women who experience Military Sexual Trauma are up to 9 times more likely to have PTSD.³²
- Additional challenges associated with history of sexual assault include major depression, anxiety, physical health issues, and substance abuse.³³⁻³⁵

For women Veterans who are homeless:³⁶

- 32% struggle with substance abuse issues.
- 45% screen positively for anxiety.
- 57% present with health related issues.
- 72% report being diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives.
- 74% screen positively for PTSD.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE: RESPONDING TO TRAUMA IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN VETERANS

As awareness of the prevalence and impact of trauma in the lives of women Veterans has increased, there has been a corresponding shift toward trauma-informed care as a best practice to support recovery. Trauma-informed care is an organization-wide approach that is **“grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors; and creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.”**³⁷

Key components of trauma-informed care for women Veterans include:³⁸

- Training all staff on trauma and its impact and the core principles of trauma-informed care.
- Creating safe and supportive environments.
- Providing comprehensive assessments that consider history of trauma, including trauma prior to, during, and after military service.
- Providing trauma-specific mental health services.
- Involving women Veterans in all aspects of program development.
- Adapting policies to support trauma-informed culture and practice and to avoid causing additional trauma.
- Offering specific services for the children of women Veterans.

Preliminary outcomes associated with trauma-informed care demonstrate:³⁹⁻⁴⁴

- Improvement in functioning and a decrease in psychiatric and behavioral symptoms.
- Increased housing stability.
- Decreased need for crisis-based services.
- Enhanced self-identity, skills, and safety among children.
- Greater collaboration among service providers.

LEARN MORE

This fact sheet was developed with support from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation as part of the *Mental Health & Well-Being* initiative. The National Center on Family Homelessness launched a multi-site demonstration project to implement a trauma-informed approach to serving women Veterans who are homeless in community-based organizations in Massachusetts. Learn more about this projects and access *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers* and other online resources at www.familyhomelessness.org.



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