



# Homeless Female Veterans

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Homelessness among women veterans is expected to rise as increasing numbers of women in the military reintegrate into their communities as veterans. Women currently make up 8% of the total veteran population and 14.6% of the active duty military, increasing to an estimated 16% by 2035. The number of homeless women veterans has doubled from 1,380 in FY 2006 to 3,328 in FY 2010. While data systems for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) do not collect data on the risk factors contributing to female veteran homelessness, women veterans face unique challenges that increase their susceptibility to homelessness.

## PTSD and MST

Within the homeless population, the frequency of mental illness is three to four times higher than the general population, with the rate of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnoses almost doubled. Nearly 80% of homeless veterans suffer from mental health disorders, drug and/or alcohol abuse, or co-occurring disorders. PTSD is one of the largest mental health challenges facing returning veterans. From 2004-2008 the



number of veterans seeking help for PTSD in the VA system increased from 274,000 to 442,000. PTSD and other mental health disorders lead to difficulties maintaining productive employment, among other difficulties, greatly increasing the risk of homelessness.

A study done by Kelly et. al found that women who experience Military Sexual Trauma (MST) were nine times more at risk for PTSD. Cases of MST continue to grow, with one in five women reporting having experienced MST. While only constituting 14.6% of the military, women account for 95% of reported sex crime victims. According to a recent Pentagon report, the rate of violent sexual crimes within the military has increased by 64% since 2006. Fear of reprisal and being ostracized from co-workers prevents many women from reporting the abuse. Defense Secretary Panetta stated that the Department of Defense is aware that this is a “very under-reported crime,” with actual incidents of military sexual assault (MSA) being six times higher than reported. With 3,191 reported MSAs in 2011, the actual number of MSA incidences is predicted to be nearly 19,000. Because those who experience personal violence, including rape, are 6.5 times more likely to experience homelessness, women veterans who have experienced MST are at a greater risk for experiencing homelessness, especially when compounded by PTSD.



## Housing, Child Care and Employment



According to the Department of Defense, in 2010 more than 30,000 single mothers have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and as of 2006 more than 40% of active duty women have children. For any veteran with dependent children, being identified as homeless creates a threat and fear of youth protective services assessing the situation as dangerous and removing the children from their parent. A recent study done by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that more than 60% of organizations with Grant and Per Diem programs (GPD) did not have sufficient resources to provide housing for the children of veterans. Of the 52 that did provide housing, 70% had major restrictions, including

the number of children per veteran and age limits. Organizations with GPD programs are reimbursed for the daily cost of housing a homeless veteran; the cost of housing a homeless veteran's child is not reimbursable, creating a cost burden on the program. GPD has proven to be a vital program in transitioning homeless veterans into independent living.

Without another funding source, organizations offering transitional housing services will likely face increased financial burdens as the number of low income women veterans with children continues to grow.



Homeless women veterans also face substantial barriers to employment. In FY 2010, according to the VA, 77% of homeless female veterans were unemployed. One of the key factors for this larger percentage could be the lack of accessible and affordable child care. In fact, according to the recent FY 2010 CHALENG report, the VA and community providers ranked child care as the highest unmet need of

homeless veterans from FY 2008- 2010. Additionally, many of the skills that women veterans learn during their military service may not translate back to the civilian workforce or may be skills for a predominately male field.

## Privacy and Safety Concerns

After returning from deployment, women veterans in need of assistance often isolate themselves, decreasing their access to critical interventions to prevent homelessness. Some women may not self-identify as veterans or may feel uncomfortable seeking services through the VA Medical Center, decreasing the services accessed by women who are at risk of homelessness. According to a study done by the GAO in 2010, space constraints and lack of access to proper equipment complicate the ability of VA Medical Centers to provide private, gender-specific care to female veterans, with many VA Medical Centers referring women to community-based outpatient clinics outside of the VA for their specialized care needs.

Homeless women veterans have traditionally had difficulty accessing housing services due to safety and security concerns. The 2010 study done by the GAO found that over 25% of existing GPD programs providing transitional housing to homeless women veterans



cited safety concerns as a barrier to service delivery. Without gender-specific safety and security standards for GPD programs, nearly one in 16 programs surveyed by the GAO reported incidents of sexual harassment or assault on women residents in the last five years. An audit released in 2012 by the VA Office of Inspector General found that 1 in 3 programs did not specify the gender of homeless veteran populations they intended to serve on their GPD application for funding. Without defining the population intended to be served, safety and security standards cannot be adequately determined. After further inspection, the audit found that 31% of GPD facilities do not have the segregated and secure living and sanitary facilities, trauma-informed competency, or basic safety procedures in place to provide security to their women clients. Compounded with the difficulties presented by experience with MST and PTSD, homeless women veterans face substantial barriers to accessing transitional housing through GPD, a critical program that has been proven to successfully prepare homeless veterans for independent living.

## Current Programs

Many existing grant programs have been adapted to meet the needs of homeless women veterans. The Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) through Department of Labor- Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) connects homeless veterans, including women, to gainful employment in their communities and it provides over \$4 million in targeted Homeless Female Veterans and Veterans with Families Program grants to specifically serve homeless female veterans. The HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program, a collaboration between HUD and VA, provides eligible veterans with VA case management and Section 8 vouchers through the local public housing authority. Designed to provide permanent housing to chronically homeless veterans, HUD-VASH prioritizes disabled veterans with dependent children, many of whom are women. Within GPD, VA has funded a series of Special Needs Grants to supplement regular GPD activities, allowing service providers to be reimbursed for additional expenses incurred for meeting the needs of women veterans with dependent children. Each VA Medical Center has a dedicated Women Veterans Program Manager to coordinate service delivery for women veterans, including homeless women veterans.



Federal agencies have worked directly with service providers, both within and beyond the homeless veteran community, to engage in a series of prevention programs that have prevented many women veterans from sliding into homelessness. Through the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) community organizations provide rapid re-housing and homeless prevention assistance to individuals who recently became homeless or who would become homeless without this intervention. Veterans and veteran families are eligible for this assistance. The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program provides supportive services to extreme low-income veterans and veteran families who are currently in or transitioning to permanent housing. These programs, along with the Veterans Prevention Demonstration Project, have provided the intervention and support that homeless women veterans need to secure a self-sufficient life.





## Resources for Women Veterans

If you are a woman veteran experiencing or at risk of homelessness, please contact the VA by calling 1-877-4AID-VET or visit <http://www.va.gov/womenvet/>. The VA will be able to assist you in connecting with the unique programs designed specifically for women. Additionally, each VA medical center has a designated Women's Veteran Coordinator. Visit [www.va.gov/directory](http://www.va.gov/directory) to locate the nearest VA medical center.

One of the most successful ways to achieve independent living is through employment. A list of HVRP programs, which connects homeless veterans to meaningful employment, can be accessed at: [http://www.nchv.org/employment\\_assistance.cfm](http://www.nchv.org/employment_assistance.cfm).

Homeless women veterans who are seeking employment assistance can also coordinate with Local Veteran Employment Representatives (LVER) and the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP). Visit <http://www.careeronestop.org/> to locate the nearest DVOP and LVER in your state.

Additionally, Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) offices are located in each of the 50 states and can assist you with locating a job or program that best fits your needs. A list of VETS offices can be found at: <http://www.dol.gov/vets/aboutvets/contacts/main.htm>.

For more information on programs specific to homeless women veterans, please visit: <http://nchv.org/women.cfm>.

Information about the HVRP, GPD, and SSVF programs can be found at: [http://nchv.org/service\\_category.cfm?id=7](http://nchv.org/service_category.cfm?id=7).

More information on SSVF can be located at: <http://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp>.

To contact someone with the HPRP program, please visit: <http://www.hudhre.info/index.cfm?do=viewLookingAssistance>.

If you need assistance for PTSD, MST or are having thoughts of suicide, please call the Veterans Crisis hotline at 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, or visit <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/index.asp>.

For specific information about health care for women veterans, please visit: <http://www.womenshealth.va.gov/>.

