



June Moss at the VA Medical Center Palo Alto, Calif., continues her battle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Women Veterans Focus on Health Care, Service

By Thom Wilborn

The Department of Veterans Affairs admits it is playing catch-up providing adequate health care, privacy and security for our nation's women veterans. During a July 28 Forum for Women Veterans, VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki said change was "overdue" for women veterans.

Shinseki said the crucially important forum, sponsored by the DAV and other veterans service organizations, would help resolve the problems of huge numbers of women veterans needing VA services. "We are late," he said. "The surge in women veterans has begun and will continue for the foreseeable future." It is estimated that within 10 years

women will make up 16 percent of all veterans.

Six percent of all veterans who use VA health care services are women, and the VA expects that number to double in ten years. Last year saw a 20-percent increase in women using VA health care services. "We must anticipate and address the challenges faced by women," said Shinseki.

"The VA has lagged in its programs and services for women veterans due to funding cuts in the 1990s," said Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman. "But it is quickly making up for lost ground. Last year VA mandated that all regional offices and medical centers have a women veterans coordinator. Today all 57 regional offices and 144 medical cen-

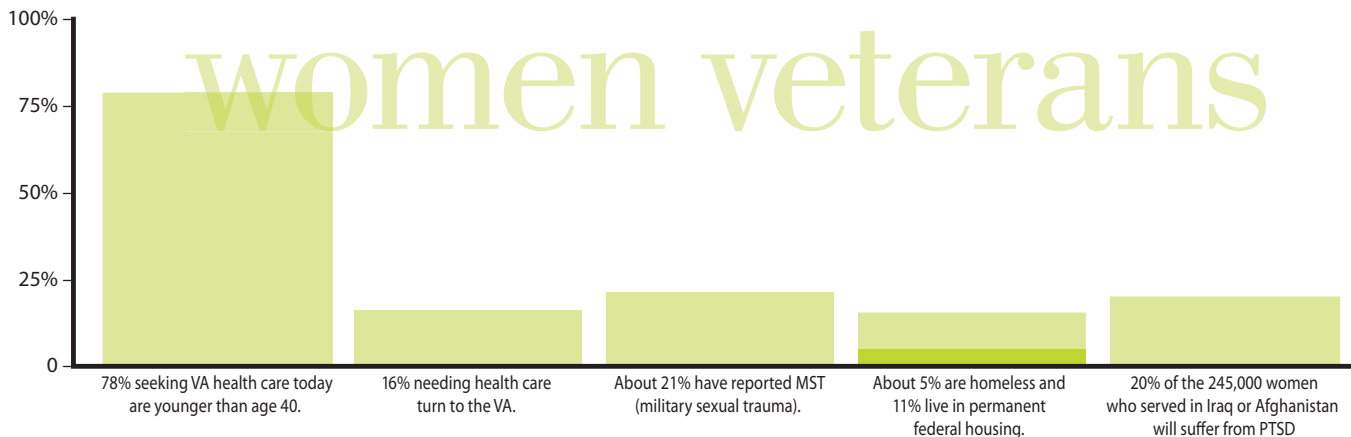
ters have full-time women veterans program managers."

"The DAV has long sought to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to women veterans programs," Gorman said. "The programs will provide even better care, privacy and security for women veterans."

More than 175 clinicians, benefits experts, VA leaders and women veterans from across our nation attended the forum to determine how to best provide VA's quality health care, benefits, mental health services, homeless services and other VA benefits to women veterans.

Patricia Hayes, chief consultant for the VA's Women Veterans Health Strategic Health Care Group, said that 125,000 women veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have

women veterans



used VA care and that 78 percent of women veterans seeking VA health care today are younger than age 40. “It is very important that we ensure women veterans get comprehensive, quality health care in a safe environment,” she said. “We want the VA to be the best in health care for women. We have to make sure what we do is absolutely the best health care anywhere.”

It is estimated that 16 percent of women veterans who need health care turn to the VA. “The most common health concerns among women veterans are depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and military sexual trauma (MST),” said Hayes.

The VA screens all veterans for sexual trauma and “about 21 percent of women veterans have reported MST,” said Amy Marcotte of the Sanford, Maine, VA Vet Center. “This is just the tip of the iceberg. We know there are many more than that.”

Women comprise about five percent of the estimated 104,000 veterans who are homeless each night, and 11 percent of those living in permanent federal housing are women veterans.



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Dr. Antonette Zeiss, VA’s Deputy Chief of Mental Health Services, said that mental health services for women veterans have improved since 2004 and that 55 percent of the psychologists, 72 percent of social workers and 41 percent of psychiatrists in the VA are women.

Dr. Natara Garovoy, a clinical psychologist at the VA’s Palo Alto, Calif., Health Care System, projected that one in five of the 245,000 women who served in Iraq or Afghanistan will suffer from PTSD. “Women veterans are more likely to seek treatment for PTSD, but are also more likely to develop chronic PTSD and are slower to respond to treatment,” she said.

“They suffer the risks of combat support roles or MST or both,” said Dr. Garovoy. “And women veterans are more isolated and lack social support.”

“It is clear that the women who serve our country have been in the shadows,” said National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. “The DAV is determined to work with the VA to provide them with the excellent care they have earned through their sacrifice.”

“Like men, women are veterans who served our nation with honor and courage,” he said. “The DAV is committed to ensuring that they receive the care and benefits earned on the battlefield, and that their service to our nation is validated by our highest esteem.”