

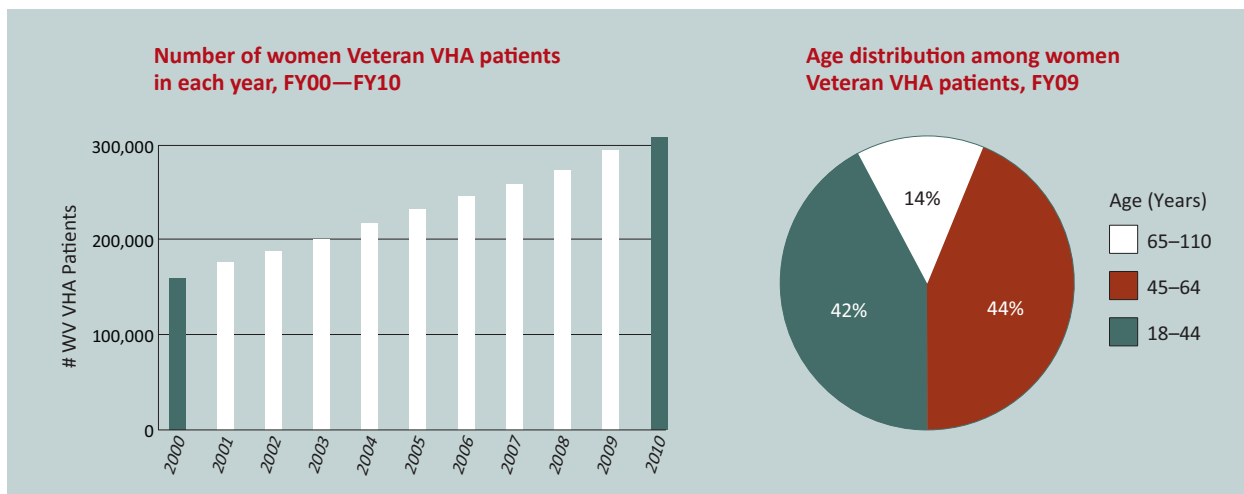
# ON THE FRONTLINES OF VA WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Enhancing Services for Women Veterans

As the frontlines of battle and the rules of warfare have changed dramatically in the past 50 years, so has the face of the U.S. military. Women constitute more than 14% of today's active-duty soldiers, serving alongside men as fighter pilots, gunners, warship commanders, and military police in locations around the world. They represent the largest growing subpopulation of the U.S. military. Correspondingly, women are enrolling for health care from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) at record levels. Soldiers from Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) have added more than 80,000 women Veterans to the rolls. During the next few years, those numbers are expected to increase dramatically. And based on the upward trend of women in all branches of the service, the number of women Veterans will keep climbing.



The VA's commitment to provide the highest-quality comprehensive health care extends to every Veteran who walks through its doors. To ensure this commitment is met for women, the VA has entrusted the Women Veterans Health Strategic Health Care Group (Women's Health) with enhancing services for women Veterans. Working closely with other VA program offices and facilities nationwide, Women's Health is improving services, resources, facilities, and workforce to make health care more accessible, more sensitive to gender-specific needs, and of the highest quality for the women Veterans of today and tomorrow.





## **Comprehensive Care Is Quality Care**

Studies show that patient-centered, comprehensive health care models result in a higher quality of care and increased patient satisfaction. Patient-centered care is a major goal of the VA and a primary focus of the vision to improve women's health care. By 2013, all VA facilities aim to offer women comprehensive primary care, including gender-specific care, from a single provider who is interested and proficient in women's health.

A five-year strategic plan for women's health goes beyond implementing comprehensive primary care. The plan focuses on education and training, policy, outreach and advocacy, and integration of research into practice—all details that make the difference between good health care and the best.

Initiatives are under way to improve the VA's understanding of the effects military service has on women's lives and to use that understanding to train VA providers to better serve women Veterans. Women's Health is driving the research agenda on women and working closely with VA analysts and data specialists to ensure that women Veteran populations are represented clearly in statistical data, including demographics, epidemiology, health status, and quality of care. They are also focusing on the needs of special women Veteran populations, such as rural and homebound women Veterans, women Veterans with mental illness, homeless women Veterans, and aging women Veterans. Ultimately, VA Women's Health hopes to be a leader in providing health care to women, and by example, raise the standard of care for all women—Veterans and non-Veterans.

The goals are ambitious, but the need is great. A recent VA analysis of women Veterans who use VA health services showed that women patients are more likely than men patients to have a service-connected disability—55 percent compared to 41 percent of men. Women patients also require more frequent health care visits. In 2009, 47 percent of women patients versus 42 percent of men patients had at least three primary care visits at VA facilities; 15 percent of women patients had six or more primary care visits.

## **Building the Infrastructure**

In the three years since launching the initiative, Women's Health has built a strong infrastructure that will sustain the growth and enhancement of services for women Veterans. A network of medical directors and program managers who coordinate care for women Veterans now encompasses all 153 medical centers in the VA Health Care System. These Women Veterans Program Managers and field directors work closely with a staff of experts in reproductive health, health education, and comprehensive health to advocate for and implement improved services for women Veterans at the facility level. This network also allows Women's Health to monitor improvements and assess the need for policy updates, education and training, or additional resources. Through the network, Women's Health can share best practices, as well as research findings on women's health, guidance on new policies, and tools for assessing progress toward its goals.

## It's Everyone's Job to Care for Women Veterans

One of the most important goals of the five-year plan is to change the culture of VA to be more accepting and understanding of women Veterans and their unique needs. Media attention, both positive and negative, about women's experiences at VA and the sheer number of women Veterans walking into VA facilities have helped dispel some long-held assumptions about Veterans and the role of women in the military. However, some in the VA still equate Veterans with men and assume the woman in the VA waiting room is a Veteran's daughter or wife.

Mini-residencies in women's health and outreach campaigns on critical women's health issues have improved provider competency in women's health. Women's Health is now developing orientation and training materials to educate all staff, from facility construction managers to check-in receptionists, on appropriate treatment of and sensitivity toward women Veterans. A multi-year, internal campaign will address the intangibles of quality care such as recognizing a woman's discomfort at sitting in an all-male waiting room or not automatically adding "Mr." to every last name on the waiting list.

Women's Health and its network of women managers and advocates are building relationships with other VA program offices at the local and national levels. Through these alliances they are advocating for the inclusion of women-specific information in program brochures and the use of women's health research to improve practice.



### The Gender Difference

For years, the argument that women are physically and mentally different than men barred women from serving in many capacities in the armed services. Now that women serve in most military roles, understanding those physical and mental differences is the key to providing women Veterans with appropriate, high-quality care. New VA policy mandates that all facilities track and record vital information about VA services provided to women Veterans, and a spike in VA research on women's health has yielded vital information about the effects of military service on women Veterans. From these sources, Women's Health develops and distributes reports, training, and best practices to shape VA health policy and practices as they relate to women. Some of what we know about our women Veterans:

- 37% of women Veteran VHA outpatients used mental health services in 2009. 12% of these women had more than six mental health visits compared with 7% of men.
- OEF/OIF/OND women Veteran VHA users are more likely than their male counterparts to have musculoskeletal and skin disorders, mild depression, major depression, and adjustment disorders.
- Women Veteran VHA outpatients require more frequent primary care visits. In 2009, 47% of women versus 42% of men had at least three primary care visits at VA facilities; 15% of women had six or more.

## Measurable Progress

Important indicators show the initiative is making progress. Disparities in the rate of screenings and immunizations given to women and men VHA patients are shrinking. In 2008, 86 percent of eligible women VHA patients received flu shots compared to 94 percent of men. In 2011, there was only a one percent difference. To determine the effectiveness of the culture change campaign, Women's Health began measuring the occurrence of women-specific information on VA Medical Center web sites. One hundred percent of VAMC homepages have at least one topic of interest to women Veterans, while nearly half link to a facility-specific women's health page, and nearly a third include images of women. Women's Health will continue to track progress quarterly. Other accomplishments of the initiative include:

- Trained more than 1,100 VA providers in Women Veterans' Primary Health Care through hands-on, case-based mini-residencies.
- Updated VA policies relating to the proper care of women Veterans, the roles and responsibilities of Women Veterans Program Managers at each facility, safety and security requirements for women in VA facilities, and maternity and newborn care and coordination.
- Developed primary care assessment tool to evaluate the quality of each facility's comprehensive primary care for women.
- Co-sponsored the Inaugural Public Forum on Women Veterans to spotlight enhancements in VA care and services and the second VA Women's Health Research Conference.
- Collaborated with the Department of Defense (DoD) on a VA-DoD Pregnancy Toolkit for patients.
- Began a multi-year initiative attempting to contact every woman Veteran (potentially 1.8 million women) by phone to talk with them about VA health care and the gender-specific services available at VA facilities.
- Conducted national survey of women Veterans' health care needs and barriers to VA use.
- Convened a National Women Veterans Communications Workgroup tasked with developing strategies to reach women Veterans and to change the culture of VA to be more inclusive of women Veterans.
- Kicked off regular media calls to engage the press and inform them about how the VA is evolving to meet the needs of women Veterans.

## The Right Care at the Right Time and Place



The end goal of these broad-reaching efforts will be that every woman Veteran has access to the right kind of care at the right time and place. Facilities across the country are investing in specialized medical equipment for women, reconfiguring facilities to ensure privacy and security, and expanding staff—all in order to provide convenient, equitable care to the women who come through their doors.

Like their male comrades, when women volunteered to serve their country, they earned the benefits VA is working hard to ensure they receive. With continued support for the initiative to improve women Veterans health care, VA will keep that promise and raise the standard of care for women Veterans. They served, they deserve, the best care anywhere.



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**WOMEN VETERANS HEALTH CARE**