

Veterans' Health Care

VFW's Concerns:

With 145 medical centers, 1,235 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC), and a total of nearly 1,700 points of care, the VA health system is tasked with providing timely and high quality health care to more than nine million veterans, their families, and survivors every year. Due to a continuously expanding number of enrolled veterans, under-resourcing, systemwide problems, and a general culture that is resistant to change, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has faced many challenges in meeting its obligations to deliver timely and high quality care.

A recent suicide study of veterans conducted by VA found veterans make up 18 percent of all adult suicides in the United States, with an average of 20 veterans who die by suicide every day. Of those 20 veterans, only six are actively enrolled in VA and, contrary to popular belief, the majority of veterans who die by suicide are 50 years of age or older. The VFW applauds Congress for passing legislation such as the *Clay Hunt SAV Act* and the *Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act*. The next step is to expand access to a minimum of mental health care to veterans with PTSD, TBI or MST who were discharged under conditions other than honorable. Three out of four combat veterans with administrative discharges are diagnosed with a mental health disorder associated with combat tours in Iraq and/or Afghanistan. These veterans are also up to three times more likely to die by suicide. Additional treatment is also needed to expand alternative treatments to veterans, as well as a better understanding of how mental health affects different populations of veterans by gender and minority background.

On today's battlefield, both men and women are similarly at risk. As an unprecedented number of women have entered the combat zone in the last decade, the number of women veterans enrolled in VA health care has doubled and will continue to grow. Women veterans are the fastest growing subpopulation within the veteran community, and estimates indicate their population will be the same size as the entire active duty force by 2030. VA must be ready and able to provide the gender-specific care women veterans deserve, to include more reproductive research.

Veterans who are unable to access VA care are sent to private sector providers under authorities with different processes and requirements. The lack of a systemwide program with clear and veteran-centric eligibility standards limits VA from providing veterans the care and services they have earned and deserve.

At the center of many issues within VA are the difficulties faced with hiring employees in a timely manner and then retaining them. Congress must provide VA the tools necessary to quickly hire qualified individuals, and maintain competitiveness with the private sector to retain those who are hired.

VFW's Solutions:

- VA must ensure its health care services programs are equal amongst men and women veterans. Women veterans need gender-specific care for mental health, primary care, specialty care and pharmaceutical care.
- VA and Congress must ensure combat veterans who receive administrative discharges are eligible for VA health care.
- Ensure veterans who received erroneous administrative discharges have a fair opportunity to upgrade their discharges.
- Congress must expand toxic exposure research to understand gender-specific health ailments, as well as how it has affected reproduction for veterans who were exposed to toxic substances.
- Congress must readjust budget caps that impede VA's ability to provide timely access to high quality and veteran-centric care and pass legislation to improve VA community care programs.
- VA must be able to expedite hiring of highly qualified employees and be given tools necessary to retain them.