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How We're Failing Our Female Veterans

By Laura Fitzpatrick

The following is an abridged version of an article that appears in the July 12, 2010 print and iPad editions of TIME magazine.

June Moss, 39, maneuvered a Humvee around charred corpses and still smoking shrapnel in Iraq in 2003. The Army driver and mechanic once watched a Black Hawk helicopter mow down insurgents a few hundred yards away. But when she called her father to tell him how tough things were, he didn't get it. "He was kind of like, 'Oh, well, you just fix the trucks. You don't have to worry about nothing,'" she recalls. "I don't know where people get the idea that women aren't out there, they don't see anything, they're just support." At home, after she was discharged from the military but before she was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the single mother couldn't find a job that paid enough to support her and two children. In 2005 her house went into foreclosure, and the next year she and her kids became homeless — a predicament made more painful by the fact that of the nearly 500 community homeless shelters funded by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), only seven provide accommodations specifically for families. That year, Moss tried to kill herself. ([See pictures of June Moss.](#))

More than 230,000 women have served in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past nine years. Women account for 15% of the active-duty military. But when they arrive back home, become civilians once again and start seeking help for PTSD, musculoskeletal problems, reproductive disorders and other maladies, they are shuffled into a veterans' hospital system that can feel like a relic from World War I, back when the phrases *our soldiers* and *our boys* were interchangeable. The number of female veterans being treated by the VA has more than doubled since 2004 and is expected to double again by 2015. The VA, which did not even start providing medical and mental-health services to women until 1988, is struggling to add resources and train its staff to handle the growing case file of female vets. ([See pictures of an Army town coping with PTSD.](#))

Some of female veterans' health care needs — pap smears, mammograms, etc. — are more obvious than others. Treatment for mental-health issues, autoimmune disorders and even high cholesterol can be hampered by a doctor who is not accustomed to female patients. To increase clinical staff's proficiency in women's health, the VA has trained more than 400 health care providers in the past two years through mini-residencies featuring 2½ days of presentations from women's-health experts. Last year the VA

finished installing a full-time women's veteran program manager at each of its 144 hospitals. The VA is also starting to ramp up women-only treatment centers like the one Moss frequents in Menlo Park, Calif., and to add all-female therapy groups, especially for sexual-assault survivors.

A bill spearheaded by Washington Senator Patty Murray — and signed into law in May — goes even further, authorizing, among other things, a report to Congress on the effects the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had on female veterans' physical, mental and reproductive health. "Women veterans have earned their stripes. They have earned their benefits," says Murray. "They shouldn't have to feel like they're asking for a handout."

In July the VA will hold a forum at Arlington National Cemetery to discuss the quality of care for female veterans and ways to improve access. For now, too few women have figured out how to navigate the byzantine system. Moss is one of them. She works in chaplain services at a VA hospital near the clinic where she sees a therapist once a week. She says she no longer feels, as she did when she first got home from Iraq, "like a shell of a person." She hugs her kids again. She enjoys what she calls "me time" at the hairdresser. She's even getting married in August, to a former Marine who, as she puts it, "understands PTSD." "It's not just being brave on the battlefield," she says of being a veteran. "You have to be brave in civilian life too."

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