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VA is stepping up its services for female veterans

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About 1.8 million women have served in the U.S. military, and with 245,000 female soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, it's estimated that within a decade, women will make up 16 percent of all veterans.

Yet until recently, some health clinics for veterans did not have separate bathrooms for women. Some doctors who treat returning service members haven't kept up with medical advances on issues from sexual trauma to prosthetics to menopause. Some Veterans Affairs computers still spit out data mistaking female veterans for wives of men who fought.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is [turning its resources to women](#) as the government braces for an increasing demand for services from female veterans.

On Wednesday, clinicians, benefits experts, VA leaders and veterans from across the country discussed the department's stepped-up efforts and the need to do more for women.

"We are late, and the surge in women veterans has begun and will continue," Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki told the crowd of 175 gathered at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. "Time is not on our side."

The retired four-star general and former Army chief of staff has made increasing services for women a top priority, securing \$217 million in gender-specific programs for the next fiscal year, a 21 percent increase from 2009. The increased investment is aimed at providing better care and more privacy and security for female patients.

The insurgency style of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, where women driving in convoys can experience the same traumas as if they were directly in combat, has upped the ante for the veterans agency, Shinseki said.

He also acknowledged the "debilitating effects" of sexual assaults and harassment of women in the military -- as many as 21 percent of women who seek VA care report sexual trauma -- and said his agency is "committed to providing world-class health care and services" for victims.

Also Wednesday, [Rep. Bob Filner](#) (D-Ca.), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, introduced legislation that would create a "bill of rights" for female veterans.

Today, women represent 8 percent of all veterans. About half enroll for VA care, a number that jumped 20 percent in 2009 alone, officials said, in part because many women have lost benefits as they have lost jobs in the bad economy.

Women's medical issues can differ widely from men's, experts said Wednesday. For example, many women report severe back pain and other musculoskeletal problems from carrying heavy gear in war zones -- up to 80 pounds of protective gear, rifles and backpacks. And a woman's artificial limb is made differently than a man's: "If you lost your leg, we have a prosthesis that allows you to wear stiletto heels," said Natara Garovoy, director of a women's center at the VA health-care system in Palo Alto, Calif. "We are not little men."

Each of the 144 veterans health-care systems in the country now has a full-time care manager for women. Primary care is being redesigned so a single physician addresses preventive care, routine gynecological care and other medical issues for women. Health-care providers can now enroll in refresher courses on women's health needs, and more training is scheduled.

"We must have health-care providers who want to know, 'What is the latest in thyroid research for women?' " said Patricia M. Hayes, chief consultant for the Women Veterans Health Strategic Health Care Group. "Who will say, 'If the best care for a particular condition is outside the VA, we're going to provide that care.' "

The agency also launched a \$5.6 million study last fall of women who served in the Vietnam War to explore the effects on their mental and physical health.

On Wednesday, the experts gathered at Arlington acknowledged that many women still fall through the cracks -- and some veterans described their own experiences.

"I'm hitting brick walls and red tape everywhere," Lauren DelRicci said as she listened to an expert on homelessness explain plans to boost housing subsidies for veterans in danger of losing their homes.

DelRicci enlisted in the Navy at 17 as a machinist's mate in 2000 and was assigned to a boiler room of a ship in the Pacific. In her first few months of duty, she said, she was sexually assaulted.

After DelRicci was given a

diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the government subsidized her tuition at a college in New Jersey, where she studied public relations. But newly graduated at 27, she says she cannot find a job and is worried that she will end up in a homeless shelter.

A regulation Shinseki signed this month eases evidence requirements for disability pay to veterans with PTSD, and clinicians and veterans said they hope it will help female veterans, particularly those who, like DelRicci, suffered sexual trauma.

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