

Published on HamptonRoads.com | PilotOnline.com (<http://hamptonroads.com>)

## Study: Women shortchanged on combat-stress help

The Department of Veterans Affairs must work harder to address combat stress in women returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a new government study says.

Conducted by the VA's inspector general, the study found that female veterans are denied benefits and treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder at a rate higher than men. It also concluded that many VA facilities aren't especially responsive to the health needs of women.

The VA launched the study last year after calls from U.S. Sen. Mark Warner and veterans advocacy groups. Speaking to reporters Monday at the Hampton VA Medical Center, Warner, a Virginia Democrat, said the study confirmed what he's been hearing from constituents for years.

"The fact is, we can do better by women who've served in combat roles," Warner said.

Women make up about 15 percent of the U.S. military.

Roughly 20,000 female Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have been diagnosed with a mental illness, according to a 2009 VA statistic.

The goal of the agency's study was simple: to examine its capacity to address combat stress in female veterans. It looked at women's use of VA health care for traumatic brain injury and PTSD, as well as for other mental health disorders. It also assessed whether the VA properly handles women's disability claims related to mental illness.

The study relied on data from the VA and Defense Department for roughly 500,000 male and female veterans, as well as policy reviews and interviews with VA workers and veterans advocates.

In many respects, the study's findings simply provide a clearer picture of how female veterans use VA services and how that differs from use by men.

But the inspector general also identified shortcomings: Better outreach is needed to inform women about available services. Regional facilities need signs directing female veterans to female veterans coordinators. Those coordinators, as well as claims processors, need training to better serve women who

are suffering from mental illness or who were sexually assaulted while in the military.

In the course of conducting the study, the VA corrected what Warner called one of the biggest hurdles facing women with combat-related mental illness: the requirement that, in order to make a PTSD-related disability claim, a service member must prove he or she was involved in combat.

The VA did away with the rule in July, saying that in today's conflicts, the lines between combat and noncombat jobs are too blurry. For instance, even soldiers working at desks in Afghanistan often endure rocket and mortar attacks.

"Even if we continue to say that women don't serve in combat, the truth is they do," Warner said. "The claims rules needed to reflect that."

On Friday, Warner sent a letter to VA leaders urging them to re-evaluate PTSD claims rejected under the old standards. He also has asked the VA to launch a campaign to encourage women who believe they were wrongly

denied to reapply.

Kristen Rouse, an Afghanistan veteran who now works with the advocacy group American Women Veterans, said she hopes the study will serve to raise awareness, if nothing else.

"The most important thing at this point is that we're talking about this stuff," Rouse said. "The study obviously isn't going to fix everything, but it's a good next step."

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**Source URL (retrieved on 01/17/2011 - 10:04):** <http://hamptonroads.com/2011/01/study-women-shortchanged-combatstress-help>