

Female Veterans Breaking Silence, Beating Trauma

by NPR STAFF



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Courtesy Of The Department Of Labor

Lisa Bolling accepts the "Challenge Coin" from Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis at Arlington National Cemetery's Women in Military Service for America Memorial on July 20. The secretary shared Bolling's story of being a homeless female veteran at the launch of a new trauma guide for women.

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Families are still trying to process the weekend's loss and deal with mental and emotional fallout from the nation's wars. And women have it particularly tough.

[Significantly more women have served in the U.S. military](#) in recent years, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Many of these women suffer [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), or PTSD, and other issues after their service ends.

U.S. Air Force veteran Lisa Bolling has survived military trauma, returned to a home on the streets, and is now coping with PTSD.

In an interview with *Tell Me More* guest host Allison Keyes, Bolling says that she first served at the Air Force base in Florida for two years, which was a wonderful experience.

But she wanted to see the world and thus got sent to Germany. She says she was assaulted by a male service member one month after arriving at the base in Germany.

"And six months later, I was pushed out of the military. I got eight letters of reprimand and two [Article 15s](#) because I didn't want to go back on the base. And I didn't feel like I could tell anyone. It was a tactical unit. It was very cold — strictly business," she explains.

Bolling says she spent one year trying to put herself back together, but eventually began taking drugs to ease the pain and soon became homeless.

"And I decided one day, I didn't want to die like that, and so I went to Narcotics Anonymous. I've been clean for 19 years," she says.

Bolling went on to earn a degree in paralegal studies and became a therapeutic foster parent.

"One of my foster daughters got cancer at 17 and died at 18. From that point on, I couldn't function. I lost my house. I lost a car. And I knew I had some issues with depression, but I didn't know what was happening to me ... where it would snatch my whole life away," says Bolling.

How often do cases like Bolling's occur?

Dr. Sonja Batten, a psychologist who works on national mental health policy for the Department of Veterans Affairs, says 22 percent of female veterans who seek care from VA report having experienced sexual trauma in the military. By contrast, a little over 1 percent of male veterans experience sexual trauma.

Batten also points out that the Department of Defense is responsible for those on active military duty; the VA is a separate governmental branch that cares for veterans after service.

She emphasizes that the VA helps veterans recognize that they are now in a safer place. She adds that women have unique stressors clinicians should keep in mind, including child care.

"So if they're feeling stressed about that, we really need to listen to them when they're talking about those challenges so we can provide them support," she says.

But Bolling believes male and female veterans deal with stress similarly.

"Post-traumatic stress is a strange disease in that it has the same blueprint for everybody. The vets are fearful. Many of them can barely get out of the bed. Many have lost their jobs, or [are] in a position where they're being suspended because they're missing work, and their boss doesn't understand why," says Bolling.

Bolling has actively helped other veterans. She encourages them to report trauma immediately, and she refers them to VA facilities she finds helpful, such as [Bay Pines in St. Petersburg, Fla.](#)

Batten says she wholeheartedly agrees with Bolling that veterans who need help should ask for it immediately.

She adds that since 2005, the VA has been working to expand its ability to provide effective mental health services. She says the VA trains providers, making sure they are skilled in the latest treatments. It also reaches out to those who may not know what services they're eligible for or what services are available.

Most recently, the VA launched a smartphone application called [The PTSD Coach](#), which offers reliable PTSD information and coping strategies. And there's a 24-hour [crisis hotline](#) for those in need of immediate assistance.

Web Resources

- [Helpful Websites For Female Veterans](#)
- [Army News Service: Growing Population Of Homeless Women Veterans Gain New Resource](#)