

Female Veterans Feel Left Behind

By Ben Kesling

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As Number of Military Women Surges, Services for Them Haven't Kept Pace



West Point graduate Devon Reyes says she felt isolated after returning from Army duty in Afghanistan. Lexey Swall for The Wall Street Journal

When Devon Reyes returned from her first deployment to Afghanistan in 2009, she withdrew from family and friends.

"No amount of pamphlets or brochures would have enticed me to come out of my shell," said the Army veteran and mother of two, now 29 years old. She said she longed for camaraderie, but there was little

opportunity to meet other female soldiers with similar experiences.

That isolation and lack of support is shared by many other women vets, even as their numbers have surged, according to a report released Wednesday by the Disabled American Veterans, a veterans-service organization. The report highlights ways that military women differ from male counterparts both during and after their service.

"As we watch our membership change from predominantly male to now having many females, we realize it's important to bring their stories to light" and push for changes to serve them better, said Garry Augustine, executive director of Disabled American Veterans.

As of March, women made up about 210,000 of the 1.79 million veterans who have served since 2001, according to the report. About 14% of active-duty service forces today are female, vs. 8% in 1980.

And never before has the Department of Veterans Affairs faced so many women who served in combat roles as they have in recent conflicts.

Still, Defense Department and VA programs tend to lag behind in serving women, according to the report.

A third of VA medical centers lack a gynecologist on staff, the report says. About one in five women veterans report having experienced military sexual trauma, including rape, yet 31% of VA clinics lack staff to provide adequate treatment, according to the Institute of Medicine, an independent nonprofit.

Women who have lost limbs face unique challenges, like needing multiple adjustments to prostheses during pregnancy to accommodate changes in weight and balance. Female veterans more often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder than their male counterparts, yet VA facilities "have difficulty providing gender-specific peer support, group therapy, residential rehabilitation," the report says.

Moreover, recently discharged female vets faced a 9.3% unemployment rate at the end of 2013, compared with 8% among male vets, according to the report.

The report makes 27 sets of recommendations, on health care, strengthening transition programs and helping women better use their GI Bill benefits.

Asked about the report, a Pentagon spokesman, Maj. James Brindle, said, "We want to make sure that across these areas, all members of the military are treated with respect." He added, "We're trying to find the gaps."

The VA said it expects the number of women using its services to double in the next several years, having already doubled in the past seven or eight years.

"This is not a time to pause, but a time to ramp up our services," said Patricia Hayes, the VA's chief consultant for women's health services. She said the VA is working to help women who experienced military sexual trauma and, although the VA is short of gynecologists, women are referred to local health-care centers.

An advocacy group for female vets expressed skepticism about the VA's ability to improve women's services. "There's an enormous shortage of female health providers across the VA. I have doubts that the VA can truly change their culture to welcome female veterans," said Anu Bhagwati, executive director of the Service Women's Action Network.

Yet there are early signs of change. The Veterans of Foreign Wars in September pushed to alter the language of its congressional charter to use inclusive language rather than refer to male vets. New VA Secretary [Robert McDonald](#) did the same in a restating of the VA motto. And Mr. Augustine said Disabled American Veterans will likely soon do the once-unthinkable: name a woman as its national commander.

Write to Ben Kesling at benjamin.kesling@wsj.com