

NWI NEWS

VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System

Link

JUNE 2010

GREETINGS FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recognizes and honors the contributions of our women Veterans. Each one of the 1.8 million women Veterans alive today serves as a living reminder of the courage and sacrifice that women have made and continue to make for our nation. VA is here to support them with outstanding health care services tailored to their needs.

Women Veterans are one of the fastest growing subpopulations of Veterans, second only to elderly Veterans. They also represent a much younger age group. Nearly all newly enrolled women Veterans using VA health care are under 40 and of childbearing age.

There are about 13,000 women Veterans in VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System (VA NWIHCS) coverage area. Yet only about 3,000 use VA health care services.

In VA NWIHCS we are implementing several initiatives to address women's health care in our VA facilities, including providing more opportunities for women Veterans to learn about services available to them. This issue of *NWI News Link* illustrates how we are expanding, changing and developing innovations to meet the needs of women Veterans.

Al Washko

WOMEN VETERANS PAST AND PRESENT

Women were officially recognized as members of the armed forces in 1901 with the inception of the Army Nurse Corps, but their participation in the U.S. military dates back to the Revolutionary War. During that conflict and the Civil War, women tended wounds, spied on enemies, and in some cases disguised themselves as men and assumed combat roles.

World War I produced 25,000 women Veterans and World War II, 319,000. It was during World War II that women first received full military status with the establishment of the Women's Army Corps in 1943.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, five percent of Veterans who served in World War II were women Veterans, two percent in the Korean War, and three percent in the Vietnam War. However, during the Gulf War of 1991 to 1992, the number of women Veterans increased to 16 percent.

There are 350,000 women serving in the armed forces today. Women currently comprise about 14 percent of the active duty military, 17.6 percent of Guard and Reserves and 5.9 percent of VA health care users. Based on

Department of Defense active duty rosters, the number of women Veterans will continue to climb dramatically.

The average age of women Veterans is 48, compared to an average age of 61 for male Veterans. Nearly all newly enrolled women Veterans using VA health care are under 40 and of childbearing age. As recently as 1998, women represented only 4.4 percent of all Veterans. Now, more women Veterans, young and old, are turning to VA for their health care.

Of the 1.8 million U.S. women Veterans, more than 450,000 have enrolled in the VA health care system. Of all women who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, 44 percent have enrolled in VA health care and 43 percent have used VA health care services between two and eleven times.

Their entry into the armed forces in unprecedented numbers, their deployment to combat zones, and their return home as combat Veterans, wives and mothers challenge VA to expand, change and innovate to meet the needs of all women Veterans.

WOMEN VETERANS HEALTH CARE

As part of VA's readiness for the influx of new women Veterans, VA's Women Veterans Program (WVP) was elevated to a Strategic Health Care Group within the Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards in 2007.

The WVP Strategic Health Care Group works to make certain that all eligible women Veterans requesting VA health care are assured of comprehensive primary care by a primary care provider; privacy, safety, dignity, and sensitivity to gender-specific needs; the right care in the right place and time; state-of-the-art health care, equipment and technology; and high-quality preventive and clinical care equal to that provided to male Veterans.

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Recent VA initiatives and programs include comprehensive primary care throughout the nation, enhanced mental health for women Veterans, staffing of every VA medical center with a women Veterans program manager, creating a mini-residency education program on women's health for primary care providers, supporting a multifaceted research program on women's health, improving communication and outreach to women Veterans, and continuing the operation of organizations like the WVP Strategic Health Care Group.

Services for women have steadily expanded and improved. VA has responded to growing numbers of women Veterans by developing programs and facilities to meet their unique health care needs. This significant effort involves everything from the abstract—changing the perception that VA health facilities serve only men—to the concrete—making certain that facilities have the necessary women's health equipment and can offer women adequate privacy.

VA NWIHCS'S WOMEN VETERANS PROGRAM

Cindy Niemack-Brown is the Women Veterans Program Manager for VA NWIHCS. She is responsible for assessing the needs of women Veterans for all sites, assists in planning, organizing and coordinating services and programs, and develops best practices in organizing the delivery of women's health care.

A Women Veterans Health Care Committee has been established at each VA NWIHCS site to strategically address and assure health care delivery is enhanced to meet the needs of women Veterans.

Currently each site has designated women Veterans primary care providers. Female Veterans can select a designated women Veterans primary care provider who will address individual health care needs. VA NWIHCS also has a military sexual trauma coordinator.

VA NWIHCS increased its outreach efforts to make more Women Veterans aware of the benefits that are available to them. Focus group meetings have been held in Grand Island, Hastings, and Omaha, with additional sessions planned throughout the VA NWIHCS service area.

We are also collaborating with County Veteran Service Officers and Veteran Service Organizations in communities to host outreach events in Nebraska and western Iowa to educate all Veterans about VA services available to them and to give them the opportunity to enroll. For example, the Veterans of Armed Forces Outreach Event, held in January in Falls City, Neb., attracted 68 Veterans. The event in Carson, Iowa, in March drew 55 attendees, including one woman Veteran of World War II, who had never enrolled to receive benefits from VA.

VA NWIHCS is also trying to change the perception of Women Veterans health care by reaching out to women Veterans through the use of posters, brochures, a quarterly newsletter and web page. The goal is to reach all women Veterans, including those who don't regularly visit VA for their health care services.

For More Information:

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Women Veterans Health Care, VA NWIHCS
www.nebraska.va.gov/services/women.asp

Women Veterans Health Care, VA Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards
www.publichealth.va.gov/womenshealth

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Cindy Niemack-Brown, VA NWIHCS Women Veterans Program Manager, explains VA health care services to a female Veteran of World War II who attended a VA outreach event in Carson, Iowa.

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