Women Veterans Call Center: What You Need to Know!

All the representatives at the Women Veterans Call Center (WVCC) are women, and many are Veterans themselves. They provide women Veterans, their families, and caregivers with information about VA services and resources. In addition to linking women Veterans to information, they make direct referrals to the Women Veteran Program Managers (WVPM) located at every VA medical center. The Women Veteran Program Manager helps the woman Veteran coordinate services.

How Do I Use the Women Veterans Call Center service?

Simply call 1-855-VA-Women (1-855-829-6636) to be connected with a Women Veterans Call Center representative. Hours of operation are Monday through Friday 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. ET and Saturday, 8:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. ET.

What Happens When I Call the Women Veterans Call Center?

- You will be connected to a trained VA woman staff member.
- Call center staff will conduct a brief screening to assess your needs.
- Women Veterans will be provided personalized information regarding health care services, VA benefits and services, and a package of information will be sent to their home.
- You can call for yourself or for a woman Veteran you know.

How Do I Use the Women Veterans Call Center Chat Feature?

The WVCC is expanding its outreach to women Veterans with a new online, one-to-one Chat Function. The new feature provides women Veterans with another avenue to ask general questions about benefits, eligibility and services specifically for women Veterans. WVCC chat is available by visiting the Women Veterans Health Care webpage at www.womenshealth.va.gov and clicking the "Chat with the Women Veterans Call Center" icon.

For more Information, visit http://www.womenshealth.va.gov/
Entrepreneurship and Mentorship

Women as Veteran Entrepreneurs (https://www.thewave.us.com) provides a forum for Veteran woman-owned small businesses to meet prime contractors to discuss business teaming, sub-contracting and mentoring opportunities, information on strategies for doing business with the government, networking, and more.

The Small Business Administration (https://www.sba.gov) has numerous resources specifically Veterans and women, and just announced awarding grants to three organizations offering small business development resources to women Veterans:

- Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship, a training program in entrepreneurship and small business management that helps women Veterans and female military spouses/partners learn business skills.

- Bunker Labs for their Entrepreneurial Program for Innovation and Collaboration (EPIC) and Bunker in a Box programs.

- The San Antonio Lift Fund, a 7-week Texas-based women Veteran entrepreneurship program.

The Coalition for Veteran Owned Business (https://veteranbusinesscoalition.org) supports the success of Veteran, service member, and military spouse-owned businesses by connecting them with entrepreneurial education and training, small business resources and solutions, and commerce and supplier opportunities, including both business-to-business and business-to-consumer models.

BusinessUSA (https://www.businessusa.gov) provides information about starting a business, access financing, growing the business, and finding opportunities.

Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service - Women Veterans (https://www.dol.gov/vets) focuses on four key areas to support our nation's veterans: (1) preparing veterans for meaningful careers; (2) providing them with employment resources and expertise; (3) protecting their employment rights; and, (4) promoting the employment of veterans and related training opportunities to employers across the country.

Academy Women's eMentor Program (https://www.ementorprogram.org) ensures that women who have gone through military training have the opportunity to benefit from a mentor who shares a common history and/or works as a corporate professional in their area of interest.

LeanIn Women Veterans (http://leanincircles.org/chapter/lean-in-women-veterans) provides a supportive network for women veterans. Their goals are to provide women Veterans connection to their local communities, means of contributing to their communities, and increase awareness of the presence of women veterans.
Women and Intimate Partner Violence: The Facts

What is Intimate Partner Violence?
Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious, preventable public health problem that affects millions of Americans. The term "intimate partner violence" describes physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014)

One third of women Veterans experience Intimate Partner Violence in their lifetime.

#ENDDOMESTICVIOLENCENOW

Prevalence

- Approximately 1.3 million women and 855,000 men each year are assaulted by an intimate partner in the United States (Tyden & Thienennes, 2008).

- More than one in every three women (35.6%) and more than one in every four men (28.5%) in the United States report experiencing rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, & Merrick, 2011).

- Approximately three women are killed every day by an intimate partner in the United States (Catalano, 2007).

- 33% of female veterans report experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime. (Gerber, Iverson, Dichter, Klap, & Latta, 2014).

- One in every four children experiences family violence during their childhood (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011, October).

Effects

The impact of intimate partner violence is far-reaching and severe. Consequences and outcomes of IPV include:

- Central nervous system problems
- Low birth weight in babies born to those who experienced IPV during pregnancy
- Higher risk of contracting STDs
- Mental health issues such as: depression, self-harm, and suicide
- Substance Abuse
- Severe injury or death (de Boorville, 2013)

Online Resources

domesticshelters.org - Nationwide database of resources
clicktoempower.org - Financial empowerment training
cnadv.org - National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
thehotline.org - National Domestic Violence Hotline
joinonelove.org - Free safety planning app and assessment tool

References
**Quick Facts About VA’s Health Care Services for Military Sexual Trauma (MST)**

- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) uses the term “military sexual trauma” (MST) to refer to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment experienced while on federal active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training.

- The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has a range of outpatient, inpatient, and residential services available to assist Veterans in their recovery from MST.

- All treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST is provided free of charge to Veterans. This includes outpatient, inpatient, residential, and pharmaceutical treatment. For Active Duty Servicemembers (ADSMs), MST-related counseling is available at Vet Centers without need for referral. ADSMs may also be able to receive care at some VA medical centers, but a Tricare referral may be required.

- To receive this free MST-related care, Veterans do not need to be service connected (that is, have a VA disability rating”) – eligibility for MST-related health care is independent of receipt of other VA benefits. Veterans may be able to receive free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA care. For example, there are no length of service or income requirements to receive MST-related care. Veterans do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred.

**Specific MST-Related Services Available Through the Veterans Health Administration**

- Every VA health care facility has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs.

- Every VA medical center has providers knowledgeable about MST and provides MST-related mental health outpatient services. Services available include formal psychological assessment and evaluation; psychiatry; and individual and group psychotherapy. Specialty programs target problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders, depression, and homelessness. MST-related counseling is also available at VHA’s community-based Vet Centers.

- For Veterans who need more intensive treatment, many VHA facilities offer residential programming. A number of these residential programs focus specifically on MST or have specialized MST tracks.

- VHA also has inpatient programs available for acute care needs (e.g., psychiatric emergencies and stabilization, medication adjustment).

*For more information, please contact the MST Coordinator at your nearest VA Medical Center or visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp). A list of VHA facilities can be found at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).*

*Note: the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) handles claims for compensation for injuries or disabilities that began or got worse during military service. More information about filing an MST-related disability claim is available at [http://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/serviceconnected/MST.pdf](http://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/serviceconnected/MST.pdf)*

May, 2016
Both women and men can experience military sexual trauma (MST) during their service. All veterans seen at Veterans Health Administration facilities are asked about experiences of sexual trauma because we know that any type of trauma can affect a person's physical and mental health, even many years later. We also know that people can recover from trauma. VA has services to help veterans do this.

For more information, male and female veterans can speak with their existing VA healthcare provider, contact the MST Coordinator at their nearest VA Medical Center, or contact their local Vet Center.

A list of VA and Vet Center facilities can be found online at www.va.gov and www.vetcenter.va.gov.

You can also call VA's general information hotline at 1-800-827-1000.

Veterans should feel free to ask to meet with a clinician of the same or opposite sex if it would make them feel more comfortable.

VETERANS:
Did you experience any unwanted sexual attention, uninvited sexual advances, or forced sex while in the military?
Does this experience continue to affect your life today?

September 2010
Problems:
- Emotions: Difficult to tolerate emotional distance, anxiety, depression, anger, irritability, irritability.
- Memory: Disorganization, forgetfulness, difficulty focusing.
- Sleep: Insomnia, nightmares, difficulty falling asleep, waking up frequently.
- Physical symptoms: Fatigue, headaches, stomach problems.
- Suicide risk: Increased.

Other problems:
- Difficulty with intimate relationships.
- Difficulty with alcohol or other drugs.
- Difficulty with concentration and attention.
- Feelings of numbness or detachment.
- Feelings of hopelessness.

WHat SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE?

MST can affect a person's mental and physical health, even many years later. MST can also affect a person's relationships with others. MST is a form of sexual trauma.
Military Sexual Trauma

What is military sexual trauma (MST)?
Military sexual trauma, or MST, is the term used by VA to refer to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that a Veteran experienced during his or her military service. The definition used by the VA comes from Federal law (Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D) and is "psychological trauma, which in the judgment of a VA mental health professional, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training." Sexual harassment is further defined as "repeated, unsolicited verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature which is threatening in character."

More concretely, MST includes any sexual activity where a Servicemember is involved against his or her will — he or she may have been pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied better treatment in exchange for sex), may have been unable to consent to sexual activities (for example, when intoxicated), or may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other experiences that fall into the category of MST include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person’s body or sexual activities; and threatening and unwelcome sexual advances. The identity or characteristics of the perpetrator, whether the Servicemember was on or off duty at the time, and whether he or she was on or off base at the time do not matter. If these experiences occurred while an individual was on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty for training, they are considered by VA to be MST.

How common is MST?
VA’s national screening program, in which every Veteran seen for health care is asked whether he or she experienced MST, provides data on how common MST is among Veterans seen in VA. National data from this program reveal that about 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men respond “yes,” that they experienced MST, when screened by their VA provider. Although rates of MST are higher among women, because there are so many more men than women in the military, there are actually significant numbers of women and men seen in VA who have experienced MST.

It’s important to keep in mind that these data speak only to the rate of MST among Veterans who have chosen to seek VA health care; they cannot be used to make an estimate of the actual rates of sexual assault and harassment experiences among all individuals serving in the U.S. Military. Also, although Veterans who respond “yes” when screened are asked if they are interested in learning about MST-related services available, not every Veteran who responds “yes” necessarily needs or is interested in treatment. MST is an experience, not a diagnosis, and Veterans’ current treatment needs will vary.

May, 2015
How can MST affect Veterans?

MST is an experience, not a diagnosis or a mental health condition, and as with other forms of trauma, there are a variety of reactions that Veterans can have in response to MST. The type, severity, and duration of a Veteran's difficulties will all vary based on factors like whether he/she has a prior history of trauma, the types of responses from others he/she received at the time of the MST, and whether the MST happened once or was repeated over time. Although the reactions men and women have to MST are similar in some ways, they may also struggle with different issues. Race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and other cultural variables can also affect the impact of MST.

Although trauma can be a life-changing event, people are often remarkably resilient after experiencing trauma. Many individuals recover without professional help; others may generally function well in their life, but continue to experience some level of difficulties or have strong reactions in certain situations. For some Veterans, the experience of MST may continue to affect their mental and physical health in significant ways, even many years later. Some of the experiences both female and male survivors of MST may have include:

**Strong emotions:** feeling depressed; having intense, sudden emotional reactions to things; feeling angry or irritable all the time

**Feelings of numbness:** feeling emotionally 'flat'; difficulty experiencing emotions like love or happiness

**Trouble sleeping:** trouble falling or staying asleep; disturbing nightmares

**Difficulties with attention, concentration, and memory:** trouble staying focused; frequently finding their mind wandering; having a hard time remembering things

**Problems with alcohol or other drugs:** drinking to excess or using drugs daily; getting intoxicated or “high” to cope with memories or emotional reactions; drinking to fall asleep

**Difficulty with things that remind them of their experiences of sexual trauma:** feeling on edge or ‘jumpy’ all the time; difficulty feeling safe; going out of their way to avoid reminders of their experiences

**Difficulties in relationships:** feeling isolated or disconnected from others; abusive relationships; trouble with employers or authority figures; difficulty trusting others

**Physical health problems:** sexual difficulties; chronic pain; weight or eating problems; gastrointestinal problems

Although posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is commonly associated with MST, it is not the only diagnosis that can result from MST. For example, VA medical record data indicate that in addition to PTSD, the diagnoses most frequently associated with MST among users of VA health care are depression and other mood disorders, and substance use disorders.

Fortunately, people can recover from experiences of trauma, and VA has effective services to help Veterans do this.
How has VA responded to the problem of MST?
VA is strongly committed to ensuring that Veterans have access to the help they need in order to recover from MST.

- Every VA health care system has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs. He or she may also be aware of state and federal benefits and community resources that may be helpful.
- Recognizing that many survivors of sexual trauma do not disclose their experiences unless asked directly, VA health care providers ask every Veteran whether he or she experienced MST. This is an important way of making sure Veterans know about the services available to them.
- All treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to experiences of MST is provided free of charge.
- To receive free treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST, Veterans do not need to be service connected (or have a VA disability rating). Veterans may be able to receive this benefit even if they are not eligible for other VA care. Veterans do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred.
- MST-related services are available at every VA medical center and every facility has providers knowledgeable about treatment for the aftereffects of MST. MST-related counseling is also available through community-based Vet Centers. Services are designed to meet Veterans where they are at in their recovery, whether that is focusing on strategies for coping with challenging emotions and memories or, for Veterans who are ready, actually talking about their MST experiences in depth.
- Nationwide, there are programs that offer specialized sexual trauma treatment in residential or inpatient settings. These are programs for Veterans who need more intense treatment and support.
- To accommodate Veterans who do not feel comfortable in mixed-gender treatment settings, some facilities have separate programs for men and women. All residential and inpatient MST programs have separate sleeping areas for men and women.

In addition to its treatment programming, VA also provides training to staff on issues related to MST, including a mandatory training on MST for all mental health and primary care providers. VA also engages in a range of outreach activities to Veterans and conducts monitoring of MST-related screening and treatment, in order to ensure that adequate services are available.

How can Veterans get help?
For more information, Veterans can speak with their existing VA health care provider, contact the MST Coordinator at their nearest VA Medical Center, or contact their local Vet Center. A list of VA and Vet Center facilities can be found at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) and [www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov). Veterans should feel free to ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if it would make them feel more comfortable.

Veterans can also learn more about VA’s MST-related services online at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp) and see video clips with the recovery stories of Veterans who have experienced MST at [http://maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma](http://maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma).
DISABILITY COMPENSATION

MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

DISABILITY COMPENSATION FOR CONDITIONS RELATED TO MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA (MST)

Disabilities determined by VA to be related to your military service can lead to monthly non-taxable compensation, enrollment in the VA health care system, a 10-point hiring preference for federal employment, and other important benefits. Ask your VA representative or Veterans Service Organization representative about Disability Compensation, Pension, Health Care, Caregiver Program, Career Services, Educational Assistance, Home Loan Guaranty, Insurance and/or Dependents and Survivors Benefits.

Some Veterans may have experienced sexual trauma while serving in the military. These kinds of experiences can affect Veterans' mental and physical health, even many years later. Veterans can apply for disability compensation for any current difficulties that are related to their service, including difficulties related to MST. The VA has military sexual trauma coordinators at local regional benefit offices who can assist Veterans. The list of coordinators is located here, http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/mstcoordinators.asp.

HOW DOES VA DEFINE MST?

MST is defined by Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D as "psychological trauma resulting from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training." Sexual harassment is defined as "repeated, unsolicited verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature which is threatening in character."

ARE VETERANS GRANTED DISABILITY COMPENSATION FOR MST?

Veterans are not granted compensation for the traumatic event itself, but can be granted disability compensation for conditions that result from MST.
CAN YOU DEVELOP POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) OR OTHER MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS AS A RESULT OF MST?

Yes. Exposure to any trauma can potentially result in PTSD or another mental health disorder. PTSD is the most common mental health diagnosis related to experiencing MST.

WHAT EVIDENCE CAN SUPPORT A DISABILITY CLAIM FOR PTSD AS A RESULT OF MST?

Department of Defense forms used in reporting incidents of sexual assault or harassment, as well as investigative reports during military service are direct evidence to support these claims. However, VA knows that events involving sexual trauma are not always officially reported. Therefore, for PTSD claims related to MST VA has relaxed the evidentiary requirements and looks for “markers” (i.e., signs, events, or circumstances) that provide some indication that the traumatic event happened. These include, but are not limited to:

- Records from law enforcement authorities, rape crisis centers, mental health counseling centers, hospitals, or physicians
- Pregnancy tests or tests for sexually transmitted diseases
- Statements from family members, roommates, fellow Servicemembers, clergy members, or counselors
- Requests for transfer to another military duty assignment
- Deterioration in work performance
- Substance abuse
- Episodes of depression, panic attacks, or anxiety without an identifiable cause
- Unexplained economic or social behavioral changes
- Relationship issues, such as divorce
- Sexual dysfunction

VA RELAXED THE STANDARDS OF EVIDENCE FOR COMBAT RELATED PTSD. ARE THE STANDARDS OF EVIDENCE FOR MST – RELATED PTSD CLAIMS MORE STRINGENT THAN OTHER PTSD CLAIMS?

No. In fact, VA relaxed its evidentiary standard for disability claims related to MST in 2002 to ensure all available evidence supporting these claims is considered. Because military service records may lack corroborating evidence that a stressful event occurred, VA regulations make clear that evidence from non-military sources may be used to corroborate the Veteran’s account of the MST. Further, when direct evidence of an MST is not available, VA may request a medical opinion to consider a Veteran’s account and any “markers” to corroborate the occurrence of the MST event as related to current PTSD symptoms.
CAN PREVIOUSLY DENIED MST RELATED PTSD DISABILITY CLAIMS BE RE-EVALUATED?

Yes. Increased awareness of MST issues resulted in special training beginning in December 2011 for all VA regional office personnel who process MST-related claims and the mental health clinicians conducting the examinations related to these claims. This ongoing training focuses on discovering "marker" evidence to support the claim. VA wants all Veterans who filed MST-related PTSD claims before December 2011 to receive the benefits of this nationwide training. If your claim was submitted before that date and denied, you can request a re-evaluation from your local VA regional office.

WHAT DO VETERANS NEED TO DO TO GET A PREVIOUSLY DENIED MST-RELATED PTSD DISABILITY CLAIM RE-EVALUATED?

Veterans who want VA to review their previously denied MST-related PTSD claim can start by contacting their regional office, calling 1-800-827-1000 or logging into their free eBenefits account at www.eBenefits.va.gov.

CAN VETERANS PROVIDE NEW INFORMATION FOR A RE-EVALUATION OF A PREVIOUSLY DENIED MST-RELATED PTSD DISABILITY CLAIM?

Yes. VBA will accept new evidence to be reviewed when a claim is re-evaluated. It’s best to send any new evidence at the same time as you request a re-evaluation. Veterans Service Organizations, as well as MST specialists and/or Women Veterans Coordinators available at every VA regional office, can help you determine what type of information is best to submit.

DO I NEED TO BE SERVICE CONNECTED FOR MY CONDITIONS RELATED TO MST TO GET TREATMENT?

No. VA provides free health care for physical and mental health conditions related to experiences of MST. No documentation of the MST experiences or disability compensation rating is required. Some Veterans may be able to receive this free MST-related health care even if they are not eligible for other VA care.

HOW CAN YOU APPLY FOR DISABILITY COMPENSATION?

You can apply for disability compensation by completing VA Form 21-526, Veteran’s Application for Compensation and/or Pension. You may also apply online at www.ebenefits.va.gov, or you can appoint an accredited Veterans Service Officer (VSO) to assist you. Male and female MST coordinators are available at every VA regional office to assist Veterans filing claims related to personal assault or MST. You can call 1-800-827-1000, and VA will put you in touch with an MST coordinator, or you can email the MST coordinator at your local regional office from the list of

Compensation — March 2016