



TIPS FOR WORKING WITH WOMEN VETERANS

Women veterans who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, share many of the same needs as their male counterparts, such as access to affordable housing, employment services, access to health care services, income supports, and other critical services to prevent and end their homelessness. However, to be successful, these services most often need to be tailored to the unique needs of women veterans. This document will explore the needs and challenges that are specific to women veterans, and some tips tailored to address them.

Child Care

According to the [Children's Defense Fund](#), in 2000, the average cost of child care for a 4 year old was \$4,000 to 6,000+ a year; some urban area centers charged more than \$10,000 a year. Today the costs are even higher. According to 2016 Care.com [member data](#), the average cost of center-based day care for infants is about \$10,468 per year, but prices can range from \$6,605 to \$20,209 a year. Similarly, the average cost of center-based day care for toddlers is about \$9,733, but prices can range from \$8,043 to \$18,815 a year.

Child care is consistently cited as an unmet need by women veterans in general, which is exacerbated by homelessness. Finding safe, reliable, and affordable child care can be a tremendous challenge, and many times the burden of paying for child care can lead to housing instability for women veterans with children. Lack of child care contributes to difficulties in being able to attend groups or appointments, attend job interviews, go to work, and function effectively. Some communities have created centers that provide free or affordable child care for women experiencing homelessness, but these are not available in all areas. Sometimes social support groups can pair up groups of parents so they can share child care provisions; state laws vary, however, and this is not always a feasible option.

Some local human services agencies, such as the YWCA, can provide child care for women veterans seeking employment, and some employers will offer subsidies for new employees with children. Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the American Job Centers can provide supportive services, including child care, to help eligible participants reach their employment and training goals. Also, if a woman veteran is employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), they may be eligible for the VA's Child Care Subsidy Program.

Sometimes extended family and other relatives can provide some limited child care. Another option is to search the Child Care Aware [state-by-state directory](#) of child care resources. Coming up with child care options before, during, and after housing and employment stabilization is critical to long-term success and stability of women veterans with children.

Tips for addressing child care:

- Understand the woman veteran's child care needs.
- Factor child care into service plans, employment plans, and the case management approach.
- Have a welcoming and kid-friendly environment (see **Creating a Welcoming Environment**).
- Generate a resource list of child care providers and services in your local area.
- Research family friendly service providers and resources.
- Learn which employers provide onsite child care, subsidies for child care, or flexible scheduling.
- Talk to clients about babysitting needs, pooling child care, and other alternative child care options.
- Connect women veterans with children to organizations with Supportive Services for Veteran Families grants for possible child care subsidies.

Outreach

Engaging women veterans can be challenging at times. Targeting outreach can enhance a Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program's (HVRP's) enrollment of homeless and at-risk women veterans. Reaching out to the VA's women programs, including the Women's Clinic, at the local level is a good strategy. When meeting with VA and other woman's programs, the goal is to inform the staff of HVRP services, provide HVRP brochures, and offer information to these sites. A short presentation of program eligibility, intake, and services offered will help get the word out to women veterans in need.

Every school district has a program for serving homeless children. Letting the homeless coordinator in your local school districts know about HVRP and asking that coordinator share your contact information and brochures with parents who are military members or veterans can be helpful.

Outreach efforts should include asking the women you currently serve to talk with their peers or former colleagues about the HVRP and its services that can help women veterans find a career pathway. Some programs offer referral incentives to their clients who bring in eligible applicants.

Tips for outreach to women veterans:

- Understand the unique agencies and programs that are women specific, women focused, and serve women clients.
- Have outreach materials that feature women veterans and service members.
- Educate programs on how your HVRP works to help women veterans obtain employment.
- Make sure your program overview presentations include information about women veterans.
- Partner with agencies that serve women veterans.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

Anecdotal evidence gleaned from the Homeless Female Veterans and Veterans with Families grant program demonstrates that it is important for programs to create an office setting that is sensitive to the needs and experiences of women veterans. A welcoming environment might mean a separate entrance to the program offices for women veterans so they do not have to be confronted with a waiting area full of male veterans, as such an experience can trigger past negative events. It can also be helpful to have a women veteran first interviewed by a woman staff member; this may make the woman veteran feel more welcomed, safe, and understood. Below are some additional tips. Although all of these changes may not be feasible for all offices, making incremental steps to create a more welcoming environment is worth the effort, as it encourages women veterans to return and to tell their colleagues about their good experiences.

Tips for creating a welcoming environment for women veterans:

- Have women, including women veterans, on your staff who can greet, welcome, and be employment counselors to women veterans.
- Have activities, toys, and a separate space for young children to play/wait while their mother talks with an intake worker.
- Replace wall decorations that are overwhelmingly military with more neutral themes, or a blend of military and nonmilitary features.
- Create a warm environment—plants, mellow lighting, calming music, comfortable seating, a fish tank, etc.
- Have women specific-service items, such as women's clothing, hygiene items, etc.

Job Placement

Developing relationships, job leads, and partnerships with employers that have amenities and are inclusive to women veterans will help to create higher placement rates for women veterans. Amenities such as child care, flexible hours, job sharing, telecommuting / work from home, family health plans, and family leave options are the kind of work benefits that often appeal to women veterans.

Women work in all sectors, but there are many male-dominated fields that women veteran may wish to pursue. Women who served in the military have been exposed to a male-dominated work culture in many cases, making some prepared to work in jobs such as construction or cable installation jobs. Finding out which employers have a gender-neutral work environment and are welcoming to women will go a long way in creating good placements. Consider whether or not an employer is open to the idea of a current employee mentoring a newly hired women veteran to assist in her adjustment to civilian employment.

Tips for placing women veterans into employment:

- Develop relationships with women-friendly employers.
- Explore the options in non-traditional occupations with women veterans.
- Make sure women's needs and issues are addressed in the employment search process.
- Work with job sectors that hire women.
- Tailor job searches with the individual woman's issues and challenges in mind.

Job Retention

Good placements are often the key to job retention. Finding a job that matches women veterans' skills, needs, and expectations is a challenging but important aspect of retention. Issues such as transportation, child care, work environment, sexual harassment, and gender bias in the workplace can often cause a woman veteran to leave a job. Addressing these issues upfront will go a long way to help women veterans keep their employment. An HVRP might consider offering

an employed women veterans' support group to help them address workplace issues and engage in peer-to-peer support.

Tips for helping women veterans keep jobs:

- Work to overcome gender discrimination in the workforce.
- Provide services that enhance women's long-term employment outcomes.
- Recognize women who work in traditionally male-dominated fields.
- Encourage women clients to assume leadership roles in their jobs.
- Make sure child care, or other caregiving, issues are addressed.

Other Considerations for Helping Women Veterans

Physical Health Care

The VA is making great strides to address the specific needs of women veterans. Women-specific clinics and women's health care coordinators are becoming more common at VA facilities. In addition, family-planning, OB/GYN services, and other women-specific health care issues are now being provided in a woman-friendly, gender-responsive environment at many local VA medical centers. More information about [VA women's health care programs](#) can be found at the VA website.

That said, gender-responsiveness is not universal, and many women veterans may find it difficult to pursue health care in a male-dominated medical system that serves more men than women. Many women veterans, particularly those who have experienced Military Sexual Trauma (MST), may be more comfortable having female health care providers and being seen in a health care setting with a predominantly female clientele and staff.

Knowing which local women's health organizations, clinics, and other health care providers in your community cater specifically to women, and have ample female providers, is a critical step in making the appropriate referrals to support women veterans in getting their physical health care needs met.

VA Medical Center Women Veterans Program Managers

Every VA Medical Center has a Women Veterans Program Manager. These program managers can help guide women veterans into VA services and programs, and connect them with state and federal benefits and resources in the region and locality. Services include primary care, pregnancy care, psychiatric care and sexual abuse counseling, inpatient medical/surgical care, programs for homeless women veterans, and quality-of-care issues. Visit the women's [Health Care Services](#) page for a listing of services available. Making sure women veterans understand their benefits and eligibility can help them take advantage of these resources.

Some additional types of VA programs for women include: Women's stress disorder treatment teams, specialized patient programs for women, residential treatment programs for women, women veterans' homelessness programs, and women veterans' comprehensive health centers. Service providers should reach out to their local VA Medical Center and explore which women-specific programs are available for their clients. Developing a good working relationship with these programs will ensure that positive referrals and warm handoffs become the norm.

Behavioral Health Care

Be aware that if a woman is the sole provider for herself and her young children, she may push herself into the job market despite not feeling "job-ready," because of her desperate need for income to support her family. In some cases, she may also be struggling with mental health or trauma-related issues without assistance. Look for ways to meet her comprehensive needs and get her access to needed services—before, during, and after job placement. Ensuring her mental health needs are met will help her be prepared to find and keep employment.

The behavioral health needs of women veterans are often exacerbated by the high rates of MST, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the women veteran population. In addition, higher rates of anxiety and depression (and other related mental health issues), coupled with childhood

trauma, domestic violence, high rates of single parenting, and environmental factors all affect the willingness and ability of women veterans to pursue behavior health interventions and services.

Understanding the resources available in your community that are appropriate for women veterans is necessary to make strong referrals that are both appropriate and will be acted upon. It is important to have a knowledge of both gender-responsive and woman-specific behavioral health providers and programs in your community. It is also important to know which programs are trauma informed, given the high rates of trauma among women veterans. Examples are women-only group therapy sessions, women-only mutual support groups, gender-responsive behavioral health clinics, domestic violence survivor's groups, peer support groups for women and women veterans, women-only residential and outpatient behavioral health settings, trauma-specific interventions for women, and local behavioral health providers who focus on women. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a publication called [Guidance Document for Supporting Women in Co-ed Settings](#) that discusses gender-responsive and trauma-informed services. SAMHSA also offers publications, trainings, webinars, and resources about meeting the behavioral health needs of women, all of which can be accessed through the [Women, Children and Families Training and Technical Assistance](#) webpage.

Behavioral health providers and programs should be vetted by HVRP staff before client referrals are given. When possible, arrange to talk with providers to ensure they understand military culture and terminology, the unique experiences of women veterans, and the specific needs of women veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. It is also helpful to visit the programs or providers' offices to ensure they are in an accessible and safe setting, as many homeless women veterans will need to take public transportation to reach appointments, support groups, and therapy programs. If the programs or providers are in an unsafe part of town, or require a long walk from public transportation, women are less likely to return, particularly if they need to attend in the evenings. Physical and psychological safety are of paramount importance.

More information about helping women veterans with behavioral health can be found through the [VA Mental Health Services for Homeless Veterans](#) webpage.

Family Supports

Family supports are critical for women veterans, as they are much more likely to be single parents, and/ or be part of an extended family group. Women veterans are often the primary caregiver for dependent children, and often for extended family members, such as aging parents. This means that family supports are a critical component to helping women veterans obtain housing and other interventions that address their social issues in ways that meet their needs. Addressing not only the individual woman veteran, but her family, is vital to being effective service providers.

Family needs for women veterans may include safe and affordable child care, access to food pantries or help attaining financial help through programs such as [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\)](#) and [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#), education opportunities, nonprofits that donate suitable clothing for work, financial literacy classes, family counseling, transportation, and help getting their children needed services, such as [Head Start](#) or other early childhood intervention programs. These and a whole host of other family-specific issues need to be taken into consideration when working with women veteran clients who are members of families and primary caregivers.

Community and Social Supports

Women veterans who are experiencing homelessness may be disconnected from their community, family, and social support networks. The goal should be to help women veterans reconnect with existing social and community networks, as well as foster new connections. Women veterans who experience homelessness often struggle to make meaningful connections within their community. These disconnects are compounded by the fact that those who experience homelessness have often burnt bridges and disconnected from the natural family groups, friends, and other close social connections. Part of the healing process and reintegration to society can be fostered by creating a safe space for the veteran to talk through why she

disconnected and come up with strategies to reconnect and heal existing connections, and build new support systems. This is not an easy process and may take time, but starting the conversation is critical.

Oftentimes peer support groups, local community groups, shared interest groups, faith-based community groups, and other networks can help women create new ties to the community and create new social bonds. These are important in the healing process. The lack of family and support networks can come through divorce, separation, disconnection, domestic abuse, substance use, behavioral health issues, and other situations—these disconnects are quite often part of the reason why women veterans experience homelessness in the first place. By fostering and promoting new social groups, women veterans are better able to participate and engage in program services.

Starting a peer support group specifically geared toward women veterans may help them create new social ties and allow them to share and work through some of their traumatic experiences. It can also allow women veterans to support one another while empowering and strengthening their resolve to address the issues that may have led to homelessness.

Housing—Family Homelessness

The housing issues faced by women veterans are often exacerbated when the woman veteran has children and other dependents. Finding suitable, safe, affordable, and accessible housing is often a very steep challenge that women veterans must face. In many communities, housing stock is typically geared toward and provided to homeless single individuals.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING: The [Grant Per Diem \(GPD\) Program](#) has long been the staple VA homeless response. Many times these GPD units are not suitable for women veterans, as they are congregate living situations and typically house male-dominated populations. There are often not units that can house women veterans with children. This creates a whole new set of challenges. Sometimes women veterans will be put into hotels or other women shelters, but finding permanent housing is often very challenging. But this is changing.

RAPID REHOUSING: In recent years, the [Supportive Services for Veterans Families \(SSVF\) Program](#)—a rapid rehousing grant program funded by VA—has become better suited to assist in placing women veterans and their families into long-term housing. That said, the housing costs in some housing markets are very high, and finding affordable housing in safe family neighborhoods can often be an arduous process. HVRPs that work with landlords and develop long-term relationships with housing authorities can alleviate some of these problems. SSVF can be particularly helpful for single mothers, who can find rapid rehousing assistance through the program and use SSVF subsidies to cover child care costs that could otherwise be a prohibitive employment barrier.

PERMEANT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING: Other VA housing for veterans may be appropriate for women veterans, such as [HUD-VASH](#), a permanent supportive housing program that is geared toward chronically homeless veterans, veterans with serious disabilities, and other populations. Although it is great to receive a

long-term permanent housing subsidy, this is not always available, particularly for women veterans who are newly homeless, at risk for homeless, or do not meet the HUD criteria for [chronic homelessness](#).

Another major challenge is that once housing is found, the moving costs, security deposits, basic household necessities, and other expenses create more challenges and barriers to getting the veteran moved into her own place. Often service providers can work with philanthropic organizations, local charities, veteran's organizations, and other community resources to come up with the needed resources for a successful move-in. There is no "one size fits all" answer, but programs that get creative can often find organizations willing to help with moving costs; household items, including furniture and other supplies; first and last month's deposit; and other upfront costs, once the housing is lined up.

More information about VA Housing Programs can be found at the [VA Programs to End Homelessness Among Women Veterans](#) webpage.