

Women Veterans And Their Long Journey Home

(NAPSA)—Many Americans don't realize it, but one out of every five new military recruits in the United States is a woman—and 2.5 million veterans are women.

Women in the military today are exposed to the same rigors of combat and the daily threat of wartime violence as their male counterparts, yet their transition from military to civilian life is often very different. A new report by DAV (Disabled American Veterans) reveals that the network of government and community groups that supports veterans is designed for and dominated by men and has serious gaps in health care, employment and housing services for women.

The report finds that women who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, have higher rates of PTSD symptoms than men. PTSD can be different for women, who are more likely to be depressed. Women are much more likely to identify interpersonal issues—marriage and parenthood—as a major source of stress when they return home. Women veterans are at least twice as likely to become homeless as non-veteran women and they have higher rates of unemployment compared to male veterans. Yet women veterans don't have access to the same kind of support networks as men do and many Department of Veterans Affairs health centers lack specialists in the physical and mental health needs of women.

“Women veterans deserve equal respect, consideration and care as the men who served,” says DAV's deputy national legislative director Joy J. Ilem, a veteran herself. “Yet the support systems are ill-equipped to meet the unique needs of the brave women who have defended our country.”

Consider the case of Crystal Dunkin, a munitions specialist in the United States Air Force. She oversaw the entire process of building and disassembling bombs, making sure nobody made a deadly mistake. “It was explosives and it was the real deal,” she recalls.



She was good at her military job but struggled when she left the Air Force and transitioned back into civilian life. “I didn't know a thing about being a civilian. It was really hard for me to find and keep jobs.”

She battled depression and alcoholism and became homeless.

Then there's Alexis Courneen, who served aboard a Coast Guard cutter. She was struck by a several-ton buoy that was being lifted by a crane onto the ship, crushing the nerves in her right arm, fracturing her hip and slamming her head against the deck. She struggled with persistent eye problems, ringing in her ears, migraines, and trouble with balance. For two years, her doctors could not diagnose her condition correctly; one doctor even suggested that hormonal changes caused her symptoms.

The DAV report is clear: Too many women, like Dunkin and Courneen, face a long road to a productive civilian life. Fortunately, both women made it. Dunkin is working in a program that helps veterans and Courneen, diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury and matched with a service dog, is happily married and raising two children.

Hundreds of thousands of servicewomen will return home in the next five years. It's both the nation's duty and to the advantage of all Americans to make sure they have access to the care and support they need to make the journey home as smooth as possible.

To learn more, visit www.dav.org/women-veterans-study.