



Joining Forces for Women Veterans **Homelessness Issue Brief**

May 2012

**"We have to take the time to invest in our own...if we don't, why would the American people?
As a soldier, part of our ethos is never to leave a fallen comrade behind."**

-Capt. Jas Boothe, veteran and Founder/ President, Final Salute, Inc., which provides safe, suitable transitional housing and reintegration support for homeless women veterans and their children.

This is what a homeless woman veteran "looks" like: She is one of an estimated 13,000 women who entered the military after the 1990 start of the Persian Gulf War (45%), probably unemployed (77%), middle-aged (61%), divorced (46%), often disabled (40%), with minor children (33%). She may have been a Navy aircraft specialist who helped keep fighter jets flying in Iraq, but she lost her footing when she returned home and faced overwhelming challenges reintegrating into civilian life. And, sadly, the nation she served lacks the support services she needs to help her get back on her feet.

Today, female veterans make up about 8% of all veterans, or about 1.8 million, compared with just 4% in 1990. As the number of women veterans climbs, unfortunately so does the number of homeless women veterans. A December, 2011 GAO study reported that the number of homeless women veterans more than doubled between 2006 and 2010. Women veterans are four times more likely than non-veteran women to experience homelessness.

This spike comes even as the overall homeless veteran population dropped by nearly 12% to about 67,500 between January 2010 and January 2011. And, as the numbers of women in the military grow and Iraqi and Afghanistan veterans return, the trend is expected to worsen. The Obama administration has set a goal of eradicating veteran homelessness by 2015, both by addressing the underlying causes and augmenting the limited inventory of temporary housing that is safe and secure for women veterans and their children.

Homelessness encompasses a variety of situations, from the unemployed woman veteran sleeping on a park bench to her counterpart who holds a steady job and lives out of her car. Resource information is limited to women who directly access the VA, and we do not have a quantitative understanding of the characteristics and needs on national, state, or local levels. Veterans' service providers are working to obtain more complete data that will improve their capability to plan services effectively, allocate grants to providers, and track progress toward the overall goal of ending veteran homelessness by 2015.

According to the GAO study, homeless women veterans face barriers to access and use of veteran housing and programs. Many are unaware of available resources and therefore do not have the mandated VA referrals for temporary housing while awaiting placement in subsidized housing. Not only are homeless women veterans often unaware of veteran housing services, VA Medical Center homeless coordinators report challenges in reaching this population.

Additional problems include discrimination against homeless mothers (limiting the age and/or number of children providers accept) and lack of basic protections (working locks and separate floors for men and women). This inattention to safety and privacy is especially troubling because rates of sexual trauma and domestic violence tend to be high among homeless female veterans.

Access to affordable, permanent housing remains veterans' number one unmet need according to the 2008 report from the Department of Veterans Affairs Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Group. Safe, secure shelter is the first, most fundamental step to successful post-military reintegration in civilian life.

In the past decade, 100,000 mothers have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Addressing housing challenges for women veterans is not just about supporting those currently homeless, but also preventing the next generation of women veterans from becoming homeless. As we seek to serve those who have served our nation, we must try to understand the underlying causes and circumstances for women veterans' disproportionate levels of homelessness.

Recent studies have identified the following risk factors associated with homelessness among women veterans: being unmarried, unemployed, disabled, and having a history of sexual trauma. Women veterans who become homeless often have left the service with severe mental health issues following military sexual assault (MST) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They are also less likely to seek medical assistance as they try to work through or deny their needs for help, in an effort to show resiliency as they did in the service.

To help achieve the goal of ending homelessness among veterans:

- Specific data must be collected on homeless women veterans, including those with children and those with disabilities, and used to strategically plan for services
- Homeless women veterans must be aware of and included in the VA's referral system while they await placement in assisted housing
- Gender-specific safety and security standards must be adopted to protect women veterans and their children living in homeless programs, especially those serving both sexes

The VA is taking steps to end homelessness, such as launching an outreach campaign. But without improved services, women—especially those with children and who have experienced military sexual trauma—remain at risk of homelessness and experiencing further abuse.

77 The percent of homeless women veterans who are unemployed

33 The percent of homeless women who have children under the age of 18 (vs. 8% of men)

40 The percent of homeless women veterans with a disability

4 The number of times women veterans are more likely to become homeless than non-veteran women

33 The percent of homeless providers with capacity to serve women and their children

When skilled women veterans lack access to basic housing, opportunities are missed at every level—fulfilling personal and career goals, family and community participation, and societal commitments. Women veterans must be informed and supported with assistance from public and private sectors in securing safe and viable housing for themselves and their families as they reintegrate into civilian life. Business and government leaders must understand the political and economic necessity and value of this assistance to ensure women veterans’ productive re-entry into the nation’s civilian workforce, and to maximize our nation’s overall competitive potential.

Support organizations working to help homeless female vets find housing:

Department of Labor Women's Bureau/The National Center on Family Homelessness

In April, 2012, the Department of Labor Women’s Bureau and the National Center on Family Homelessness released *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers*, in a continuing effort to play an integral part in changing and reducing the complexity of homelessness among women veterans. The National Center provides essential tools to those serving women veterans experiencing homelessness to regain economic and housing security.

<http://www.dol.gov/wb/programs/listeningsessions.htm> and <http://www.dol.gov/wb/trauma/>

The National Center on Family Homelessness

The national initiative supports local nonprofits and organizations that provide housing, as well as those that address domestic violence, mental health and other issues for families not necessarily directly enrolled in programs:

<http://www.familyhomelessness.org/youngmothers.php?p=ss>

Veterans Administration

The VA provides resources related to housing, health care services, military sexual trauma and information on how the needs of female veterans are evolving and being addressed:

http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/for_women_veterans.asp

Final Salute

Final Salute provides homeless female veterans with safe and suitable housing in the Northern Virginia region, by taking a three-pronged approach to addressing the issues associated with the homelessness of female Veterans: **Awareness. Assistance. Aspiration**

<http://www.finalsaluteinc.org/>

National Call Center for Homeless Veterans

Homeless veterans and veterans at risk can find services at the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 1-877-4AID-VET (1-877-424-3838), or

<http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center

For over 30 years, PVMSEC has provided coordinated and comprehensive services to military veterans, including job training and placement, permanent and transitional housing services for homeless and low income veterans (including the Mary E. Walker House transitional residence program for women veterans located on the grounds of the Coatesville, VA Medical Center)

<http://pvmsec.org/>

Steps 'n Stages

The program provides transitional and permanent housing for homeless female vets. The organization also assists with job searches, mentoring, financial literacy and more:

<http://www.stepsnstages.com/>

U.S. Vets

U.S. Vets has opened housing specifically for women veterans and their families. The organization also provides employment and physical and mental health services for female veterans with children.

<http://www.usvetsinc.org/how-to-help/>

Women Veterans Interactive

Women Veterans Interactive, an offshoot of John 14:2, Inc., provides housing options and support for Maryland women veterans through advocacy, collaboration, networking, community support, and peer-to-peer interaction.

<http://www.john142vets.org/womenveterans/womenveteransinteractive.html>

Recommended Reading:

<http://www.gao.gov/assets/590/587334.pdf>

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/post/safety-of-female-homeless-veterans-examined-at-hearing/2012/03/13/gIQAw1FgBS_blog.html

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/homeless-shelters-unsafe-female-vets-investigators-find-article-1.1037884>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/17/opinion/homelessness-among-female-veterans.html>

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/belle_fourche/women-of-war-homeless-women-veterans-slow-to-sign-on/article_45306988-6a55-11e1-b832-0019bb2963f4.html

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2012/04/08/more-female-veterans-are-homeless/X592CfwrlFR9R2AoXA4bVO/story.html>

<http://normantranscript.com/headlines/x1968911024/More-women-veterans-are-homeless>

<http://www.military.com/news/article/ending-female-vet-homelessness.html>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/09/homeless-female-vets-housing_n_1411498.html