

VA WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH NETWORK (WHRN) VA HSR&D Service Directed Research (Project #10-012)

Women Veterans' Suicide Prevention Research

Background

Given the disproportionate volume of Veteran suicides in the U.S., Suicide Prevention is a top VA priority. To bring research to bear on these issues, the VA Office of Research & Development developed a strategic plan for accelerating suicide research across all types of VA-funded research. As part of this initiative, VA Health Services Research & Development (HSR&D) has funded a national consortium of VA researchers partnered with policy and operations leaders to facilitate design, conduct, dissemination and implementation of suicide research findings into evidence-based practice and policy.

Women Veterans' Suicide Rates Nearly Double that of Civilian Women

Concerns about female Veterans' special needs around suicide prevention led to legislation that was put forward in 2016 (HR 2915), as early research found that women Veterans' suicide rates were nearly double that of civilian women and increased by approximately 34% from 2005-16. However, research on their differential risks and needs has been lacking.

National Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Work Group Launched

The VA Women's Health Research Network (WHRN) launched a national Work Group (Mar 2017) to bring national attention and resources to bear on accelerating research evidence on women Veterans' unique risks and resiliencies and gender differences that may inform tailoring of suicide prevention interventions. WHRN goals are to meet the needs of this research community, by helping them design and obtain funding for new research, increase dissemination of their research findings, and accelerate the trajectory of research to interventions and implementation of effective strategies to reduce women Veterans' suicidal behaviors and outcomes.

WHRN convenes regular calls to review progress, identify needs, and advance strategic plans in support of these objectives. Membership encompasses VA and university-based researchers, and involves many established clinical and research centers. The VA Office of Mental Health & Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) and the VA Office of Women's Health (OWH) are primary operational partners, while the Work Group is also linked to the multi-Center collaborative—the Suicide Prevention Research Impact NeTwork (SPRINT), to integrate/coordinate efforts.

Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Conferences

WHRN convened the first Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Conference in 2018. This conference led to a new research agenda and acceleration of research projects on women Veterans' unique risks and resiliencies for suicide¹. We have since held a virtual research conference in 2021 and are planning a 2024 meeting, focusing on disseminating findings and promoting collaborations with operational partners and researchers.

Journal Supplement Published on Suicide Research among Women Veterans, Active Duty Service Women and Civilian Women (Feb 2021)

WHRN organized development of a VA-funded supplement to a medical journal (*Medical Care*) on suicide among women Veterans, active duty servicewomen, and civilian women. **The journal supplement is available online at <https://journals.lww.com/lww-medicalcare/toc/2021/02001>.**

¹Hoffmire CA, Denneson LM, Monteith LL, et al. Accelerating Research on Suicide Risk and Prevention in Women Veterans Through Research-Operations Partnerships. *Med Care*. 2021;59:S11-S16. doi:10.1097/MLR.0000000000001432

Women Veterans Suicide Research Funding Since Work Group Launch

- **COMPLETED: Perspectives of Female Veterans, VHA Providers, and Family Members on Preventing Firearm-Inflicted Suicides among Female Veterans** (Lindsey Monteith, PhD, Aurora, CO) (Dec 2020-May 2022). *For more information:* Lindsey.Monteith@va.gov.
- **COMPLETED: Advancing Suicide Prevention for Female Veterans** (Lauren Denneson, PhD, Portland OR) (May 2018-Apr 2023). *For more information:* Lauren.Denneson@va.gov.
- **COMPLETED: Strengthening Suicide Prevention Efforts for Women Veterans through the Veterans Crisis Line** (Melissa Dichter, PhD, Philadelphia, PA) (Jul 2020-Jun 2023). *For more information:* Melissa.Dichter@va.gov.
- **COMPLETED: Understanding Suicide Risk among LGBT Veterans in VA Care** (Joseph Goulet, PhD, West Haven, CT) (Jun 2019-May 2023). *For more information:* Joseph.Goulet@va.gov.
- **ONGOING: Preventing Suicide among Female and Male Veterans Not Receiving VHA Services** (Lindsey Monteith, PhD & Claire Hoffmire, PhD, Aurora, CO) (Jun 2020-May 2024). This study will compare VHA and non-VHA female and male Veterans on (1) circumstances and precipitants to suicide; (2) mental health care experiences, barriers, and help-seeking; and (3) experiences, preferences, and barriers to help-seeking when suicidal. Women Veterans will be oversampled to study gender differences and inform gender-sensitive suicide prevention efforts. *For more information:* Lindsey.Monteith@va.gov, Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov.
- **ONGOING: Exposure to Suicide Among Post 9/11 Veterans: Prevalence, Correlates and Treatment Needs** (Nina Sayer, PhD, Minneapolis, MN) (Jul 2022-Jun 2026). This study will provide foundational information on an understudied risk factor for suicide, exposure to a suicide death (defined as knowing the person), in a cohort of Veterans at increased suicide risk - post 9/11 Veterans within six years following military separation. It will provide information to inform suicide prevention strategies that target the population of suicide bereaved post-9/11 Veterans as well as those targeting women and American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) Veterans. *For more information:* Nina.Sayer@va.gov.
- **ONGOING: Gender Differences in Veteran Reintegration and Associated Suicide Risk** (Lauren Denneson, PhD, Portland OR) (Nov 2022-Oct 2027). This study will provide valuable data on the reintegration experiences of Veterans at risk for suicide across six key domains of Veteran reintegration, identify reintegration experiences associated with increased suicide risk, and elucidate gender differences in reintegration experiences and associated suicide risk. *For more information:* Lauren.Denneson@va.gov.

VA Studies Oversample Women Veterans to Better Understand Suicide Risk Factors

- The **Comparative Health Assessment Interview Study** focuses on OEF/OIF/OND Veterans' mental health, symptoms, suicidal thoughts, attempt history, and behavioral risk factors for suicide risk, oversampling women Veterans to study gender differences. *For more information,* contact Aaron.Schneiderman@va.gov.
- **Assessing Social & Community Environment with National Data (ASCEND) for Veteran Suicide Prevention.** Funded by OMHSP, ASCEND fielded a national Veteran survey to document prevalence and trends in suicidal ideation and attempted to estimate social and community risk and protective factors among all Veterans (not just VA users), oversampling women Veterans. *For more information,* contact Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov.

For More Information about WHRN or the Work Group Contact our team at WHRN@va.gov.