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# VA Women's Mental Health: Strategic Priorities and Helpful Tips for Engagement and Partnerships in Research, Policy and Practice

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# Women's Mental Health Services

Mental health care (and care models) that address the influence of ...

## **Gender-related factors:**

- Female gender roles and inequities
- Female gender-linked traumas – e.g., intimate partner violence, sexual trauma

## **Gender-specific factors:**

- Biological sex differences – e.g., effects on pharmacokinetics
- Co-morbidities more common in women – e.g., gynecologic diseases
- Female reproductive cycle stages

# What is women's reproductive mental health (RMH)?

RMH includes pregnancy-related influences on mental health:

- Infertility
- Preconception and pregnancy planning
- Pregnancy and postpartum
- Traumatic labor and delivery
- Pregnancy loss (e.g., miscarriage, stillbirth, ectopic pregnancy)



RMH also includes mental health implications of other reproductive cycle stages and reproductive organ comorbidities

Menstrual cycle  
phases

Perimenopause  
and  
menopause

Breast and  
gynecologic  
cancers

Genital and  
pelvic pain

Pelvic exam  
anxiety

Contraception

# Women Veterans' Mental Health - Overview

- **Gender minority:**
  - Women are 9-10% of VHA Veteran users and ~10% of the overall US Veteran population
  - Women are projected to be 15% of the US Veteran population by 2035
- **High rates of mental illness:**
  - FY 2021: 45% of women Veteran VHA users were diagnosed with mental illness
  - FY 2021: 26% of male Veteran VHA users were diagnosed with mental illness
- **Suicide:**
  - Women Veterans more than twice as likely to die by suicide than non-Veteran women

# Key Women's Mental Health Initiatives: Clinical Training

- VA/DoD WMH Mini-Residency
- DBT-Skills Group Training (DBT = Dialectical Behavior Therapy)
- Multidisciplinary Eating Disorders Treatment Teams
- Reproductive Mental Health (RMH) training curriculum
- STAIR (Skills Training in Affective and Interpersonal Regulation)
- WMH Monthly Teleconference Series
- IPT for RMH concerns – new in FY22 (IPT = interpersonal therapy)

# Key Women's Mental Health Initiatives: Clinical Resources

- National RMH Consultation Program
- Women's MH Champions at all VA medical centers
- Clinicians with specialized training in RMH
- WMH discussion boards
- WMH tip sheets and brochures

# Key Women's Mental Health Initiatives: WMH/Peer Support Collaborations

- WoVeN in VA pilot (WoVeN = peer specialist-led support groups for women Veterans)
- WMH/Peer Support Mini-Series (3-day webinar co-led by WMH clinical subject matter experts and peer specialists)
- National peer support services needs assessment
- Guidebook development for 2 additional women-specific peer interventions



# Women's Mental Health, OMHSP

- REPRODUCTIVE MENTAL HEALTH**
  - RMH training series - national roster of trained clinicians
  - Reproductive Mental Health Consultation Program
  - Interpersonal Therapy for Reproductive Mental Health training

- EMOTION REGULATION and SKILLS BUILDING**
  - Dialectical Behavioral Treatment-Skills Group training
  - Skills Training in Affective and Interpersonal Regulation

- WOMEN'S MH/PEER SUPPORT**
  - WoVeN in VA
  - Confident and Courageous
  - Beyond MST + Peer Support
  - National peer support needs assessment

## MISSION

- Provides national WMH subject matter expertise and program and policy guidance
- Supports VA Central Office to address congressional requests and stakeholder inquiries
- Fosters a national WMH community of practice within VA
- Develops extensive resources and training initiatives to ensure that VA clinicians have the skills and expertise to address women Veterans' treatment needs and preferences

## VETERAN FACING MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

- Public-facing web page
- Social media
- Start the Conversation flyers
- "Make the Connection" style video

- EATING DISORDERS**
  - Multidisciplinary eating disorders treatment team training
  - Multidisciplinary eating disorders treatment individual training
  - Case consultation for eating disorders
  - Multidisciplinary eating disorders teleconference series

- EDUCATION & DISSEMINATION**
  - WMH monthly teleconference series
  - WMH SharePoint
  - VA/DoD annual training event - mini residency/virtual training series/workshops
  - WMH monthly newsletter
  - WMH discussion forums

- WMH CHAMPIONS**
  - WMH action plans
  - Community of practice
  - Infrastructure
  - Facility-level point of contact

# WMH priorities

- **Research:**
  - gender differences, gender- and trauma-informed mental health care for women
  - facilitators and barriers to VA enrollment, treatment engagement and retention
  - complexity, intersectionality
- **Clinical practice:**
  - models of care (e.g., panel size, appointment length) – should be data driven
- **Professional community:**
  - foster a VA community interested in women – collegial and collaborative
  - make VA a place to start a career – how do we attract talent, train and retain people?

# Food for thought

- Real world decisions do not always align with the pace of research
- Is there a role for “research-informed” approaches (e.g., expert consensus panels) to provide a road map and a common language (accessible to all stakeholders)?

# WMH priorities: RMH

- Working toward all VA clinicians having basic RMH knowledge
- Expanding cadre of RMH subject matter experts
- Increasing clinician awareness of the RMH Consultation Program
- Screening for premenstrual and perimenopausal mental health conditions
- Advancing discussion of pregnancy intention and contraception with women of reproductive age before psychotropic prescribing
- Promoting informed, balanced decisions about perinatal psychotropic medication use
- Expanding access to evidence-based psychotherapies adapted for RMH – e.g.,
  - Interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) for RMH
  - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Menopause (CBT-Meno)
- Developing public-facing RMH materials

# Women's Mental Health, OMHSP



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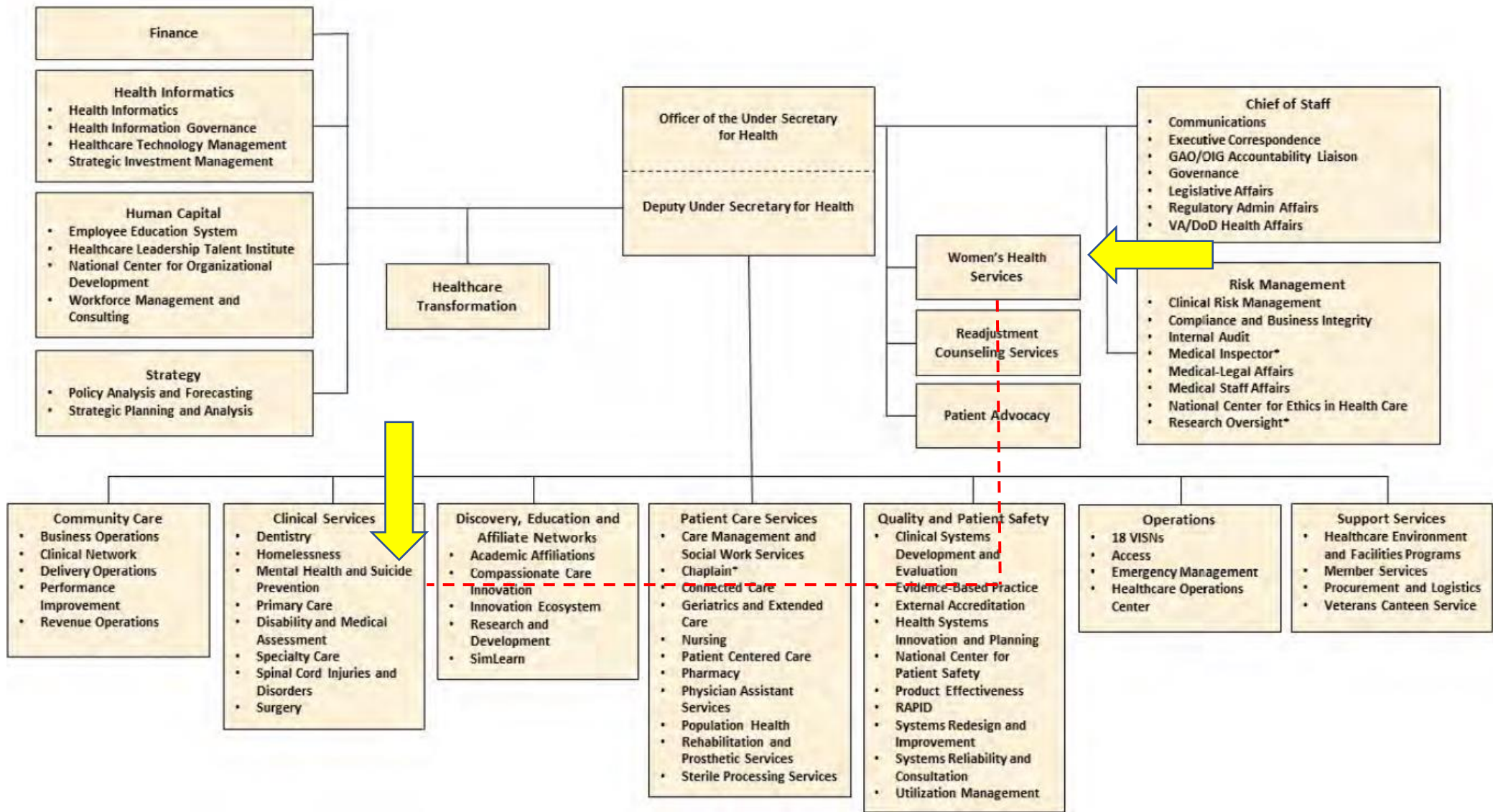
# Frequently Asked Questions and Pro Tips

# Frequently Asked Question #1

So are you part of the  
Office of Women's  
Health?

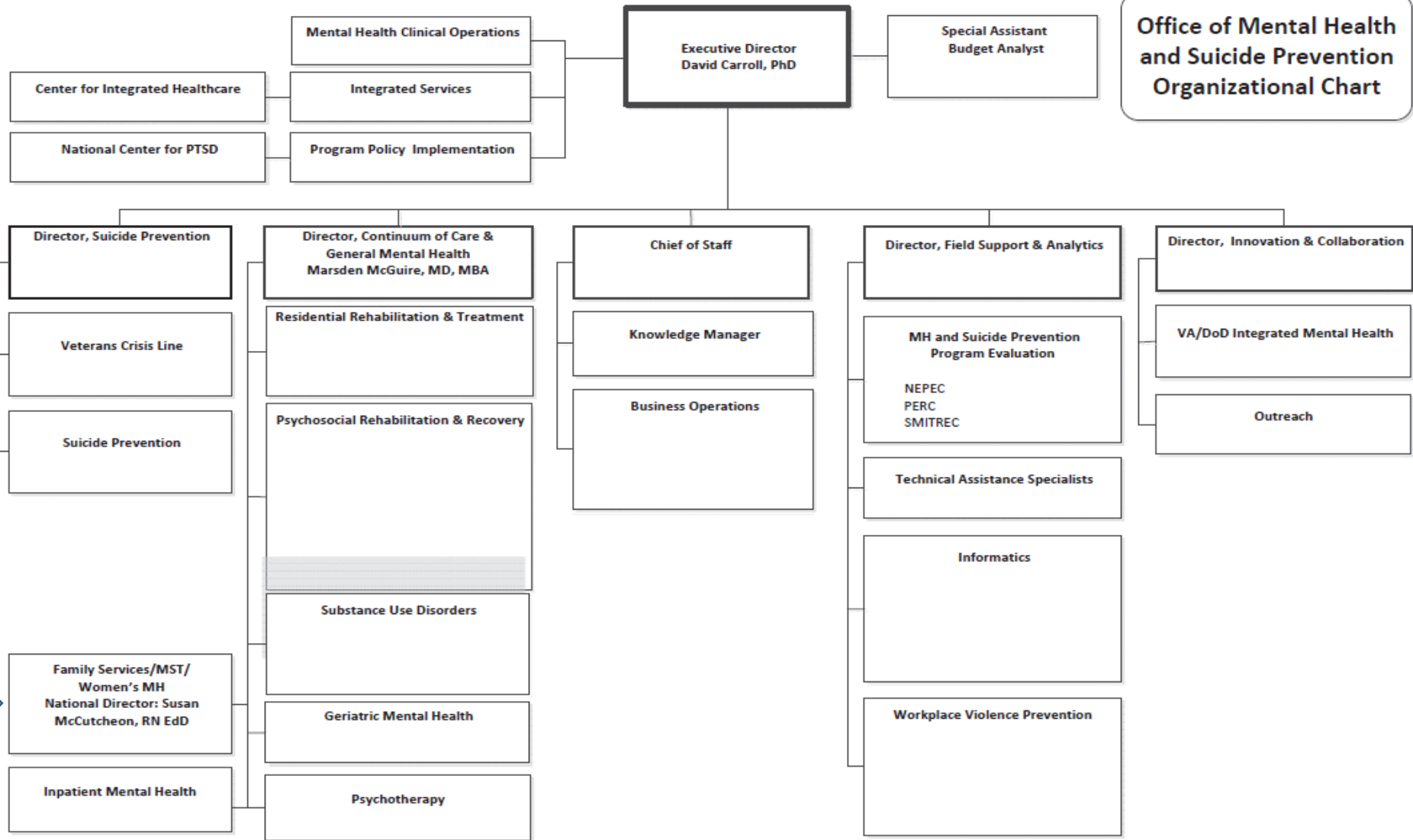








**Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention  
Organizational Chart**



## Frequently Asked Question #2



Can you write me a letter of support?

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## Frequently Asked Question #3



**I have a great idea for a new study! Your input (about policy implications, about relevant outcomes, etc.) would be helpful. Can I run some things by you?**

## Frequently Asked Question #4

I just finished a study and am about to start writing up findings. Would you like to hear about it? Can I ask you a few questions?



## Frequently Asked Question #5

My manuscript was just accepted for publication. The findings (...may reflect poorly on women Veterans or VA women's mental health, etc.) may cause a media stir.

So, um, how do you feel about surprises?



# WMH can help at every stage of the research process

- **Early in the process**
  - Brainstorm to align research proposals with key needs of women Veterans
  - Provide up-to-date information about VA women's mental health care delivery systems and resources to inform health care services research proposals
  - Provide letters of support for proposals
- **Later in the process**
  - Read manuscript drafts to ensure accurate descriptions of VA WMH services
  - Help disseminate clinically relevant research findings
- **When relevant for selected projects**
  - Co-mentor early career researchers
  - Co-author manuscripts



# Optimizing collaborations between researchers and WMH: dissemination opportunities

- Teleconferences
- Research Minutes in WMH Monthly Newsletter
- Tip Sheets
- Champion Quarterly Calls
- SharePoint Discussion Forums



## DISCUSSION FORUMS

Before joining the discussion forums, first please read the user guide that is available on the right column. If you have any questions, please contact Sandy Rowlands.

### Champion Discussion Forum

This forum is primarily intended for facility WMH Champions to discuss the roles and responsibilities of these positions, seek advice and help from other Champions, and share best practices.

[Join the Discussion »](#)

### General Discussion Forum

This forum is for all VA staff to start discussions and ask questions about Women's Mental Health (WMH): clinical issues when working with women Veterans, VA policies, available treatment services, and other related topics.

[Join the Discussion »](#)

### RMH Trained Clinician Discussion Forum

This forum is primarily intended for clinicians who have successfully completed the RMH Training Series to discuss clinical issues related to RMH, best practices and to further develop a community of practice.

[Join the Discussion »](#)

## DISCUSSION FORUM USER GUIDE

This guide provides useful tips for joining the discussion forums. It also covers how to protect and handle confidential information in the discussion.



*"Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says 'I'll try again tomorrow.'"*

-Mary Anne Radmacher



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## Did You Know...

June 12<sup>th</sup> is Women Veterans Day, a day to honor and remember the signing of the *Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948*. This law allowed women to permanently serve in the armed forces.

## Program Office Updates

Greetings from Women's Mental Health (WMH) in the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (DMHSP) and thank you for all that you do to support women Veterans' mental health!

## NEW! WMH SharePoint Site Upgrade

We are pleased to announce the launch of the new and improved WMH SharePoint Site. Please take a few moments to tour the site for on-demand courses, information on WMH programs and initiatives, helpful resources, clinician discussion forums and much, much more!

[Women's Mental Health \(sharepoint.com\)](https://sharepoint.com)

## Key Resources

### Women's Mental Health (sharepoint.com)

- WMH programs and initiatives
- WMH education and training materials
- WMH discussion boards
- Relevant policies and guidance
- WMH “Research Minute” (summary of key findings and clinical implications of recent WMH-related research)
- Outreach materials
- Contact lists:
  - Champions, RMH Trained Clinicians, Eating Disorder Treatment Teams

### Staffing

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## National Women’s Mental Health Monthly Teleconference Series

2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday of each month, 3pm EST

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