

VA WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH NETWORK (WHRN)

VA HSR&D Service Directed Research (Project #10-012)

Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Work Group

Objectives

Women Veterans' suicide rates are nearly double that of civilian women and increased by approximately 34% from 2005-16. Research on their differential risks and needs has been lacking. The VA has made Suicide Prevention a top priority, while legislation has focused on female Veterans' special needs around suicide prevention was put forward in 2016 (HR 2915).

The VA Women's Health Research Network (WHRN) launched the **Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Work Group** in March 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. The work group is national in scope given the importance of collaborative research development that builds on wide-ranging expertise across the country. The **objectives of the Work Group** are to:

- Understand and act on the technical, data resources, and other support needs of the research community dedicated to better understanding and intervening on women Veterans' suicide-related risks and actions;
- Collaboratively develop and help obtain funding for research that increases our understanding of women Veterans' suicide risks and their determinants on the path to designing suicide prevention interventions;
- Increase communication and dissemination of women Veterans' suicide prevention research;
- Accelerate the trajectory of research to interventions and implementation of effective strategies to reduce women Veterans' suicidal behaviors and outcomes.

WHRN convenes national bimonthly conference calls to review progress, identify needs, and advance strategic plans in support of these research objectives. Membership encompasses VA and university-based researchers, and involves many established Centers, including the Rocky Mountain Mental Illness Research, Education & Clinical Center (MIRECC), National Center for PTSD, VISN 2 Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention, the HSR&D Center to Improve Veteran Involvement in Care (CIVIC), and the Center for Health Equity Research & Promotion (CHERP), among others. The VA Office of Mental Health & Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) and VA Women's Health Services (WHS) are the Work Group's primary VA operational partners. The Work Group is also now linked to the newly funded multi-Center collaborative VA consortium—the Suicide Prevention Research Impact NeTwork (SPRINT), recently funded to integrate efforts across the VA to accelerate research in this important area.

Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Conference

Based on Work Group input, WHRN obtained travel funds to convene an in-person meeting at VA Central Office in Washington DC (Oct 2018), bringing together Work Group members as well as representatives from OMHSP, WHS, the Department of Defense, among other attendees. This day-long meeting focused on a review of current knowledge and research in progress, discussion of data sources and needs, and breakout groups to collaboratively design new research focused on civilian reintegration, community connections, upstream prevention, psychosocial stressors, trauma, risk assessment, health care access, and mental health interventions. New research proposals were designed on the basis of conference collaborations and ideas.

New Women Veterans Suicide Research Funding Since Work Group Launch

- **Advancing Suicide Prevention for Female Veterans** (Lauren Denneson, PhD, Principal Investigator, VA HSR&D Center to Improve Veteran Involvement in Care, Portland VA) (IIR 17-131) (May 2018-Apr 2023). This large national study aims to better understand female and male risks for suicidal self-directed violence, as well as differences in patterns of healthcare utilization, coping strategies, and symptom changes over time between female and male Veterans at risk. *For more study information:* contact Lauren.Denneson@va.gov and view the study abstract at https://www.hsrdrd.research.va.gov/research/abstracts.cfm?Project_ID=2141706345.
- **Identifying Novel Opportunities for Suicide Prevention among Women Veterans Using Reproductive Health Care Services** (Claire Hoffmire, PhD, Principal Investigator, Rocky Mountain MIRECC, Aurora, CO) (PPO 17-276) (Oct 2018-Sep 2019). This pilot study will estimate rates of suicide, non-fatal self-directed violence, and suicidal ideation among women Veterans using VA reproductive health services, and assess women Veterans' beliefs, attitudes, and preferences for suicide risk assessment and prevention. For more information, contact Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov (https://www.hsrdrd.research.va.gov/research/abstracts.cfm?Project_ID=2141706861)
- **NEW: Strengthening Suicide Prevention Efforts for Women Veterans through the Veterans Crisis Line** (Melissa Dichter, PhD, Principal Investigator, Philadelphia VA) (start date TBA). This study was recently approved for funding and will compare characteristics of women and men Veterans who use the Veterans Crisis Line, and examine the relationships between Veteran characteristics, Crisis Line use, engagement in VA care, and suicide-related outcomes. For more study information, contact Melissa.Dichter@va.gov.
- **NEW: Preventing Suicide among Female and Male Veterans not Receiving VHA Services** (Lindsey Monteith, PhD & Claire Hoffmire, PhD, VA Eastern Colorado, Aurora, CO) (start date TBA). This mixed-method 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 willingness to seek help; and (3) experiences, preferences, and barriers to help-seeking when suicidal. Female Veterans will be oversampled to facilitate examination of gender differences and development of gender-sensitive suicide prevention efforts for VHA and non-VHA Veterans. For more study information, contact Lindsey.Monteith@va.gov or Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov.

Planning for New Journal Supplement Underway on Women's Suicide Research

Work Group discussions about the importance of highlighting women Veterans' suicide research led to development of a new VA-funded supplement to a scientific journal. The Call for Papers (released in October 2019) seeks manuscripts summarizing suicide research among women Veterans, active duty servicewomen, and civilian women, enabling comparisons and contrasts across these different groups.

VA Study Oversamples Women Veterans to Better Understand Suicide Risk Factors

- The **Comparative Health Assessment Interview (CHAI) Study** is a population-based study of health and well-being among OEF/OIF/OND Veterans, focused on mental health history, current symptoms, suicidal thoughts and history of attempts, and behavioral risk factors which may be associated with suicide risk. *CHAI included a 30% oversample of female Veterans to study gender differences and a civilian comparison group.* For more information, contact Aaron.Schneiderman@va.gov.
- **NEW: Assessing Social and Community Environment with National Data (ASCEND) for Veteran Suicide Prevention**, funded by the VA Office for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, aims to design and implement a national survey of Veterans that will: (1) serve as a national surveillance system to document prevalence and trends over time in suicide ideation (SI) and attempt (SA); and (2) provide estimates of the impact of social and community risk and protective factors on SI and SA among Veterans. This project focuses on the Veteran population as a whole, not only those using VHA services, and will oversample women Veterans. For more information, contact Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov.

For More Information

For more information about the Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Work Group, please contact Elizabeth M. Yano, PhD, MSPH (elizabeth.yano@va.gov) or Ruth Klap, PhD (ruth.klap@va.gov).