

## 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 VA Women's Health Services (WHS) are primary operational partners., while the Work Group is also linked to the newly funded multi-Center collaborative—the Suicide Prevention Research Impact NeTwork (SPRINT), to integrate/coordinate efforts.

### Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Conference in Washington DC (Oct 2018)

WHRN convened the first Women Veterans Suicide Prevention Research Conference, bringing together Work Group members and representatives from OMHSP, WHS, the Department of Defense, among other attendees. The meeting generated a new research agenda building on current knowledge, research in progress, discussion of data sources and data needs, and collaborative design of research focused on civilian reintegration, community connections, upstream prevention, psychosocial stressors, trauma, risk assessment, health care access, and mental health interventions. New proposals were designed on the basis of conference collaborations and ideas.

### 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>.**

## Women Veterans Suicide Research Funding Since Work Group Launch

- **COMPLETED: Identifying Novel Opportunities for Suicide Prevention among Women Veterans Using Reproductive Health Care Services** (Claire Hoffmire, PhD, Aurora, CO) (Oct 2018-Sep 2019). This study estimated rates of suicide, non-fatal self-directed violence, and suicidal ideation among women Veterans using VA reproductive health services, and assessed their beliefs, attitudes, and preferences for suicide risk assessment and prevention. *For more information:* [Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov](mailto:Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov).
- **ONGOING: Advancing Suicide Prevention for Female Veterans** (Lauren Denneson, PhD, Portland OR) (May 2018-Apr 2023). This study aims to better understand gender differences in risks for suicidal self-directed violence, and patterns of use, coping strategies, and symptom changes. *For more information:* [Lauren.Denneson@va.gov](mailto:Lauren.Denneson@va.gov).
- **ONGOING: Understanding Suicide Risk among LGBT Veterans in VA Care** (Joseph Goulet, PhD, West Haven, CT) (Jun 2019-May 2023). This study will develop informatics tools to identify LGBT Veterans and suicide attempts and events and characterize suicide risk factors in a national sample of Veterans, and examine the differential effect of risk factors on suicide by LGBT status. *For more information:* [Joseph.Goulet@va.gov](mailto:Joseph.Goulet@va.gov).
- **ONGOING: Strengthening Suicide Prevention Efforts for Women Veterans through the Veterans Crisis Line** (Melissa Dichter, PhD, Philadelphia, PA) (Jul 2020-Jun 2023). This study will compare characteristics of women and men Veterans who use the Veterans Crisis Line, and examine relationships between Veteran characteristics, Crisis Line use, engagement in VA care, and suicide-related outcomes. *For more information:* [Melissa.Dichter@va.gov](mailto:Melissa.Dichter@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](mailto:Lindsey.Monteith@va.gov), [Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov](mailto:Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov).
- **ONGOING: 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). This pilot study will describe female Veterans' perspectives, experiences, and preferences for firearm lethal means safety, explore female Veterans' partners' perspectives and willingness to engage in firearm-related lethal means safety, and elucidate VHA mental health and primary care providers' experiences and perspectives on conducting firearm lethal means safety with female Veterans. *For more information:* [Lindsey.Monteith@va.gov](mailto:Lindsey.Monteith@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](mailto:Aaron.Schneiderman@va.gov).
- **ONGOING: Assessing Social & Community Environment with National Data (ASCEND) for Veteran Suicide Prevention.** Funded by OMHSP, ASCEND is fielding a national Veteran survey to document prevalence and trends in suicidal ideation and attempts and will 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](mailto:Claire.Hoffmire@va.gov).

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