

VA WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH NETWORK

Supporting Practice and Research Collaboration

Spotlight on Women's Health Cyberseminar Series

**Women Veterans' experiences of harassment in VA healthcare facilities:
What have we learned, and where do we need to go?**

Sponsored by the VA Women's Health Research Network

WHRN@va.gov

Today's Speakers



Karissa Fenwick, PhD, MSW, LCSW
Core Investigator,
Center for the Study of Healthcare Innovation,
Implementation & Policy (CSHIIP),
VA Greater Los Angeles
Speaker



Jeanette Shekelle, MPH
Health Science Specialist,
Women's Health Practice-Based Research Network,
Center for Innovation to Implementation (Ci2i),
VA Palo Alto
Speaker



Today's Discussant

Leila Jackson, MBA, MS, FAC-P/PM

Director, Assault and Harassment Prevention Office

Women Veterans' experiences of harassment in VA
healthcare facilities:
What have we learned, and where do we need to go?

Karissa Fenwick, PhD, MSW, LCSW
VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

Jeanette Shekelle, MPH
VA Palo Alto Healthcare System



Objectives



Explain why addressing harassment of women Veterans at VA is critical



Examine women Veterans' experiences of harassment using national, multiwave data

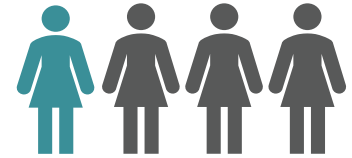


Identify ongoing and future plans for addressing harassment at VA

Background

Harassment of Women Veterans at VA

1 in 4 women Veteran regular primary care users experienced harassment from men Veterans at VA healthcare facilities.



Klap et al., 2019

Harassment Examples

Sexual harassment: unwanted sexual advances

- ❖ catcalling
- ❖ comments on appearance
- ❖ requests for dates
- ❖ whistles
- ❖ staring/leering
- ❖ touching

Klap et al., 2019

Harassment Examples

Gender harassment: derogatory statements about women

- ❖ making women feel unwelcome
- ❖ suggesting women don't belong at VA or in the military
- ❖ denigration of Veteran status

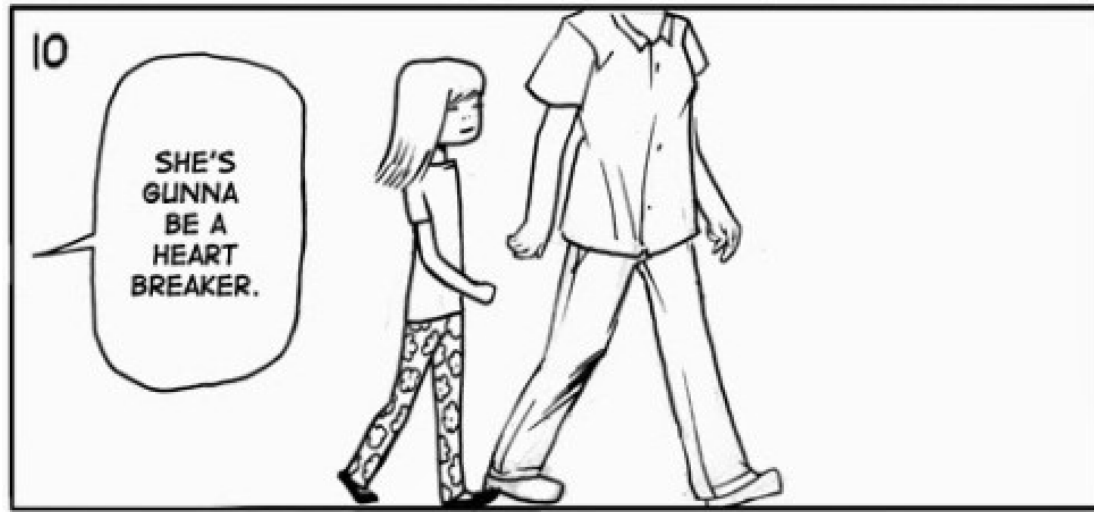
Klap et al., 2019

Impacts of Harassment

- ❖ Feeling unsafe at VA
- ❖ Feeling unwelcome at VA
- ❖ Delaying or missing needed care
- ❖ Adverse physical health outcomes
- ❖ Adverse mental health outcomes

Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017; Klap et al., 2019

Cumulative Impacts of Harassment



Impacts of Harassment

May be heightened for those with histories of sexual trauma (e.g., military sexual trauma) and members of marginalized groups (e.g., people of color).

Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017; Klap et al., 2019

Harassment Veteran Feedback Project

- ❖ Led by the Women's Health Practice-Based Research Network (WH-PBRN)
- ❖ Conducted (approximately) annually since 2017
- ❖ Collects information about women Veterans':
 - Experiences of harassment at VA
 - Perceptions about VA (e.g., feeling safe/welcome)



Methods

Data Collection

Participants: sequential women Veterans attending medical appointments

Setting: primary care clinics at WH-PBRN sites

Surveys: short, anonymous, one-page forms

Duration: 2-6 weeks

Harassment Survey Questions

4. Have you experienced any of the following types of harassment at the VA from Veterans and/or from VA staff or volunteers in the past six months:

Call out comments to you such as "hey baby," make sexual remarks, comment on your appearance, whistle or stare at you or gesture to you in a sexist or discomforting way?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	If yes, who did this? (Check all that apply)	Did a VA staff person try to help?
	<input type="checkbox"/> No		
		<input type="checkbox"/> Male Veteran did this	<input type="checkbox"/> VA staff tried to help
		<input type="checkbox"/> Female Veteran did this	<input type="checkbox"/> VA staff did not see it happen
		<input type="checkbox"/> Male VA Staff did this	<input type="checkbox"/> VA staff saw but did not try to help
		<input type="checkbox"/> Female VA Staff did this	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Male Volunteer did this	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Female Volunteer did this	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Other/Don't know	<i>(You are welcome to add comments about your experiences on the back, Question #10)</i>

5. Have you have experienced any of the following types of harassment at the VA from Veterans and/or from VA staff or volunteers in the past six months:

Tell you or make you feel that you do not belong at the VA, you aren't a Veteran, or you don't deserve VA services because you are a woman, or women are not welcome at the VA?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	If yes, who did this? (Check all that apply)	Did a VA staff person try to help?
	<input type="checkbox"/> No		
		<input type="checkbox"/> Male Veteran did this	<input type="checkbox"/> VA staff tried to help
		<input type="checkbox"/> Female Veteran did this	<input type="checkbox"/> VA staff did not see it happen
		<input type="checkbox"/> Male VA Staff did this	<input type="checkbox"/> VA staff saw but did not try to help
		<input type="checkbox"/> Female VA Staff did this	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Male Volunteer did this	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Female Volunteer did this	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Other/Don't know	<i>(You are welcome to add comments about your experiences on the back, Question #10)</i>

Site Participation



57 out of 76 sites participated in at least one wave of the Harassment Veteran Feedback Project

15 sites participated in all five waves

Participating Site Characteristics ($n = 57$)

- ❖ **Geographic variation:** 33 states, 1 territory (Puerto Rico)
- ❖ **Facility size:** 1,121-17,986 women Veteran patients
- ❖ **Racial/ethnic diversity:** At 15 sites, majority of the women Veteran patient population were women of color
- ❖ **Urban/rural diversity:** At 7 sites, majority of the women Veteran patient population had rural residence

Site, Clinic, and Women Veteran Participation by Year

Year of data collection	# of PBRN Sites that participated	# of clinics that participated	# of women Veterans
2017 (Wave 1)	26	29	1,303
2018 (Wave 2)	30	42	1,714
2019 (Wave 3)	35	67	2,135
2021 (Wave 4)	29	50	1,245
2022 (Wave 5)	32	60	1,645

Results

Participant Characteristics (2022; $n = 1645$)

Age:

- 45-64: 44%
- 18-44: 38%
- 65+: 17%

In-person VA visits in past year:

- Three or more times: 72%
- Two times: 17%
- One time: 12%

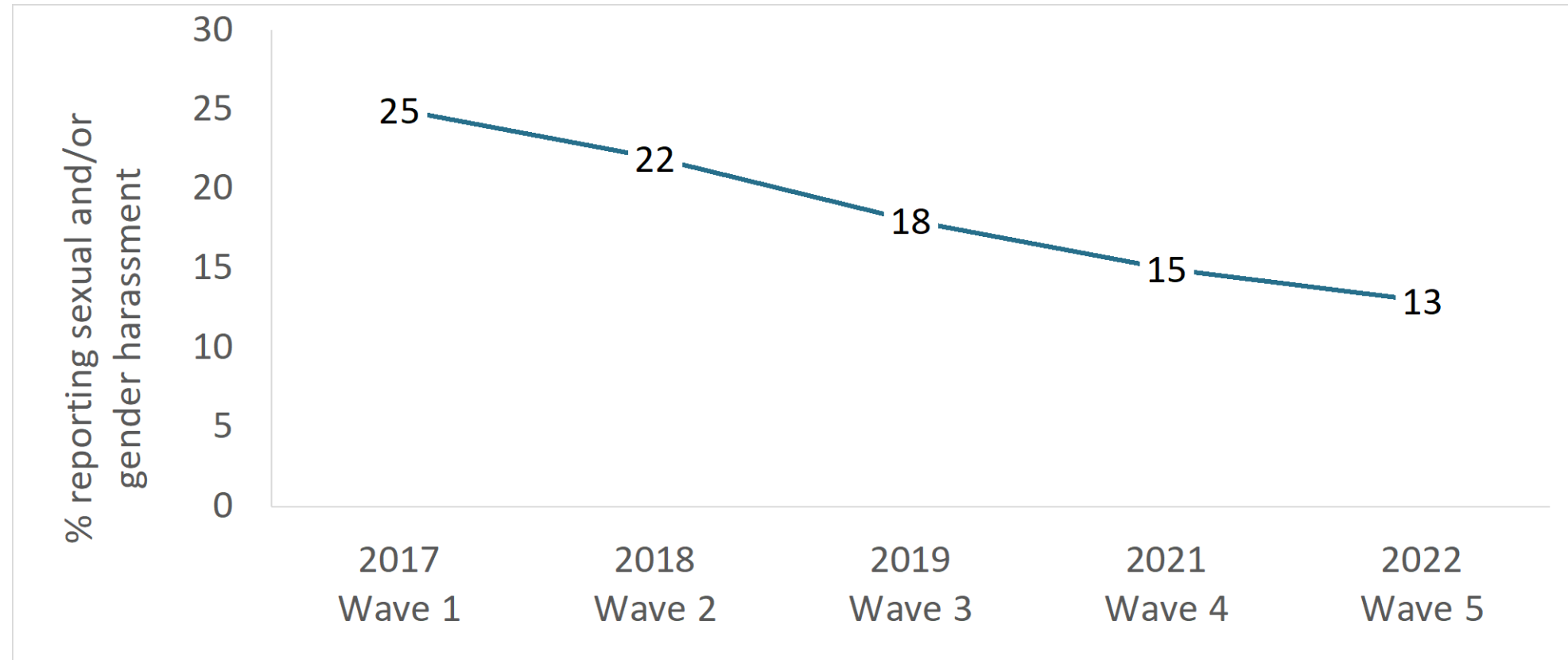


Either Type of Harassment

13%

participants reported experiences of sexual harassment and/or gender harassment in 2022.

Either Type of Harassment



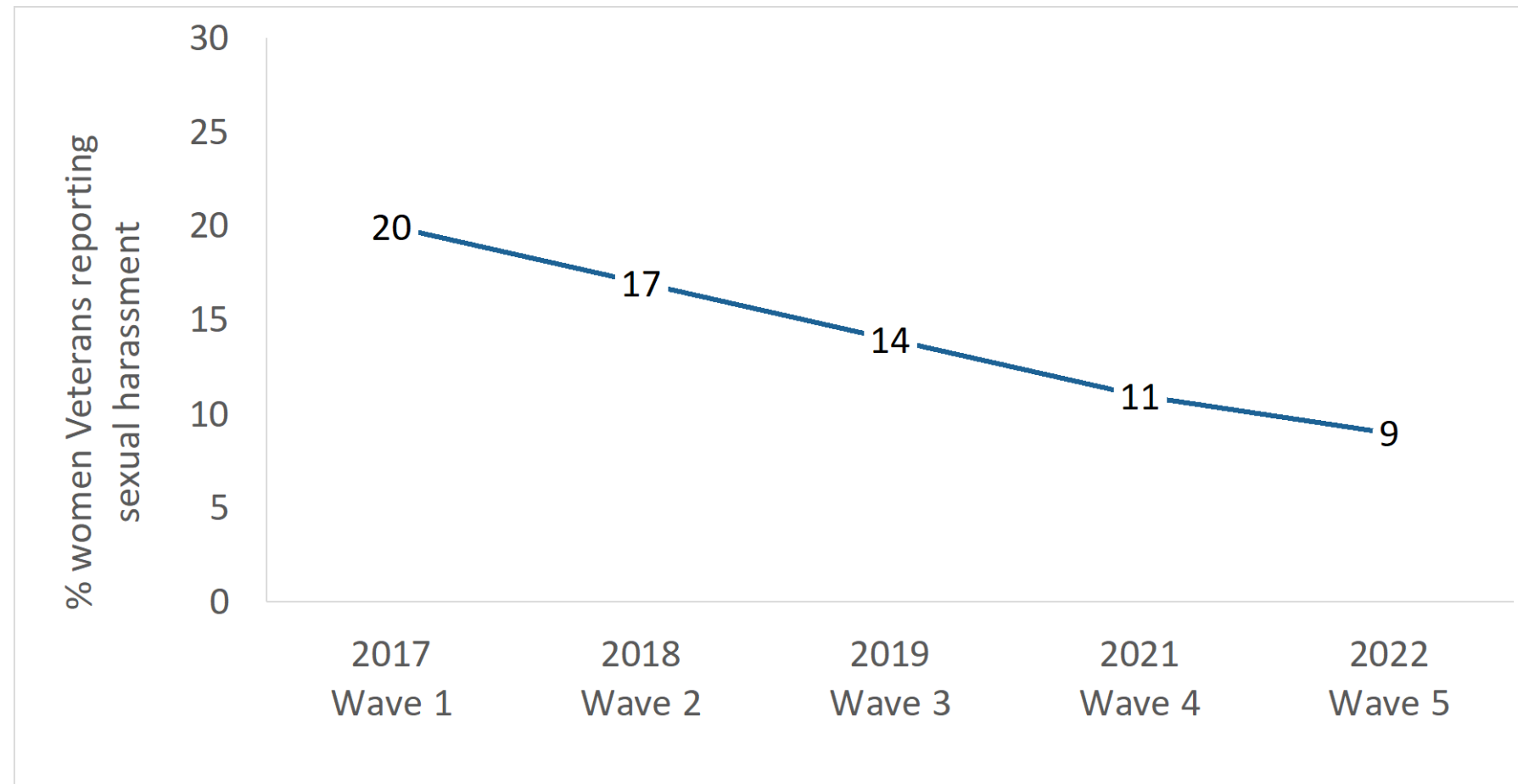
Sexual Harassment

Calling out comments such as “hey baby”, making sexual remarks, commenting on appearance, whistling or staring, or gesturing in a sexist or discomforting way (yes/no)

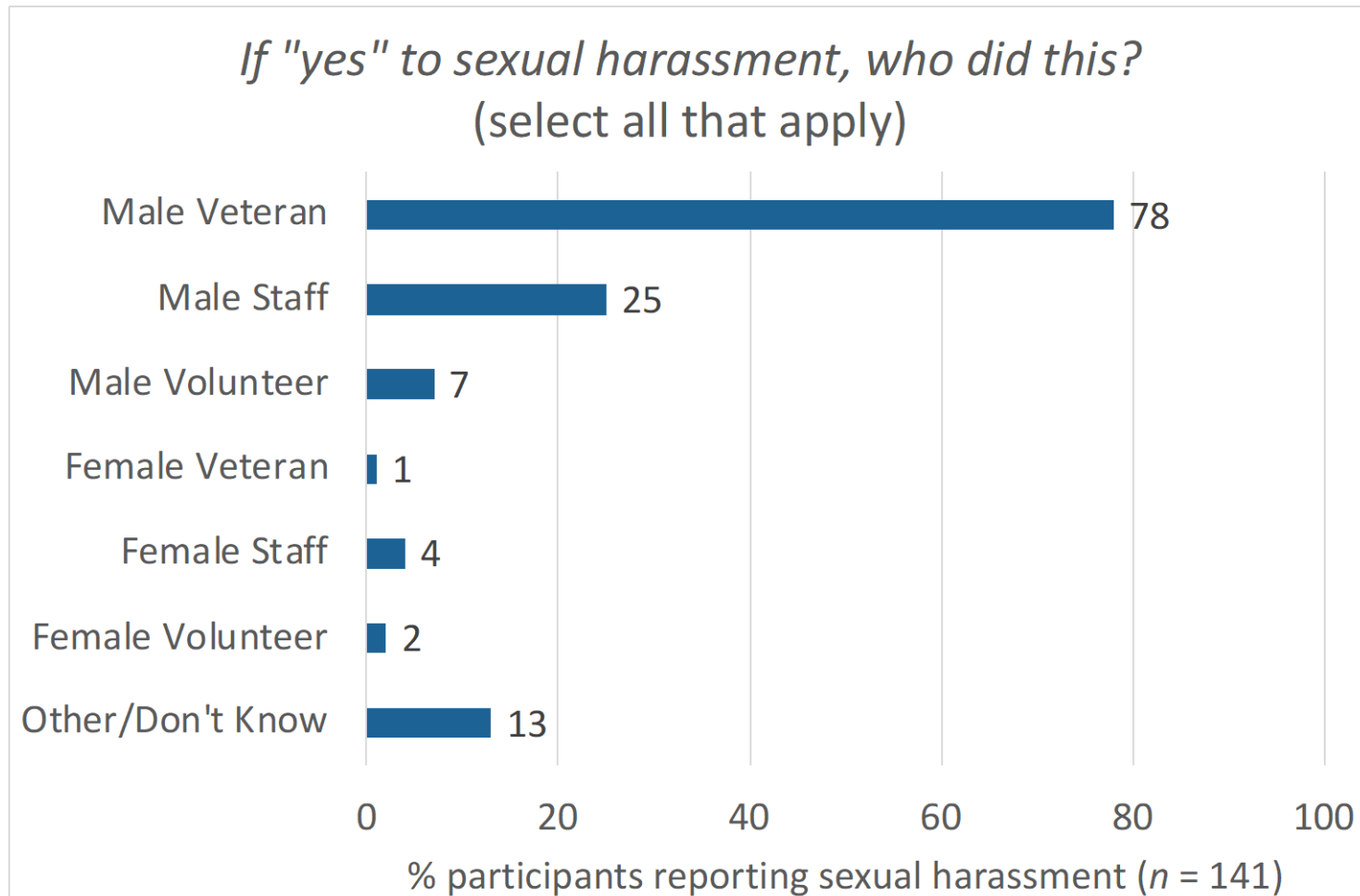
9%

participants reported experiences of sexual harassment in 2022.

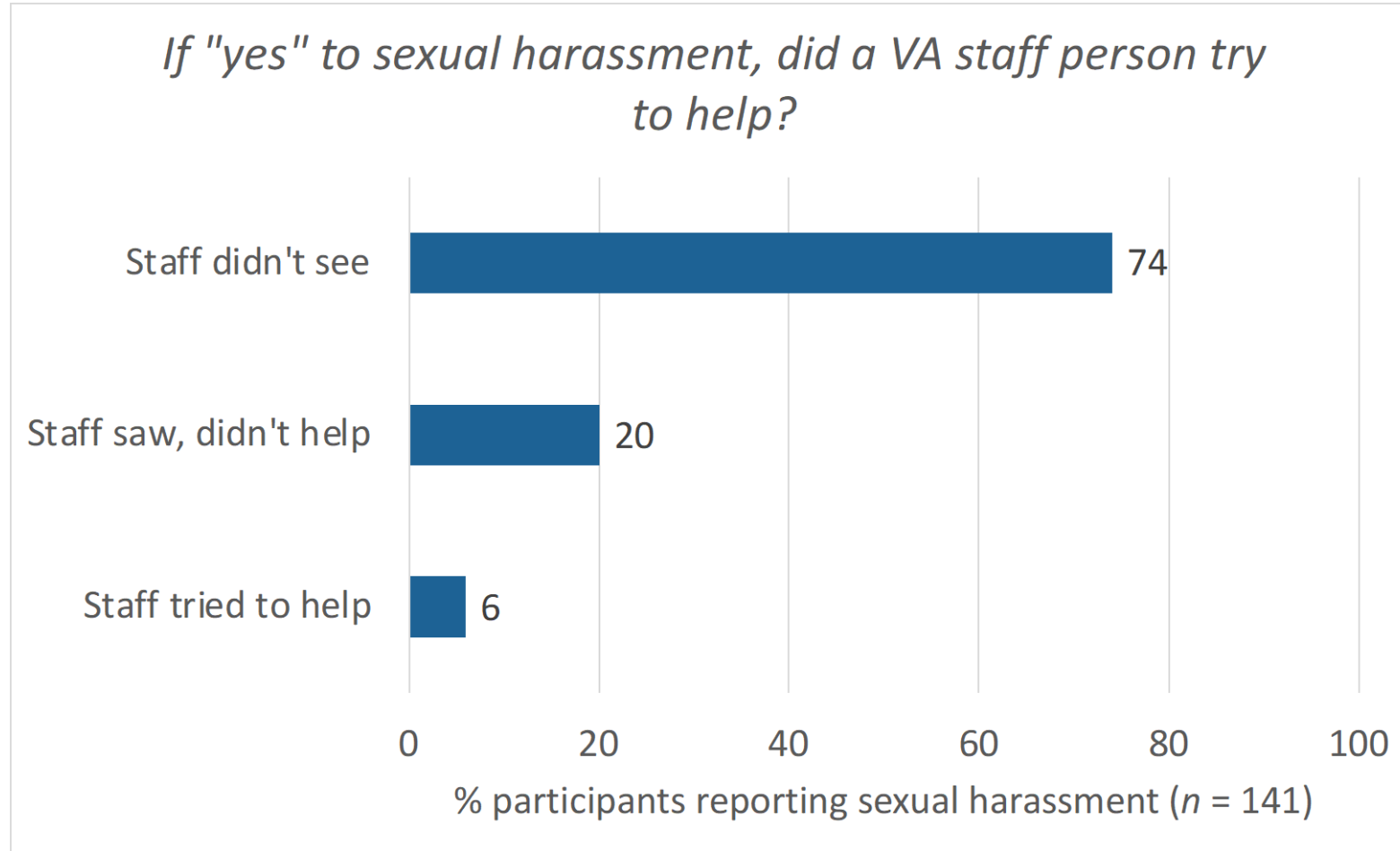
Sexual Harassment



Sexual Harassment: Perpetrators



Sexual Harassment: Did Staff Help?



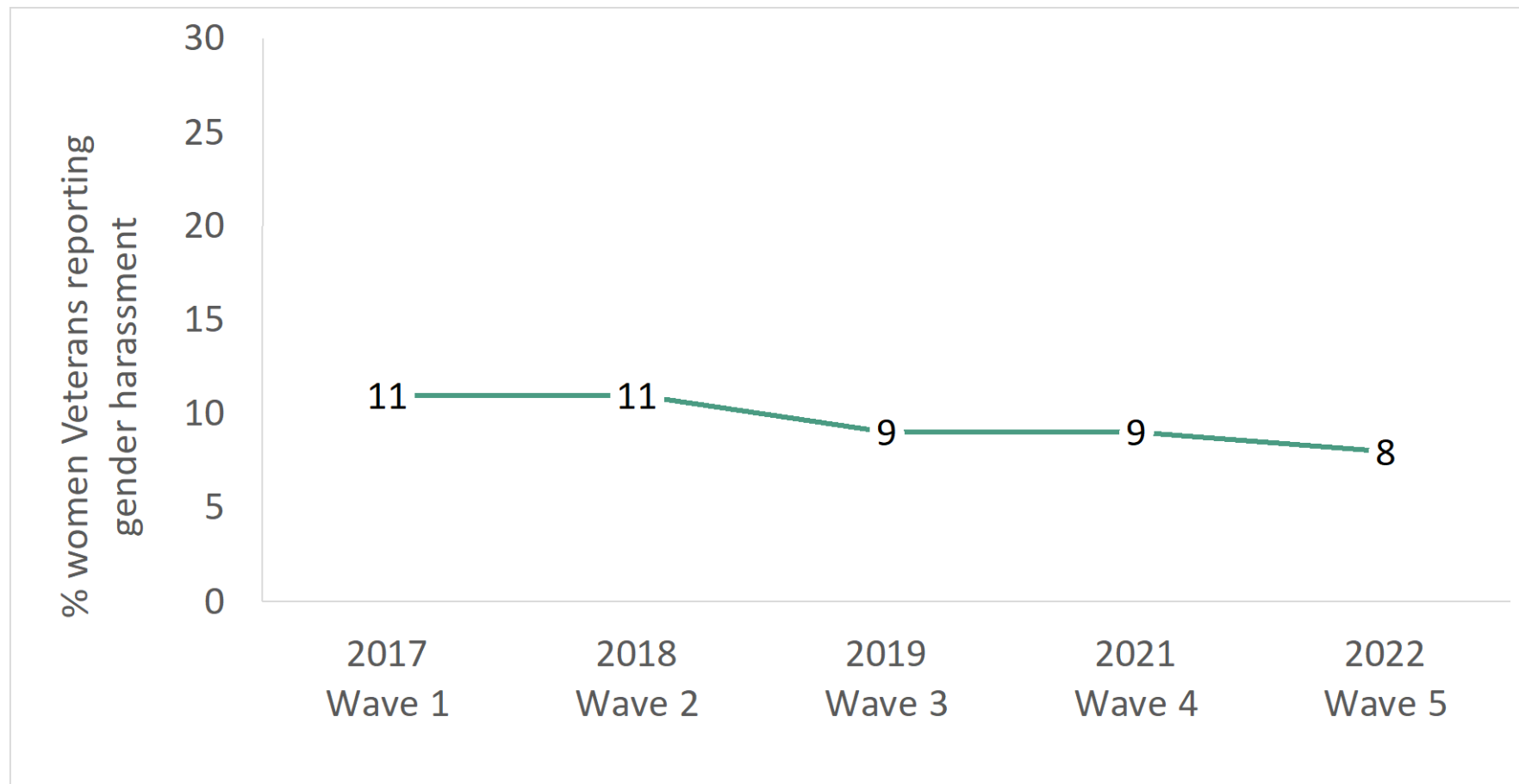
Gender Harassment

Telling you or making you feel that you do not belong at the VA, that you aren't a Veteran, or you don't deserve VA services because you are a woman, or women are not welcome at the VA (yes/no)

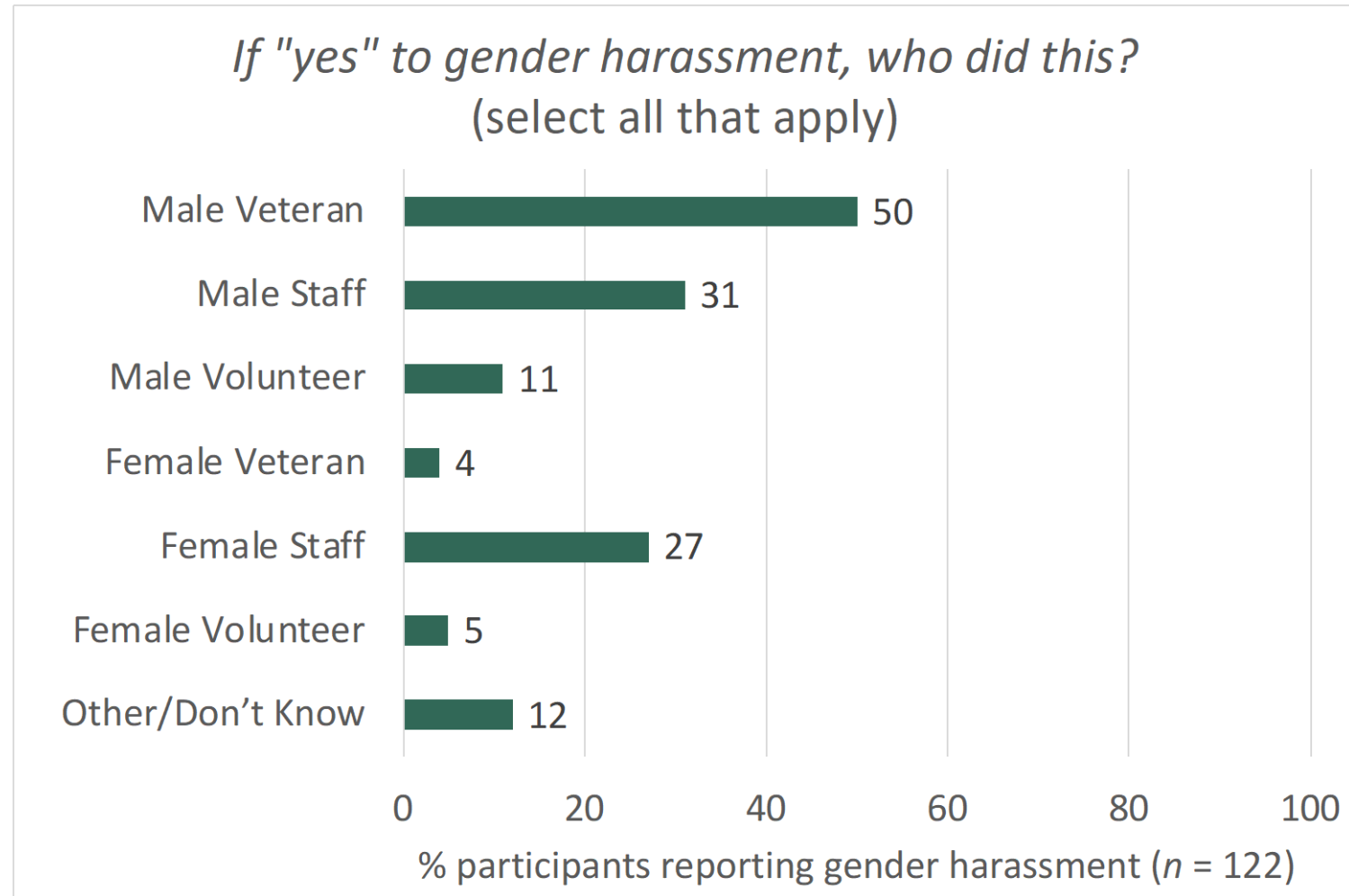
8%

participants reported experiences of gender harassment in 2022.

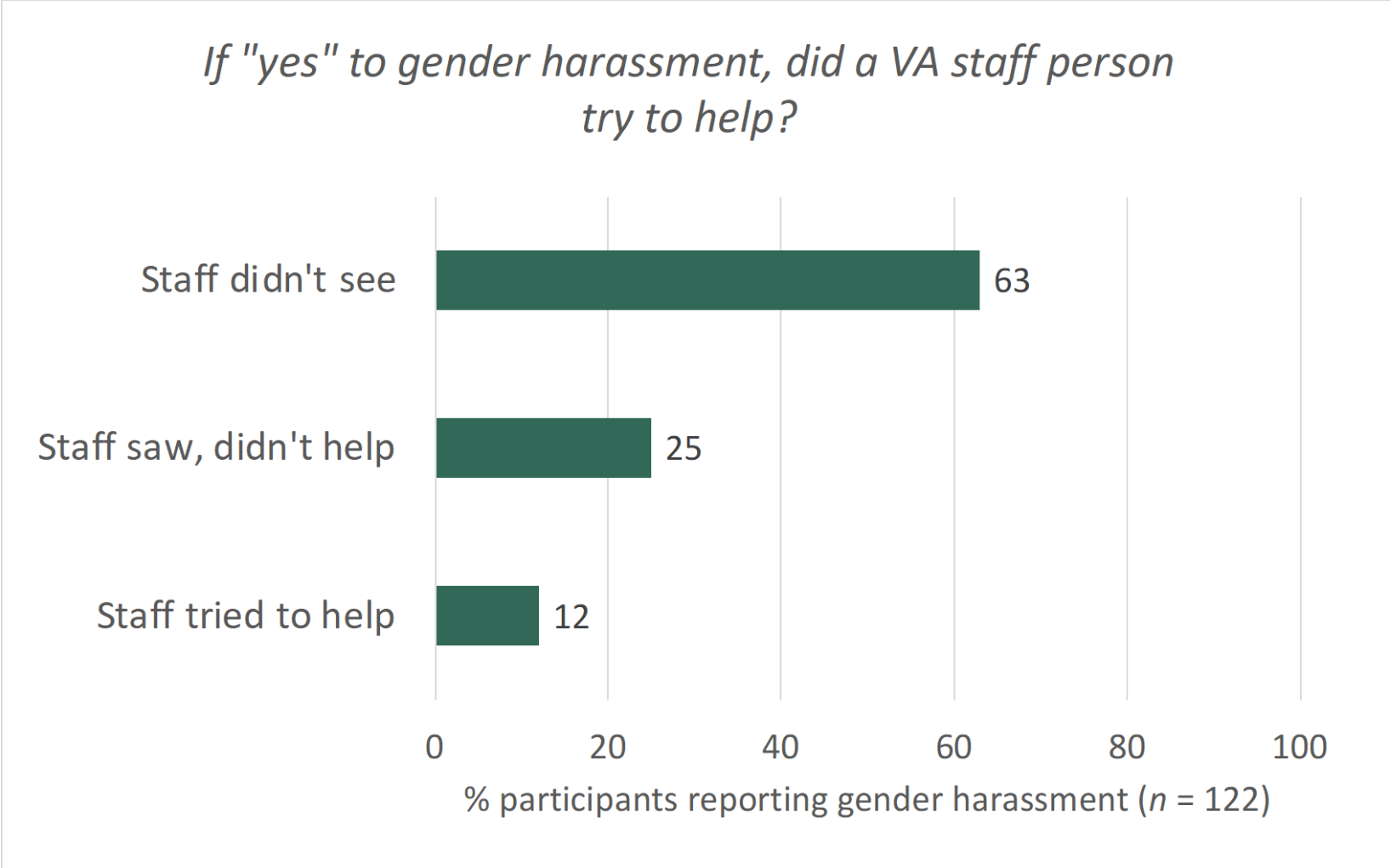
Gender Harassment



Gender Harassment: Perpetrators



Gender Harassment: Did Staff Help?



Misgendered Salutations

Have VA staff called you “Mr.” (for example, in letters, phone calls, check-in processes, or appointments)? (yes/no)

22%

*participants reported being called
“Mr.” in 2022.*

Reporting Harassment

Do you know how to report harassment at your VA? (yes/no)

57%

participants reported that they know how to report harassment at their VA in 2022.

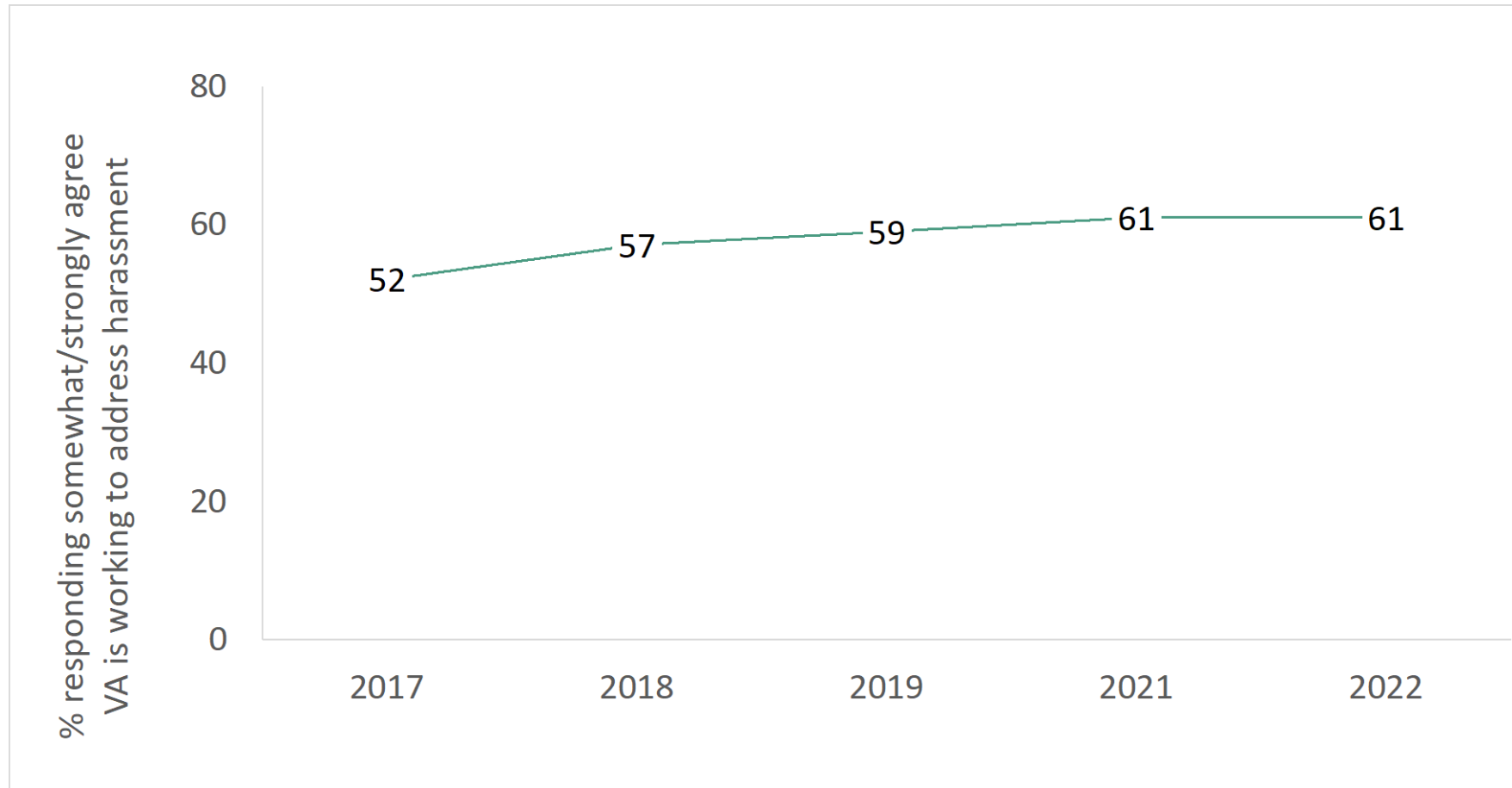
VA Working to Address Harassment

My VA is working to address harassment that happens at the VA
(strongly disagree / somewhat disagree / neutral / somewhat agree / strongly agree)

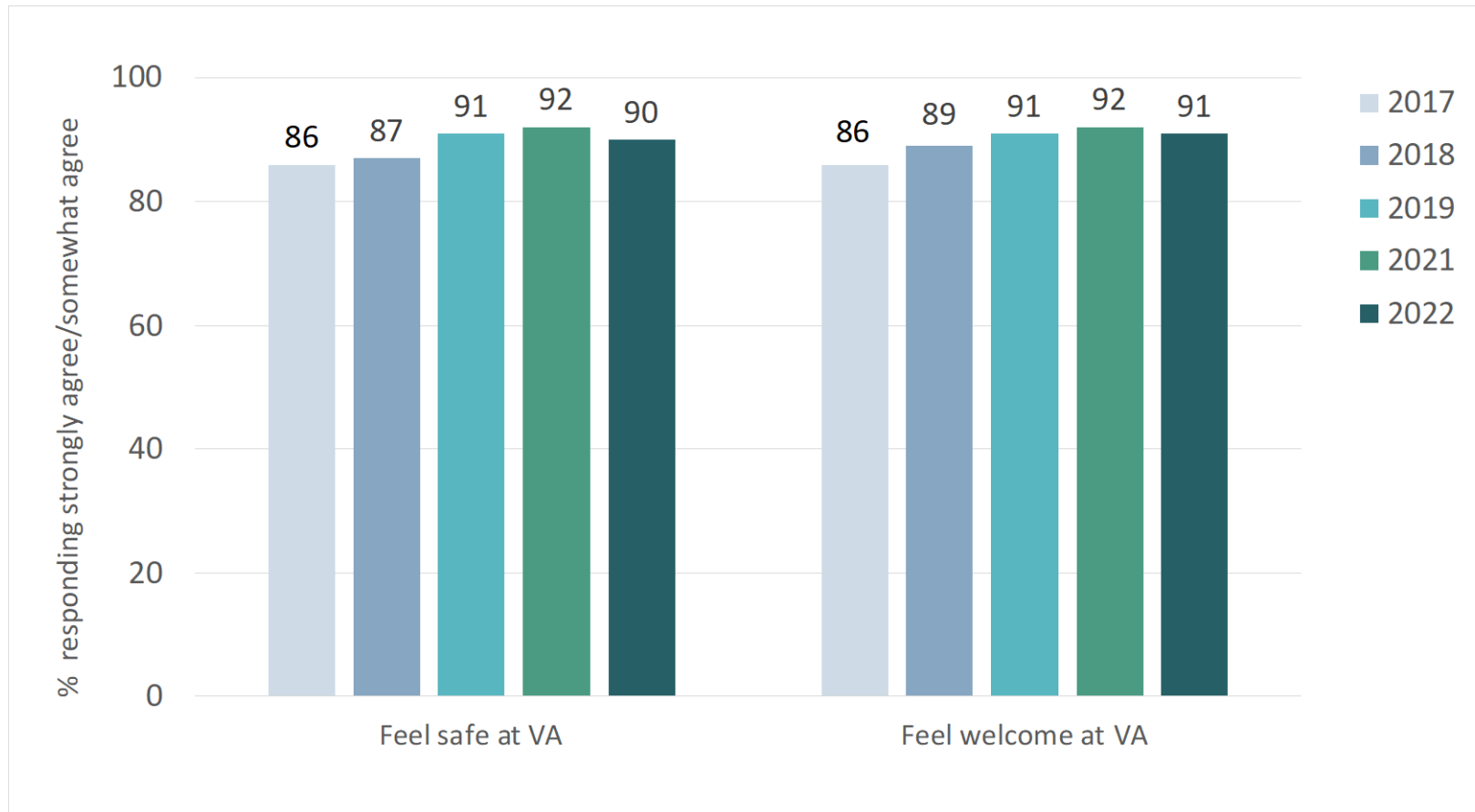
61%

participants somewhat/strongly agreed that their VA is working to address harassment in 2022.

VA Working to Address Harassment



Feeling Safe and Welcome at VA



Unsafe Locations

Are there any places at this VA where you do not feel safe? (yes/no)

12%

participants reported that there were places at their VA where they did not feel safe in 2019.

Unsafe Locations

If yes [to feeling unsafe at this VA], where do you feel unsafe? (open-ended)

12%

participants reported that there were places at their VA where they did not feel safe in 2019.

Most specified at least one unsafe location (n participants = 238)

Some specified more than one location (n locations = >300)

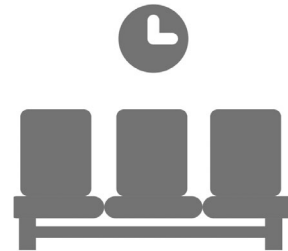
Unsafe Locations: Frequently Identified



Parking areas
(>25% total
comments)



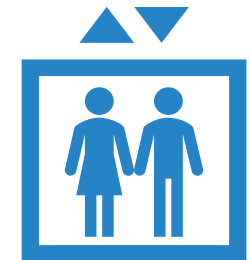
Hallways



Waiting
rooms



Entrances/
lobbies



Elevators

Unsafe Locations: Less Frequently Identified

Specific clinics/services:



Pharmacy



Mental health



ER/Urgent care

Unsafe Locations: Other Themes

“Everywhere” feels unsafe
(≈5% total comments)

“

I’m always on guard when I’m here to feel like I have to explain myself, justify my presence as a Veteran, and protect myself from sexual comments.

”

“

Any area [feels unsafe].
Leave it up to God because I will not stop coming because of their attitude.

”

Unsafe Locations: Other Themes

Associations with military trauma

“

Almost everywhere [feels unsafe]. Because I experienced MST [military sexual trauma], I am sometimes uneasy. I am hypervigilant.

”

“

Due to my military experience many places make me personally feel unsafe.

”

Discussion

Main Findings: The Good News



Prevalence of women Veterans experiencing harassment decreased

- ❖ 25% (2017) → 13% (2022) of women Veterans experiencing either type of harassment
- ❖ Sexual harassment decreased more than gender harassment

Main Findings: The Good News



Possible drivers of decrease in harassment prevalence:

- ❖ Culture change in society as a whole (e.g., #MeToo)
- ❖ National and local VA culture change efforts
- ❖ Other factors (e.g., decreased in-person visits during COVID-19)
- ❖ Gender harassment may be more insidious and difficult to change

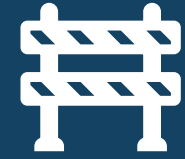
Main Findings: The Good News



Most women (>90%)
feel safe at VA

Most women (>90%)
feel welcome at VA

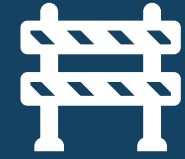
Main Findings: Areas for Improvement



Role of VA staff in enabling harassment

- ❖ Perpetrating harassment
- ❖ Failure to intervene in harassment
- ❖ Misgendered salutations

Main Findings: Areas for Improvement



Reporting
harassment

Perceptions that VA
is working to
address harassment

Perceived safety of
VA public spaces

Practical Implications

- ❖ Shared with participating sites
- ❖ Informed ongoing efforts to address harassment
 - Office of Women's Health
 - Assault and Harassment Prevention Office
- ❖ Communicated up the chain to Congress

THIS IS HARASSMENT.

If you see it, hear it, or experience it, please take action.

REPORT IT HERE:

You can remain anonymous.



Limitations

- ❖ Repeat cross-sectional design
- ❖ Limited sociodemographic information
- ❖ Sample limited to women
- ❖ Lack of information about harassment based on characteristics other than gender

Future Directions

Harassment Veteran Feedback Project 2023 (Wave 6) and beyond:

- ❖ Includes Veterans of all genders
- ❖ Includes race and gender questions
- ❖ Assesses culture change related to LGBTQ+ Veteran equity

Acknowledgements

- Susan Frayne
- Elizabeth Yano
- Alison Hamilton
- Diane Carney
- Women's Health Practice-Based Research Network (WH-PBRN) coordinating center team
- WH-PBRN Site Leads and Project Leads/Co-Leads
- VA Office of Women's Health (XVA 65-092)
- Technical Support provided by VA Women's Health Research Network (SDR 10-012)
- Women Veteran participants



Special Thanks: Participating WH-PBRN Sites

- Albany, NY
- Anchorage, AK
- Ann Arbor, MI
- Atlanta, GA
- Bay Pines, FL
- Bedford, MA
- Boise, ID
- Boston, MA
- Chicago, IL (Hines)
- Chicago, IL (Jesse Brown)
- Clarksburg, WV
- Cleveland, OH
- Dallas, TX
- Durham, NC
- Eastern Kansas, KS (Leavenworth/Topeka)
- Fargo, ND
- Fort Harrison, MT
- Fresno, CA
- Gainesville, FL
- Greater Los Angeles, CA
- Honolulu, HI
- Houston, TX
- Huntington, WV
- Iowa City, IA
- Jackson, MS
- Las Vegas, NV
- Little Rock, AR
- Long Beach, CA
- Madison, WI
- Miami, FL
- Milwaukee, WI
- Minneapolis, MN
- Muskogee, OK
- N. California, CA (Mather-Sacramento)
- New Orleans, LA
- North Chicago, IL (Lovell)
- Northampton, MA
- Northport, NY
- Oklahoma City, OK
- Orlando, FL
- Palo Alto, CA
- Pittsburgh, PA
- Portland, OR
- Providence, RI
- Puget Sound, WA
- Reno, NV
- Salt Lake City, UT
- San Diego, CA
- San Francisco, CA
- San Juan, PR
- Southern Arizona, AZ (Tucson)
- St. Louis, MO
- Syracuse, NY
- Tampa, FL
- Temple, TX
- West Haven, CT
- Wichita, KS

**Discussant: Lelia Jackson,
MBA, MS, FAC-P/PM**

Director, VHA Assault and Harassment Prevention Office

Promoting a Proactive Culture



It's about the
HEART
of the matter

Lelia P. Jackson, MBA, MS, FAC-P/PM
Director, Assault and Harassment Prevention Office

VHA Assault and Harassment Prevention Office (AHPO)

Mission: To systematically facilitate national harassment and sexual assault prevention and recovery strategies to promote a culture of respect and safety.

AHPO Lanes of Effort

Education and Awareness



Tools and initiatives to reduce harmful behaviors, increase respectful and safe environments, awareness of response capabilities, and encourage reporting and active intervention.

Compliance, Oversight, and Quality Assurance



Address Congressional mandates, leadership initiatives and related directives to implement requirements; provide timely management and technical assistance to drive sustainability and program effectiveness.

Data and Evaluation



Analyze and translate data, remediation plans of action, and survey results; identify and address trends to maximize prevention efforts, and target intervention and response efforts.

Strategic Partnerships



Collaborate with stakeholders to maximize prevention and response techniques, share best practice and information, establish communities of practice to eradicate harassment and sexual assault at facilities; demonstrate the Administration's dedication to a respectful, safe culture.

AHPO Lane of Effort: Education and Awareness



Immersive Training



One Million Pledges and Growing!



Prevention of Sexual Harassment VR

The Deborah Sampson Act



Title V of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 contains 28 provisions that improve Women Veterans' access to VA health care and benefits.

Improvements for Women Veterans in VA

- ★ Ending harassment and sexual assault within VA
- ★ Enhancing Women Veteran reintegration and readjustment
- ★ Expanding reintegration and readjustment counseling retreats for Women Veterans and their family members
- ★ Increasing availability of prosthetics for Women Veterans
- ★ Bolstering Women Veterans counseling and legal services



Deborah Sampson

Deborah Sampson became a hero of the American Revolution after disguising herself as a man for over two years to serve her country in battle. When Sampson was shot during the war, she extracted the pistol ball herself. She was discovered when she became ill during an epidemic, was taken to a hospital, and lost consciousness.

While she received a military pension from the state of Massachusetts, it wasn't until four years after her death that Congress awarded her full military benefits - stating that the history of the Revolution "furnished no other similar example of female heroism, fidelity and courage."

Michals, Debra. "Deborah Sampson." National Women's History Museum. National Women's History Museum, 2015. April 2021.

Deborah Sampson: Key Areas of Focus & Facility Requirements

- Comprehensive anti-harassment and sexual assault policy and annual distribution to Veterans
- **Anti-harassment anti-sexual assault internet banners**
- **Survey of Veterans' feeling of safety in VA medical facilities**
- Designated points of contact and prominent signage
- **Mandatory reporting remediation plans for facilities with five or more substantiated incidents of harassment or sexual assault**
- Mandatory reporting of harassment or sexual assault incidents
- Mandatory training update to include bystander intervention training for employees and Veterans
- **Annual distribution of the Secretary's anti-harassment/anti-sexual assault policy ~16 Million Veterans**
- Annual report to Congress on total reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault



**Compliance, Oversight,
and Quality Assurance**

Deborah Sampson: Key Areas of Focus & Facility Requirements

US Department of Veterans Affairs

LEADING WITH RESPECT

Improving the VA Experience



VA is committed to embracing a welcoming, diverse, and respectful culture that does not tolerate harassing, disruptive, or abusive behaviors of any kind.

 **VA** |  U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

For more information:
www.va.gov/stop-harassment/policy/

FROM OCT. 1, 2022, TO JUNE 30, 2023, NEARLY **243,000 SURVEYS** WERE SENT, WHICH RESULTED IN OVER 42,000 VETERAN RESPONSES, IDENTIFYING 427 RISK MANAGEMENT CONCERNS WITH LESS THAN 1% OVERALL SEXUALLY BASED CONCERNS.


VSignals Safety Survey



VA'S ANTI-HARASSMENT AND ANTI-SEXUAL ASSAULT POLICY

Everyone should feel welcome and safe at VA.
[Be a part of VA's culture of respect »](#)

<https://www.va.gov/health/>





IF YOU ARE HARASSED OR SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

or you witness this type of behavior, contact the VA Police or the Patient Advocate.


U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
World Class Harassment Prevention & Recourse

Our Culture
VA is committed to a culture where everyone is treated with civility, compassion, and respect.

VA will not tolerate or accept harassment of any kind, in any facility.



For more information, please visit va.gov/stop-harassment/.

VA |  U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Promoting a Proactive Culture

How to file your report

As a Veteran or visitor to VA, you have options for how to file your report. And you can file a report at any time. When you're ready, we'll support you through every step of the process.

- **Tell someone you trust at a VA location.** For example, tell security, a patient advocate, or your health care provider.
- **Or, if you've left the facility, call us at [800-698-2411](tel:800-698-2411) (TTY: 711) and select option 9.** Our trained staff are here 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

We'll always respect your need for confidentiality. When you file your report, we'll explain your options for confidential or anonymous reporting.

[Find out what to do if you don't want to give your name](#)

Note: Your safety is the top priority. If you've been assaulted and you need help right away, call [911](tel:911). If you're at a VA location, call for security or find the nearest staff member.

<https://www.va.gov/report-harassment/>



Interpersonal Signage and Internet Site

<https://www.va.gov/STOP-HARASSMENT/HelpIsAvailable.asp>

**If you feel unsafe...
Help is available.**

If you are experiencing:

- Mental Health Crisis**
Veterans Crisis Line
Call 988 (then press "1") or text 838255
www.veteranscrisisline.net
- Medical Emergency**
Dial 911
- Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence**
National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
www.thehotline.org
- Sexual Assault/Abuse**
Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)
1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
www.rainn.org
- Human Trafficking**
National Human Trafficking Hotline
1-888-373-7888
www.humantraffickinghotline.org

For additional information and resources, scan the QR code or go to www.va.gov/stop-harassment/helpisavailable.asp
Para información en español, escanear el código QR, o ir a www.va.gov/stop-harassment/helpisavailable.asp

VA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration

If you feel unsafe, use THIS HAND SIGNAL to let a VA staff person know you need help. Someone will speak with you privately and discreetly.

UNIVERSAL SIGN FOR HELP

For on-site emergency:
Contact the VA Police

VHA 10-375

Help is Available

VA is committed to a culture where everyone is treated with civility, compassion, and respect. Everyone should feel welcome and safe when doing business with VA.

**If you feel unsafe...
Help is available.**

If you are experiencing...	Contact...
24/7, confidential crisis support for Veterans and their loved ones. You don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect.	
Medical Emergency	Dial 911
Mental Health Crisis	Veterans Crisis Line Dial 988 (then press "1") or text 838255 www.veteranscrisisline.net
Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence	National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) www.thehotline.org VA Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program Coordinator Directory www.socialwork.va.gov/IPV/Coordinators.asp
Sexual Assault/Abuse	Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) www.rainn.org
Human Trafficking	National Human Trafficking Hotline 1-888-373-7888 humantraffickinghotline.org

Do you fear you may be using violence in your relationship? We can help!

- Contact your local VA Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program Coordinator for more information.
- Consider taking a self-assessment

If you feel unsafe while in a VA facility, discreetly use this hand signal to let a VA staff person know you need help.

UNIVERSAL SIGN FOR HELP.

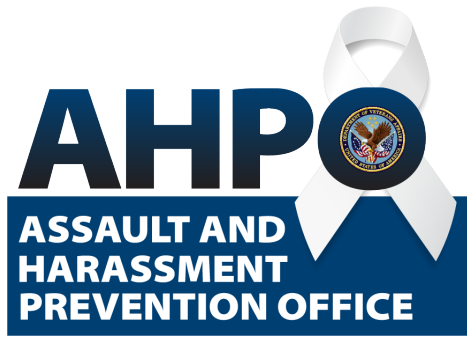
For more information about the universal sign for help, please go to: <https://canadianwomen.org/signal-for-help/>

2024 VA Quadrennial National Women Veterans Summit



Washington Hilton
September 5 – 7, 2024

- Increase access and decrease barriers to VA health care services and benefits.
- Bring together women Veterans, partners, and stakeholders with equity in improving women Veterans' health and wellness.
- Facilitate resolution to current challenges to meet the unique needs of our women Veterans:
 - Comprehensive Health care
 - Mental Health Care Services
 - Military Sexual Trauma
 - Sexual Harassment
 - Intimate Partner Violence
 - Homelessness
 - Unemployment
 - Benefits Claims



AHPO Contact Information

Director: Lelia Jackson, MBA, MS, FAC/P-PM

Email: VHA_AHPO@va.gov

Intranet: vaww.stop-harassment.med.va.gov/

Internet: www.va.gov/STOPHARASSMENT/policy/index.asp

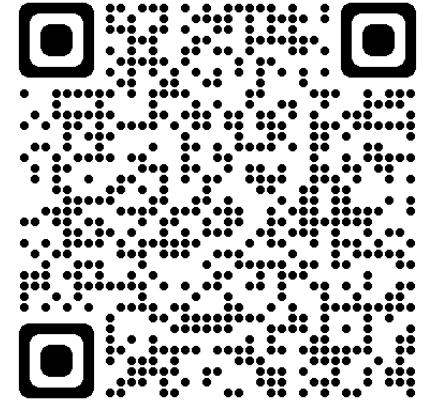
“Little can destroy institutional trust faster and more painfully than sexual assault or sexual harassment.”

President Joe Biden



Thank you!
Comments/Questions

Get Involved!



- ✓ **Subscribe to the VA WHRN Consortium Group Email:**
<https://varedcap.rcp.vaec.va.gov/redcap/surveys/?s=CDFTRTNJK79PF4YE>
- ✓ **Contact** Adriana Rodriguez, PhD, WHRN Consortium Program Manager, at Adriana.Rodriguez3@va.gov or Jessica Friedman, PhD, Jessica.Friedman@va.gov with ideas for future cyberseminars focused on women's health.