

The North County Times - Californian

## Are female veteran suicides a hidden epidemic?

Despite study's findings, numbers are low in San Diego

**By Rick Rogers - For The North County Times | Posted: Friday, December 10, 2010 12:00 am**

A new report on the prevalence of suicides among females with military service is causing quite a buzz. It said younger women are three times more likely to kill themselves than their civilian counterparts, according to Oregon researchers.

The alarmingly high number of suicides among male veterans is well known, but until the study by Portland State University and Oregon Health and Science University, the cases among their female counterparts were not.

The research effort titled "Self-Inflicted Deaths Among Women With U.S. Military Service: A Hidden Epidemic?" is billed as the largest study yet on suicides among female veterans.

It saw publication last week in the December issue of the American Psychiatric Association's journal *Psychiatric Services* and is based on information collected from 16 states. California, home to the largest veteran population in the country, was not among them.

The study of 5,948 female suicides between 2004 and 2007 found women veterans aged 18 to 34 most at risk:

-- 56 suicides among 418,132 female veterans (1 in 7,465)

-- 1,461 suicides among 33,257,362 nonveterans (1 in 22,763).

"This study shows that young women veterans have nearly triple the suicide rate of young women who never served in the military," said Mark Kaplan, co-author of the study and a professor at Portland State University.

"These findings suggest a hidden epidemic of suicide among younger women with military service. Clinicians should inquire about military service among women and should recognize that suicide prevention practices pertain to female veterans," the researchers concluded.

In San Diego County, those suicide numbers are not being seen, but other health needs are.

Laura Dolata, associate chief nurse for ambulatory and outpatient care for the VA San Diego Healthcare System, said records indicate just three female veterans committed suicide since 2005 in an area that includes Southern California and Las Vegas, and none of them was ages 18 to 34.

San Diego County is home to 25,000 female veterans, according to 2007 government figures. About 7,500 of them are enrolled at the San Diego VA.

"We have had very, very few suicides," Dolata said. "For whatever reasons, we are not seeing them."

Dolata is seeing surging numbers of female veterans whose health care needs are quietly transforming the government health care system.

"I've been at the VA system for 27 years," Dolata said. "We never used to see very many females veterans. Now we do. We've had to bring in some services and do some things differently."

Children-friendly waiting rooms might be the most obvious example of this recent change. But alterations are going beyond the cosmetic and to the cultural core of the institution.

In recent years, the San Diego VA has hired specialists in gynecology and mammography. Both services used to be contracted out. Now they are done in-house.

The San Diego County VA is considering opening women-only clinics, especially for those suffering from military sexual trauma, a condition common enough to have its own acronym, MST.

Studies measuring sexual assaults and harassment in the military vary widely. Some have found that 15 percent have experienced sexual assault or harassment, while other surveys put the figure at twice that.

Like their male colleagues, female veterans are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and "the group has a lot of mental health needs," Dolata said.

In 2008 and 2009, PTSD, hypertension and depression were the top three diagnostic categories for female veterans treated by the VA.

Those needs will likely only grow.

The number of women in the military has doubled in the last 30 years, and is expected to double again in the next decade, according to VA estimates. At least 250,000 American women have served in Iraq or Afghanistan.

"The VA has traditionally been a very male-oriented organization," Dolata said. "Many women who served in the military don't consider themselves veterans. We need to change that."