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Rise In Homeless Female Vets Tied To Military Sexual Abuse



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The number of homeless female veterans is on the rise and the high rate of Military Sexual Assault may be partly to blame.

Between 2008 and 2009, women veterans made up 7.5 percent of the estimated 75,609 homeless service members, [according to the Department of Veteran Affairs](#). The same organization found that 20 percent of of female Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have experienced Military Sexual Abuse, a trauma that is more likely to impede a veteran's transition back to society, than a combat-related trauma, according to a 2009 *Clinical Psychology Review* study, [the Portland Monthly](#) cited.

"I think I can say confidently that [every single woman in the military has dealt with sexual harassment at some time in their career](#)," [Mickiela Montoya, a homeless veteran, told ABC](#). Montoya, who served as a policewoman in Iraq for seven years said a fellow soldier threatened to rape her in Iraq.

Recognizing the pressing need to cater to this specific population, [the U.S. Department of Labor's Women Bureau launched a guide](#) for service providers in July to ensure that homeless veterans' unique challenges are adequately addressed.

"I am very concerned about this increase in homelessness and other challenges our women veterans face as they reintegrate..." Hilda Solis, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor, remarked on the organization's website. "Often women veterans are neither aware of the available services nor comfortable accessing them. Something must be done."

Paulina Hicks, who lives in a veteran-funded women's living center in California, is one such traumatized veteran who the Department of Labor hopes to target.

"Of course, I'll never forget his face," Hicks told [the Huffington Post](#) in April of the man she said raped her at an air show.

Hicks said that another man, who broke into her dormitory in Texas, raped her and that she was verbally and physically assaulted by a superior in Oregon whom she worked with on a daily basis for three years. She reported a few incidences, but mostly kept the attacks to herself.

While the growing rate of female homeless veterans is a nationwide concern, certain pockets of the population are experiencing the rise more than others.

In Fayetteville, N.C., for example, the female veteran homeless rate has hit 18 percent, according to [the Fay Observer](#).

"Fayetteville is a bastion of military persons," Barbara Marshall, a Navy veteran who was once homeless, told the newspaper. "They retire here, and, unfortunately, some encounter times of trouble."

Of the 504 homeless veterans Fayetteville serves, about 90 of them are women, [the Fay Observer](#) reports. But those numbers don't necessarily represent the problem's complete picture, since veterans are often hesitant to reveal the abuse they have been subjected to.

To help those facing similar struggles that she's overcome, Marshall established the Jubilee House a year ago, a transitional home for homeless female veterans. Thanks to Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, which renovated the Jubilee House last month, it can now accommodate seven homeless veterans and their families and has additional space for mentoring and counseling.

But, finding housing is just part of the problem. Getting veterans to overcome their reluctance to ask for help is another.

“There’s more shame, secrecy, and stigma attached to post-traumatic stress disorder associated with military sexual trauma than with combat-related PTSD,” Marcia Hall, a counselor and Women’s Health Program manager at the Roseburg VA told [the Portland Monthly](#). “It’s a hidden war.”

Oregon’s VA faces similar challenges to that of Fayetteville’s when it comes female veteran homelessness. Though the 2010 rate of 6 percent is lower than the national rate, according to Oregon Housing and Community Services, experts admit that these numbers are likely not representative of how grave the problem is.

“Veterans are like the salmon, they never want to stop and be counted,” Nicole Hoeft, lead public information specialist for Oregon’s VA, told the Huffington Post.

To assist their homeless female veteran population, Portland’s VA opened the state’s first—and one of the country’s few—female-only VA clinics. Lawmakers also recently passed legislation calling for improvements in the care made available for victims of Military Sexual Trauma, [the Portland Monthly](#) reported.

While such female-veteran specific resources are raising awareness and offering unprecedented help, experts say it’s just beginning to scratch the surface of the problem.

"The community is more aware," Stephanie Felder, the Fayetteville VA's homeless program coordinator Felder told [the Fey Observer](#). "But there just isn't enough beds, especially for women and children."

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