

Mental Wellness Findings Action Steps

Since the Revolutionary War, women have served with valor in the US military. Today, women serve as fighter pilots, submariners, infantrymen and tankers, far from the days when they were restricted by law and policy from serving in many occupations and units.

The increased number of military roles that women fill bring with them many health challenges. Some of these challenges make headlines, while others—such as mental wellness—are often invisible to the public and policy makers. Unfortunately, responses to mental health concerns remain tailored to meet the requirements of men and often do not address the unique needs of women.

In 2016 the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) conducted a community needs assessment survey and found that mental health is a top concern among active duty and veteran women. This finding served as the catalyst for a mental wellness survey to further identify the needs of service women. SWAN's 2017 annual survey and Summit focused on the mental wellness challenges service women and women veterans face, and explored how to bridge the gaps to improve the mental wellness of military women.

What the Data Reveals and What Congress Can Do

SWAN's data revealed that 60% of military women surveyed by SWAN have been diagnosed with a depressive disorder and 20% have intentionally harmed themselves. Veterans Affairs data tells us that women veterans are 250% more likely to commit suicide than other women and that they are disproportionately categorized as "housing insecure." Congress can provide legislative assistance by taking steps to fund programs that address existing gaps. Simply put, by taking these steps, Congress can save lives.

Policy recommendations:

- Provide gender-specific mental wellness assessments with feedback and recommended care options during transition **and** demobilization activities. (DoD)
- Develop women-specific transition and demobilization services. Service women have a very different experience of deployment and transition; programs must be tailored to meet women's specific needs. (DoD)
- Increase access to appropriately trained counselors/therapists in DoD and the VA. Access is often slow, inconsistent and of variable quality. Many therapists have not been trained in how to handle cases of harassment and sexual assault. (DoD and VA)
- Provide funding for alternative therapies like meditation, yoga, massage therapy, acupuncture, etc. Many military women pay out-of-pocket costs for therapies that they find to be more effective than traditional approaches which rely almost solely on counseling and medication. (DoD and VHA)
- Establish social support groups/networks for military women. (VA/VSO/MSOs)
- Improve resource access via a single, cross community resource site. (DoD/VA/MSOs)

Take Action

You can join SWAN's efforts to advocate for the mental wellness needs of service women and women veterans. Taking some of the simple steps below can lead to meaningful change.

- **Contact your federal representatives** to express your support for the mental wellness needs of military women. Give your representative a copy of SWAN's report. Tell your representative a personal story about why this is important to you. Tell your representative that this is important because healthy service members make a strong military.

To find your U.S. Member of Congress go to:

<https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>

To find your U.S. Senator go to:

https://www.senate.gov/reference/common/faq/How_to_correspond_senators.htm

You may also phone the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121. A switchboard operator will connect you directly with the House and Senate office you request.

- **Attend National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service** events throughout the country. Click the link to find events near you or share your thoughts:
<http://www.inspire2serve.gov/news-events>
- **Connect nationally with the Service Women's Action Network.** Attend an event. Take part in the #MeTooMilitary movement, or donate to support their initiatives.
<https://www.servicewomen.org/>, www.facebook.com/servicewomen, @servicewomen on Twitter.
- **Tweet** and tag your Congressional representatives: Women veterans have a 250% higher suicide rate than civilian women. Join @servicewomen in their fight for better mental wellness care for military women. #ServiceWomen <https://www.servicewomen.org/summit-report/>

Post on Facebook: "Did you know that women veterans have a 250% higher suicide rate than women who have never served? We cannot leave our service women behind. Contact @servicewomen to see how you can advocate for military women and share SWAN's report on the Mental Wellness Needs of Military Women with your local representatives."
<https://www.servicewomen.org/summit-report/>

- Activate locally and connect with your local organizations assisting women in the military.