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National Assessment Aims to Assist Needs of Women Veterans

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. – A national survey of women veterans hopes to provide the first comprehensive snapshot of the challenges they face transitioning to civilian life, providing veteran service organizations with data needed to expand outreach and better meet needs.

Led by The University of Alabama, [the survey](#) asks women about their time in the armed forces along with their needs and preferences in transitioning out of the service. The survey also aims to capture the experiences of women veterans in civilian life.

“A lot of people assume the experiences of women in their transition are really no different than of men, but that’s not the case,” said [Dr. Karl Hamner](#), UA clinical associate professor in educational research. “Both recent research and the personal accounts of women themselves show us that many women who served are having trouble, but we don’t have a good picture of why. There is a lack of data, and this assessment will provide a baseline of information in a lot of areas.”

Hamner is leading the study with [Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas](#), a researcher who earned her doctorate in health education and promotion from UA and is an adjunct instructor at George Mason University’s Department of Global and Community Health. Also part of the project is Dr. Paria Jami, an evaluation post-doctoral fellow in the UA College of Education’s [Office of Evaluation Research and School Improvement](#), which Hamner directs.

Thomas, a veteran of the Marine Corps, said she struggled with all the stereotypical issues veterans face after leaving the military such as alcohol abuse, depression, loneliness and choosing toxic relationships. It wasn’t until she connected with other women veterans through a service organization that she was able to find both camaraderie that stopped her feeling alone in her transition as well as strategies to cope and move forward, she said.

“I really struggled with my transition for a number of years,” Thomas said. “I was ready to leave the Marine Corps, but it was incredibly hard to become a normal girl again. Our transition needs are just different from men.”

The suicide rate for female veterans is 2.1 times more than civilian women, while the rate for male veterans is 1.3 times that of civilian men, Hamner said. Women veterans are also less likely than men to use Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and organizations designed to help with transition issues such as employment and mental health.

They can also struggle with different mental health issues than male veterans after working in a hyper-masculine culture while on active duty, he said. Additionally, it's estimated three-fourths of women veterans are not involved with service organizations.

Another crucial difference is women who have served are often not recognized by society or even VA hospitals or veterans service organizations as veterans. For example, one woman veteran shared that the staff of a VA hospital once asked if she was picking up her grandfather, despite the fact that she was the recipient of a Purple Heart.

"Once you let your hair out of the bun you wore in active duty, you don't stand out anymore," Thomas said. "You don't get identified as a veteran very often. You can become invisible."

The project hopes to survey at least 3,000 women veterans, but overwhelming support early in the process could mean well more than that could be surveyed, helping to add more robust data to subsets such as women veterans of color and disabled women veterans, Hamner said.

Hamner, who is also leading [a national study](#) with America's Warrior Partnership to explore and better understand organizational and community risk factors that contribute to suicide and intentional self-harm among military veterans, said veteran service organizations and individual women who have served have helped spread the survey.

In an agreement with organizations, the researchers will share an early analysis of the survey this summer to help them in outreach efforts and in programming and services for women veterans.

"We are going to publish papers as part of scholarly activity, but, at the same time, we want to share this data so it can have an impact soon on the lives of women veterans," he said.

Thomas said service organizations and VA hospitals want to diversify the veterans they help, and this survey can help.

"The intention of the study is to be used in the real world right away by giving this data to organizations on the ground that can use the information," she said.

The anonymous, private survey is estimated to take between 20 and 30 minutes, and only summary-level data will be reported. Women who want to participate can visit the [online survey](#) or contact Hamner at khamner@ua.edu or Thomas at katehendricksthomas@gmail.com.

A QR code that links to the survey is available upon request.

<https://news.ua.edu/2021/04/national-assessment-aims-to-assist-needs-of-women-veterans/>

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