

DESERET
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Female vets often 'silent' victims of war trauma

By **Amy Joi Bryson**

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They are often the silent victims of the street, cloaking their past, distrusting of services and linking up with people who frequently take advantage of them.

As more and more women join the military, complete their stint of service and return home, many are struggling with problems previously mostly seen in their male counterparts: post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and homelessness.

Consider that in 1973, women made up just 2.5 percent of the military, but by 2004, that number had risen to 15 percent.

And in years past, women held largely "female" positions in the military such as nursing and clerical work. Now, more and more women are on the front lines in combat roles.

"Due to the nature of the war going on in Afghanistan and Iraq, women are being exposed to situations that bring on a lot of trauma — situations that will change their personalities forever," said Reggie Burnaugh with the Homeless Veterans Fellowship in Ogden. "As they return back home to their husband and family, there will be strife."

Those who work to help veterans expect that the strife, coupled with other challenges posed by the transition to civilian life, will result in an increase in the homeless population of female veterans.

"We have not seen that much traffic yet," said Burnaugh, "but I foresee there being a great need in the next two or three years because of the dynamics of the military conflicts."

Tracking those numbers even now is difficult because the streets — given their potentially dangerous nature — often force homeless women into choices not typically available to their male counterparts.

"The female homeless veterans are very much more resourceful than a guy," Burnaugh said. "A guy would bring in a homeless female much more than a woman would bring in a guy."

As a result, homeless women often dive into poor relationships that mask the need for help, he said.

"Instead of them getting in and getting the right services to bring them out of the downward spiral, they fall into a bad relationship."

Through its intake work, the Road Home, Utah's largest homeless shelter, tracks whether the people it serves are veterans.

From July 2000 through May of this year, the facility served 1,653 veterans who stayed 168,000 nights. Of those veterans, 49 were women who stayed nearly 5,000 nights.

Rich Landward, the clinical director of the Valor House — a 61-bed transitional housing program for homeless veterans — suspects on any given night in the Salt Lake County area there are between 90 and 120 female veterans who are homeless.

"The statistics are really difficult to gather," Landward said. "The real issue is not so much the homelessness but the environments where many of them are — domestic violence and other problems."

Burnaugh's transitional housing program in Ogden offers segregated and private housing for female veterans seeking help, and he's had a couple cycle through in the past several years.

But other transitional programs serving homeless vets have dormitory-style accommodations that may deter their seeking assistance.

"They don't like blending with the men. They've been mistreated, haven't been accepted; the last thing they want is to be thrown into a dormitory with a bunch of guys," Burnaugh said.

Nationally, the Veterans Affairs administration has 7,600 beds available for homeless veterans — 1,700 available for women in coed programs and 206 in women-only facilities.

A variety of factors lead those who deal with vets to describe the issue of women joining the homeless the "invisible" problem.

"It's tough getting the word out there," Burnaugh said.

Barry Bassett, a licensed clinical social worker, heads up the Veterans Administration's Community Residential Care program, which places veterans in "sponsor" homes — a sort of adult foster care program.

Willing sponsors commit to arranging meals, transportation and other services for the veterans, who often suffer from a wide range of problems.

In the past year, close to 20 male veterans have been placed in family homes and officials are working to find family sponsors for female veterans — if the veterans will step forward.

"History tells us most female veterans are not readily admitting they are veterans, and they tend to be reticent about disclosure," Bassett said. "Because of that, they are less likely to seek services."

Burnaugh said what would be ideal is the local development of a women-only program — a sanctuary of sorts designed exclusively to counter the problems of being a woman, being homeless and being a veteran.

"Someone has to venture out and say, 'We know there is need and yes, we are putting this facility up for you — trust us, we're here for you.' "

Contributing: Leigh Dethman.

E-mail: amyjoi@desnews.com

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