

Officials: Women Can Suffer Same Deployment Ills as Men

By Terri Moon Cronk
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 7, 2012 - It once was thought that servicewomen neither were exposed to the same combat situations as men nor developed the same psychological injuries. But officials now recognize otherwise.

"With the type of combat we're in now, ... it's probably the only place where men and women really are equal," therapist Jeanine Aversa says in "The Long Road Home," this month's installment of the Pentagon Channel series "Recon."

The segment made its debut on the Pentagon Channel yesterday and will run through February. Officials estimate that the percentage of women in the military has doubled in the past 30 years. But that increase, the "Recon" segment noted, has come with a rise in problems such as homelessness, drug addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder among female veterans.

The Defense and Veterans Affairs departments work together to address service members' physical, mental and emotional injuries, including those of women, so officials say it's now easier for female veterans to ask for help.

Kate McGraw, acting deputy director for the psychological health, clinical standards of care at the Defense Centers for Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., said a "huge influx" of congressional funding and Defense Department support on the issues facing female veterans have helped address psychological health and traumatic brain injury.

"Because there are more people deploying and the frequency has increased over time," McGraw said, "we're also seeing an increase in support for the effects of deployment."

Focus groups, growing numbers of support groups and a mental health anti-stigma campaign are part of the DOD and VA support for female veterans, she said.

Battling the stigma of seeking mental health counseling also has remained a concern among military leaders, McGraw noted. Some service members don't seek help, she explained, because they believe doing so could hurt their careers.

"The fears don't necessarily have a basis," she said. "So this is an attempt to try to de-stigmatize those fears."

Peculiar to women is an apparent higher rate of "co-occurrence" of PTSD and depression when compared with men after returning from deployment, McGraw said. And other behaviors also can play a part in women's lives, she said.

"Women tend to have a higher incidence of binge drinking ... and a higher incidence of eating disorder behavior ... as compared to males," McGraw said, citing recent literature on studies conducted during the past five years.

Women made up only seven-tenths of 1 percent of the military when now-retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Wilma Vaught entered service in 1957. Although her active-duty experience was nothing like what today's women service members have undergone in Iraq and in Afghanistan, she said, she emphasized that many more doors are open to women in the military now than before.

"But that progress has come with a price," she said.

Veteran Jen Crane knows about that price. She began to have panic attacks while searching for work after she left the military. She couldn't continue her military job as a paralegal in the civilian sector, so she took a bartending job. There, she was introduced to cocaine. She said it brought her anxiety down and made her social.

Eventually, however, Crane's penchant for drugs nearly cost her everything.

"Because I was using, [I was told to] get help. I was a soldier, a warrior. I can handle anything," she said she believed. "I felt like a monster."

Crane turned to prostitution to support her drug habit, and became homeless and broke. As her situation spiraled downward, she decided to take her life.

"I was going to do it with drugs, because it was going to be slow and painful. That's what I felt like I deserved," she said. But before she could act on her plan, police arrested her for drug possession.

Crane went to court, and began receiving counseling from Aversa. With support from her therapist, the courts and her family, today she is married, has a child and is the national spokeswoman for a nonprofit organization, traveling around the country to tell her story.

Experiences like Crane's are helping to change the care female veterans receive. "We're undergoing a culture change within the Department of Veterans Affairs," Patricia Hayes, the VA's chief consultant on women's health, told "Recon."

VA estimates that 6,500 female veterans are homeless and live on the nation's streets -- double the number from 10 years ago. VA also reported that one in five women veterans reported military sexual trauma during their military service, and the number of women with PTSD is increasing.

The wartime roles for servicewomen have changed because of their exposure to combat today," Hayes said. Women were close to bombings in Vietnam, but not like in Iraq and Afghanistan, she said, which have involved carrying an M-16 rifle and being alert for roadside bombs.

Women need time to adjust after returning home, Hayes said.

"They need time to work through [what] they've been exposed to," she added. "A lot of women say they're thrust right back into family life. They tell us, 'The laundry is piled up.'"

McGraw outlined signs that someone is struggling with readjustment issues. She cited symptoms such as the inability to get a good quality sleep, nightmares, or the feeling of reliving events from a deployment when awake, disturbing dreams about deployment events, changes in mood, irritability feeling increasingly on edge or keyed up, or getting startled easily.

Veteran Genevieve Chase, who suffered a traumatic head injury after the vehicle she was riding in exploded, said told "Recon" that in spite of the struggles women try to overcome, their patriotism remains intact.

"Even the women who are trying to get on their feet or have been struggling through military sexual trauma, substance abuse, suicide or any major issue, ... when they come home, every single one of them is still proud of their service," Chase said.

The Pentagon Channel's "Recon" series is a monthly, 30-minute broadcast that provides an in-depth look at operations, missions, military events, history and other subjects highlighting the accomplishments of U.S. military men and women. All "Recon" programs are posted on the Pentagon Channel's website.