

Women Veterans Day Out!

VA Women's Wellness Fair to be held in St. Cloud

St. Cloud, Minn: It's time to expand the definition of Veteran. Many women who served in the military don't identify themselves as Veterans. But just like their male counterparts, if they served, they are Veterans. The definition of Veteran hasn't changed but the population has: it's younger, increasingly female, and with different health care needs. The St. Cloud VA Health Care System is working to enhance care, improve services, and change the culture to serve the growing population of women Veterans.

In support of their health care, women Veterans are invited to attend the VA Women's Wellness Fair on May 17, from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., at the River's Edge Convention Center in St. Cloud.

"We really want to reach out to women Veterans," said Julie Roman Vera, Women Veterans Program Manager at the St. Cloud VA, "so we are putting everything out there for women to see and sample at the Wellness Fair."

If you know a woman who served, ask her if she's checked out VA lately and invite her to the Wellness Fair, Roman Vera said.

Despite the fact that 15% of all military service members are women, in the transition from military service to civilian life most women do not self-identify as Veterans, she said. The unfortunate consequence is that many women Veterans do not utilize the health care and other benefits their service earned.

According to Roman Vera, the population of women Veterans is growing rapidly. Since 2000, the number of female Veterans using VA health care has more than doubled.

While this growth rate has outpaced that of the male Veteran population, in the central Minnesota area less than one-third of eligible women use VA health care. She adds that their needs are acute:

- Women Veterans using VA care are more likely than their male-counterparts to have a service-connected disability, meaning an injury or illness that was incurred or aggravated during service.
- 1 in 5 women Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- 1 in 5 women seen by VA health care respond "yes" when screened for Military Sexual Trauma.

- Women are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless Veteran population and are more likely to be homeless with children.
- Women Veterans are younger, and many are in need of family planning and pregnancy care.
- Women Veterans use more mental health services.

While the number of enrollees in the Women Veteran Program at the St. Cloud VA has increased in recent years, we have the capacity and desire to serve more, Roman Vera said.

“Experience has shown that once women Veterans access VA health care, they access it frequently, and that is great news for women Veterans and their families,” she said.

The VA Women’s Wellness Fair will feature a variety of health and wellness presentations and activities, including those provided by the VA and also by local health vendors.

Women Veterans are encouraged to bring a friend for the daylong event. “We encourage women Veterans to bring a friend or ‘battle buddy’ along, and the friend does not have to be a Veteran to attend. Think of it as a woman’s day out and we’ve got more than enough to interest everyone,” Roman Vera said. “In addition to all of the health activities, there is a catered lunch and live entertainment.”

“We are excited to announce that the popular Minnesota comedy-singing duo, ‘Tina & Lena,’ will be pulling out all the stops to entertain the women in attendance,” Roman Vera said.

Admission is free, but women planning to attend the luncheon are asked to RSVP by May 2. To RSVP please call 320-255-6353.

The VA Women’s Wellness Fair is being supported through a generous donation by the Women’s Fund, Central Minnesota Community Foundation.

To view program highlights, visit: www.stcloud.va.gov.