

## **Past Panel: Supporting Women Veterans' Mental Health**

**Reflections:** On May 28<sup>th</sup>, NAMI Multnomah held the first Evening with the Experts event of 2019. The topic of discussion was Supporting Women Veterans' Mental Health. The panel featured a variety of perspectives from four women veterans who served in the military during different eras. While all of these women had personal lived experience as a veteran with mental health issues, some also had professional or volunteer experience advocating for causes around mental health and veterans' rights. The variety of experiences from this panel led to a valuable and insightful discussion.

Panelists answered several key questions. The first was: **In your lived experience, what are some of the largest challenges women veterans face regarding mental health and how do those concerns differ from those of male identified veterans?** The panelists agreed that one of the major issues for specifically women veterans is lack of the "Veteran" identity. Women veterans often do not identify as vets because they don't feel like they are vets.

This disconnect in identity ends up preventing some women vets from accessing critical health services at the VA. Over the course of the event, panelists outlined a multitude of problems contributing to this disconnect. These problems include: alienation of women veterans, not taking the time to truly listen to their experiences and needs and of course very complex societal issues such as sexism.

The second question was: **What mental health services are lacking for women veterans or are too challenging to access? Are there any specific services that already exist that could be improved upon?** Panelists highlighted several key services that many people often don't consider to be related to mental health: family planning services, adequate sexual health care, and parenting education. Panelists explained how these healthcare services are integral to the reintegration process and therefore a critical factor for the veteran's mental wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of their families.

In addition to the services listed above, panelists stressed the need for more Military Sexual Trauma (MST) specialists to provide mental health care services for veterans who experience this trauma. There are currently very few well-trained MST specialists available. One panelist mentioned she knew of two specialists who both had caseloads of over six hundred people. Given the prevalence of MST experienced by both women and men in the military, it's clear that training and employing more MST

*specialists is an important step toward better supporting veterans, especially women veterans in our communities.*

*The third question was: **How can communities better support women veterans and their mental health recovery? What steps can organizations like NAMI or larger institutions like the VA take to better advocate for women veterans and their mental health?** The panelists offered a list of suggestions for where we could start. This is by no means an exhaustive list but just some good first steps to better supporting women veterans:*

- *LISTEN to them; take the time to hear what their needs are.*
- *Provide more peer support for veterans.*
- *Advocate for more MST specialists.*
- *Treatment versatility: incorporating support groups, art groups and activities, meditation, acupuncture, etc.*
- *Group support opportunities are crucial so people don't have the opportunity to isolate.*
- *Recognize the role of children, partners and family members in the reintegration process.*
- *Community partners and organizations play a huge role in providing programs that supplement VA services. These programs outside of the VA have a large impact.*

**Interested in any of the resources that came up during the discussion? Below are a few that were covered:**

**[Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program](#)**

**[Returning Veterans Project](#)**

**[FAST Program](#)**

**[Veterans & Families Resource Center of Oregon](#)**

**[NAMI Homefront](#)**