

Past Panel: LGBTQ+ Veterans and Mental Health

Reflections: *On June 27th, NAMI Multnomah held the second Evening with the Experts event of our summer panel series. The topic was on LGBTQ+ Veterans and Mental Health. We had a large group of five panelists, all of them being veterans from varying eras and backgrounds. Early on in the discussion, it was apparent that the LGBTQ+ label encompasses many different identities and therefore differing experiences by folks who identify as such. The panelists had a range of experiences with the military as well as their care at the VA once they were discharged. For example, cisgender folks on the panel had less negative experiences getting care at the VA than a trans woman on the panel did. These differences in treatment go beyond healthcare though and are often experienced in greater society.*

Some of the panelists expressed a disconnect between the veteran identity and the LGBTQ+ identity. They explained how they often feel unaccepted due to the stigma around being LGBTQ+ in the veteran community. Since these two identities don't tend to mix well, panelists are forced to walk a strange line in-between or cover up one of their identities in order to be accepted by the other. Specifically, during active duty, it can be particularly dangerous to be open about your identity. Some panelists described discrimination, harassment and threats of violence perpetrated by military folks they were on active duty with.

Another major part of the discussion was a call for more supportive peer services and healthcare services for LGBTQ+ identifying veterans. One panelist emphasized the need for more peer support opportunities for veterans through the VA so veterans who are struggling can work with someone who actually knows what they are going through. Another panelist emphasized the need for better access to transgender medical services so trans veterans don't have to worry about not getting the medical care they deserve. Several panelists called for counseling and support services to be expanded more to spouses and partners of veterans too. Supporting any veteran always includes their partner and family so services catered to them would be helpful.

