Office of Health Equity

Veterans Health Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs

ADDRESSING SOCIAL NEEDS IN WOMEN'S HEALTHCARE SETTINGS

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INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves an increasingly diverse Veteran population. Equitable access to high-quality care for all Veterans is a major tenet of the VA healthcare mission. The Office of Health Equity champions eliminating health disparities and achieving health equity for all Veterans.

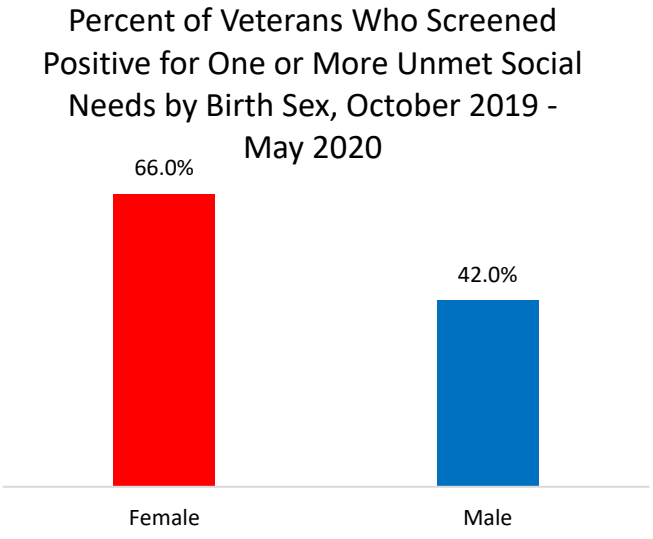
Today, there are more than 2 million women Veterans in the U.S. Women are the fastest growing population of Veterans. VHA has implemented a Women Veterans Program Manager at every VA Medical Center (VAMC) to address their unique needs and can assist in coordinating needed care. VHA is also working to understand better and address women Veterans' health-related social needs.

SOCIAL NEEDS

The Assessing Circumstances and Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) initiative aims to identify social risks and address social needs among Veterans systematically. The ACORN screener is comprised of Veteran-tailored items across a range of social risk domains that ask Veterans about housing instability, food insecurity, utility needs, lack of access to transportation, legal needs, feelings of social isolation and loneliness, employment needs, interest in educational information for Veterans, employment needs, and digital needs (device and internet access and digital health literacy).

REDUCING DISPARITIES

An initial pilot of ACORN found that female Veterans were more likely than male Veterans to screen positive for at least one unmet social need. These findings led VHA staff at the Robert J. Dole VAMC to conduct a quality improvement initiative to implement ACORN in a Women's Health Clinic.



Russell LE*, Cohen AJ*, Chrzas S, Halladay CW, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Moy E, Lehmann LS. Implementing a Social Needs Screening and Referral Program Among Veterans: Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN). *J GEN INTERN MED* (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-023-08181-9
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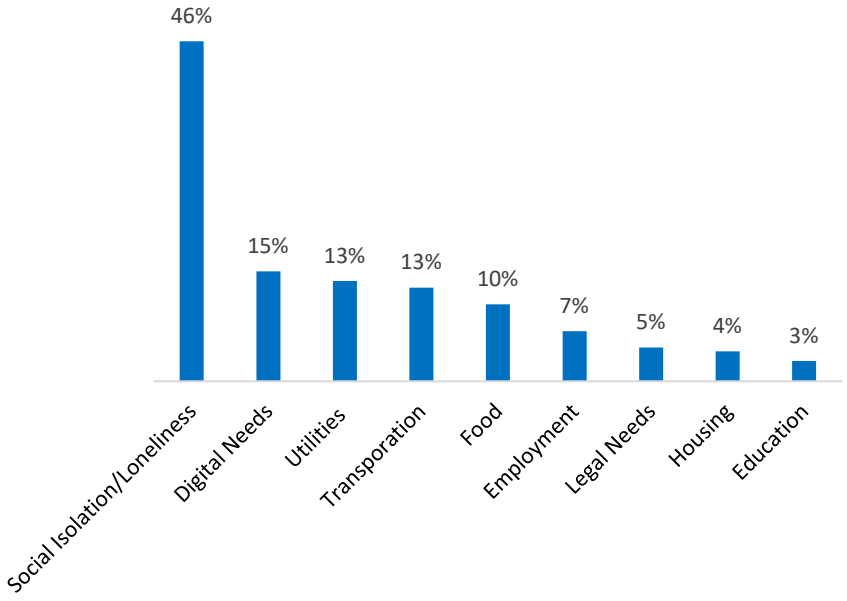
SCREENING WOMEN VETERANS FOR SOCIAL NEEDS

The Robert J. Dole Veterans Affairs VAMC, located in Wichita, Kansas, serves approximately 32,000 Veterans each year from Wichita, Dodge City, Hays, Hutchinson, Parson, and Salina. In March 2023, the Women's Health Clinic at this VA Medical Center began using ACORN to screen its women Veteran patients. They implemented ACORN to develop a greater understanding of the unmet social needs impacting women Veterans.

Women Veteran Clinical Navigators, who are registered nurses, use ACORN during routine appointments to discuss screening for breast cancer, cervical cancer, osteoporosis, reproductive screening (including maternity calls), and menopause. Additionally, the Maternity Care Coordinator in the clinic used ACORN to identify unmet social needs among pregnant and post-partum Veterans.

Between March 1, 2023 and February 15, 2024, 224 women Veterans were screened, with 143 (64%) reporting one or more unmet social needs. The most commonly reported social needs are social isolation/loneliness (46%), digital needs (15%), and not being able to have utilities (13%). In Veterans who identified an unmet social need, 66% were provided resources/referrals, 24% reported already receiving services/assistance, and 11% declined assistance.

Social Need Burden Among Women Veterans Screened with ACORN at the Robert J. Dole, VA Medical Center, March 2023 - February 2024



From the Assessing Circumstances and Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Dashboard, Office of Health Equity. Accessed on 02.15.2024

When Veterans identify unmet social needs, Clinical Navigators and the Maternity Care Coordinator offer relevant lists of resources or facilitate warm hand-offs or referrals to other clinical services, such as a social worker, mental health provider, or dietitian.

For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit: https://www.va.gov/healthequity/

Published March 2024