



MILITARY & VETERANS SERVICES

# CALL TO ACTION



Support Community Efforts to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life for Women Veterans

## ABOUT EASTER SEALS

Easter Seals is a leading non-profit organization that assists veterans, military families, and others to reach their potential and succeed in their communities by providing and connecting them to local services and supports. Founded in 1919, Easter Seals began serving veterans after World War II to help address the unmet needs of service members returning home with service-connected disabilities. Through our national network of 73 community-based affiliates and Easter Seals Dixon Center Military & Veterans Services, Easter Seals continues to fill the gap between the services veterans need and the services currently available through government or other entities.

## ABOUT THE *CALL TO ACTION*

Women veterans have honorably served our nation in all branches and aspects of the U.S. military. Many have not known a time when our country has not been at war, preparing for war, or coming home from war. When they exit the military they transition into communities. Those communities and their community-based organizations play key roles in addressing the immediate transition and ongoing reintegration needs of women veterans. Easter Seals developed this *Call to Action* white paper to educate policymakers and others about the need to expand community-based solutions to meet the reintegration challenges women veterans face.



# Executive Overview

Female veterans are strong and resilient and, like their male veteran counterparts, most thrive during reintegration and enjoy success after military service. Recent studies find, however, that far too many women veterans still struggle during transition, which can lead to long-term challenges of unemployment, homelessness, poor health and broken families.

Studies on women veterans also offer policy and program prescriptions for improved transition success through increased access to timely and effective care, services and supports. Immediate action is needed to close the service and benefit gap that exists for women veterans in areas such as child care, mental health and counseling, gender-specific health care, employment and housing.

In addition, a recurring recommendation among many studies is to **invest in community solutions where local organizations coordinate and connect women veterans to available reintegration services and supports.**

This *Call to Action: Support Community Efforts to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life for Women Veterans* white paper fully examines the community solution recommendations aimed at promoting transition to civilian life success for women veterans. The white paper will:

- Highlight the unique challenges women veterans experience during transition;
- Review the community solution recommendations within recent studies;
- Analyze core elements of effective community-based reintegration programs;
- Showcase a community best-practice model in action, including its impact in communities and across a national network; and
- Identify actions state and federal policymakers can take to promote community engagement and foster collaboration among local organizations to assist more effectively women veterans during reintegration.

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# Transition Challenges Women Veterans Face

**W**omen have supported and served in the United States military since the formation of our country.<sup>1</sup> Their service and contributions to our nation have expanded through the years to where women now represent approximately 20 percent of new enlisted recruits.<sup>2</sup> Women also make up one of the fastest growing veteran segments, soon to reach about one-fifth of the total veteran population.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 200,000 women will transition into civilian life over the next several years. The transition to civilian life varies for each female veteran just as it does for male veterans. Many women veterans reintegrate into civilian life with ease while others experience challenges during the initial transition or several months or years later.

Recent reports and studies have chronicled current challenges, which include finding and maintaining employment and housing, and maintaining health and family wellness.

**“Transitions can be complex for women because not only are they processing what they experienced while deployed to a combat theater, they must also process societal assumptions that women are not warriors.”**

*Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home study, 2014*

Source: *Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home, Disabled American Veterans, 2014*, <http://www.dav.org/wp-content/uploads/women-veterans-study.pdf>

## Employment

Nearly 84 percent of female veterans are of working age (17-64 years) compared to 55% of male veterans.<sup>4</sup> Women who are veterans and are employed full-time working year-round do better financially than full-time non-veteran women, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Some groups of women veterans, however, continue to experience “stubbornly high” unemployment rates, partly due to difficulty in translating their military experience into civilian employment.<sup>5</sup> Joblessness can lead to a host of other problems, including poverty. Nearly two in ten women veterans age 17 to 24 years old live in poverty.<sup>6</sup> Overall, about 10% of all women veterans are in poverty. Female veterans view their military experience differently than male veterans. Female veterans feel their military experience is “not relevant” to civilian careers or did not result in key skills development.<sup>7</sup>

## Housing

Women veterans are the fastest growing segment of the homeless veteran population.<sup>8</sup> The number of homeless women veterans tripled from an estimated 1,380 in FY 2006 to 4,456 in FY 2013, while overall veteran homelessness dropped significantly.<sup>9</sup> Women who are veterans are two to four times more likely to be homeless than women who are not veterans and younger women veterans are at greater risk of homelessness than older women veterans.<sup>10</sup> Unemployment is the biggest risk factor for homelessness among women veterans.<sup>11</sup> Lack of accessible and affordable childcare ranks as the highest unmet need for homeless women veterans who are looking for work.<sup>12</sup> Other contributing factors to the increasing rate of homelessness among women veterans include military sexual trauma, post-traumatic stress, low

levels of social support, and challenges associated with being a single mother.<sup>13</sup> Lack of access to appropriate resources, such as housing, continues to be a major barrier for women veterans. More than 60% of housing programs that serve homeless women veterans do not house children and the ones that do have restrictions on the ages or numbers of children, which complicates the path to permanent housing for homeless female veterans with children.<sup>14</sup>

### Health & Family Wellness

Military service-connected experiences and transition challenges pose health and family threats to some women veterans. More than half of the women who served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan experience unprecedented levels of combat exposure and return with targeted health care needs, such as chronic musculoskeletal pain, respiratory conditions, metabolic disorders and mental health conditions including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and substance-abuse.<sup>15</sup> Women veterans commit suicide at rates six times higher than other women.<sup>16</sup> Female veterans are at higher risk for depression than male veterans while young female veterans (i.e., under 35 years old) are significantly less likely to use mental health services than their male counterparts.<sup>17</sup> Women veterans also experience greater rates of disrupted marriages. More than two in ten (23%) women who are veterans are divorced compared to just over one in ten (13%) of women who are not veterans. Divorce is seven times more common for young women veterans (17 to 24 years old) than for their non-veteran counterparts. In addition, children under the age of 18 are more likely to be involved when divorce occurs among women veterans.<sup>18</sup> Women veterans focus more than male veterans on disruption of interpersonal relationships and feel less social support once they return home.<sup>19</sup> Female veterans with combat exposures are 1.78 times more likely to develop eating disorders and 2.35 times more likely to lose an extreme amount of weight compared to male veterans with combat exposures.<sup>20</sup>

- **Meet Erin:** Erin was excited about her new chapter in life. After proudly serving her country in the U.S. Air Force for seven and a half years, Erin was ready to put her impressive work experience in the military to use in the civilian workforce. Her military career included everything from serving as an executive assistant to commanding intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance mission operations. Just prior to leaving the military, she completed the mandatory job preparation and transition courses and developed a job search plan for finding a civilian position. But the transition assistance program classes left her unprepared for what came next: nothing. She applied for several jobs that matched her interests, skills and military experience, but nothing happened. No calls. No referrals. No interviews. No offers. Nothing. The rejection drained her emotionally and, soon thereafter, financially. Her plan for transition success—which began with finding a job—quickly unraveled. As her desperation increased, Erin misspent her time by frantically applying for any available job instead of pinpointing positions that matched her skills and experience. Erin temporarily lost two of the most valuable things she developed in the military: focus and self-confidence. Finding a connection into her community helped Erin get her transition back on track and she is now thriving in that community. (See page 8 for more on Erin.)



**“America’s veterans are not receiving the care and services they need to transition successfully from military to civilian life. Although many excel out of uniform, some veterans continue to face significant service-related challenges.”**

*Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities report, 2013*

Source: *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities*, Center for a New American Security, 2012, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_WellAfterService\\_BerglassHarrell.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_WellAfterService_BerglassHarrell.pdf)

- Meet Shaneece:** Shaneece joined the U.S. Army in 2011 as a young adult with a strong desire to serve her nation. She completed boot camp and trained as a generator mechanic. "I don't know how I became a mechanic. But it was something different and I was willing to learn." Shaneece took on the task and excelled in her new vocational specialty. While on the job, Shaneece was harassed regularly by fellow soldiers, including sexual advancements and assaults. She felt trapped. The stress was overwhelming. "I cried every single day for three straight months. I would have panic attacks. Every time I tried eating it would come right back up." Six months later, she left the military and new challenges started at once. Her plan to temporarily move back with her parents in New York City fell through due to complications at home. With no other options, Shaneece resorted to sleeping in her car at night and spending her days in the city looking for work. With her hope dropping faster than the overnight winter temperature, Shaneece made a key connection in her community: a connection that changed her life. (See page 9 for more on Shaneece.)



- Meet Mary:** Mary faced reintegration challenges almost immediately after her U.S. Army National Guard unit returned from Iraq. The single mother of two struggled to adjust to her new reality. Her father died just prior to her deployment and she was managing pain from a lumbar (lower back) injury that she suffered while serving in Iraq. She misused prescription medicine she took for the back pain, which led to missed drill weekends with her Guard unit. In addition, the salary she earned from the full-time job she took after returning from Iraq wasn't enough to cover her expenses. She felt detached, but would soon learn she was not alone. Her community noticed and responded with help and assistance. (See page 9 for more on Mary.)



**"Today, women are rising through our ranks and expanding their influence at an ever increasing rate, serving magnificently all over the world in all sorts of ways."**

*Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman,  
Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 6, 2010*

*Source: Mullen: Military Lags in Support of Women Warriors, U.S. Department of Defense News, 2010,  
<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=61559>*

# The Role of Communities in Successful Transitions

**W**omen fight for their communities, neighbors and families when they enlist and serve in the United States military. As veterans, they return home to their communities, neighbors, and families. Women veterans live in communities across 3,100 counties and in all 50 states.<sup>21</sup> How a community welcomes, connects with, and responds to service members leaving the military can

mean the difference between a transition success story and one of struggle and crisis. Recent studies on veteran reintegration and transition challenges for women who have left military service recognize the role of communities and offer recommendations (see sidebar) for expanding community-based reintegration solutions for veterans and their families.

## Past Study Recommendations to Expand Community-based Reintegration Solutions:

**“VA should build upon the local community partnerships and outreach established for other programs, such as homeless veterans, to establish support networks for women veterans in accessing health care, employment, financial counseling, and housing.”**

*Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home study, 2014<sup>22</sup>*

**“In order to finally address the veteran reintegration challenge, federal agencies must restrategize, refocus, and recalibrate their programs, engaging public and private partners to deliver at the local level what large bureaucracies in Washington cannot, and embrace a comprehensive understanding of veteran wellness as their guiding goal.”**

*Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities report, 2012<sup>23</sup>*

**“Expand on established community-based public-private partnerships and encourage organizations to seek out public-private partnerships to meet their goals.”**

*RAND study, 2015<sup>24</sup>*

**“VA should continue to work with community partners to meet the needs of homeless veterans and those at risk of homelessness and continue its outreach efforts to help homeless veterans gain access to VA programs.”**

*The Independent Budget, 2015<sup>25</sup>*

**“DoD, VA, and local communities should work together to establish peer support networks for women veterans to ease transition, isolation and assist with readjustment problems.”**

*Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities report, 2012<sup>26</sup>*

## Veteran Reintegration Best Practice:

So what works best in helping veterans, including women veterans, excel during their transition into civilian life? Studies conclude that the point of greatest transition impact for veterans occurs locally, through a coordinated network of veteran services and supports. Effective community solutions for veteran reintegration vary by location to meet the unique needs of veterans. The *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* report analyzed successful local programs for veteran reintegration and identified common core elements.<sup>27</sup>

The most effective community-based veteran reintegration programs, according to the *Well After Service* report, “are those that base operations at a credible, local nonprofit organization that coordinates and deploys both public and private resources and stakeholders to address the needs and recognize the skills of service members, veterans, and their families.”

Successful veteran reintegration programs are **well informed** about veteran needs and community resources, **connect** to military families; **strategize** through quantitative planning and analysis, **collaborate**

“Successful and strategic collaborations leverage resources, mitigate unnecessary duplication of services, and strengthen the overall “culture of support” within a given community by creating a network of opportunities by which to reach and serve veterans and encourage the volunteerism of the public.”

*Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities report, 2013*

Source: *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities*, Center for a New American Security, 2012, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_WellAfterService\\_BerglassHarrell.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_WellAfterService_BerglassHarrell.pdf)

within the community to leverage resources, use individualized **case management**, and regularly **evaluate** outcomes and program effectiveness.

Finally, successful reintegration programs focus on overall **veteran wellness**, both physical and psychological, and recognize the “dynamic and multidimensional quality” of each veteran, which is informed by military experiences and civilian transition.<sup>28</sup>

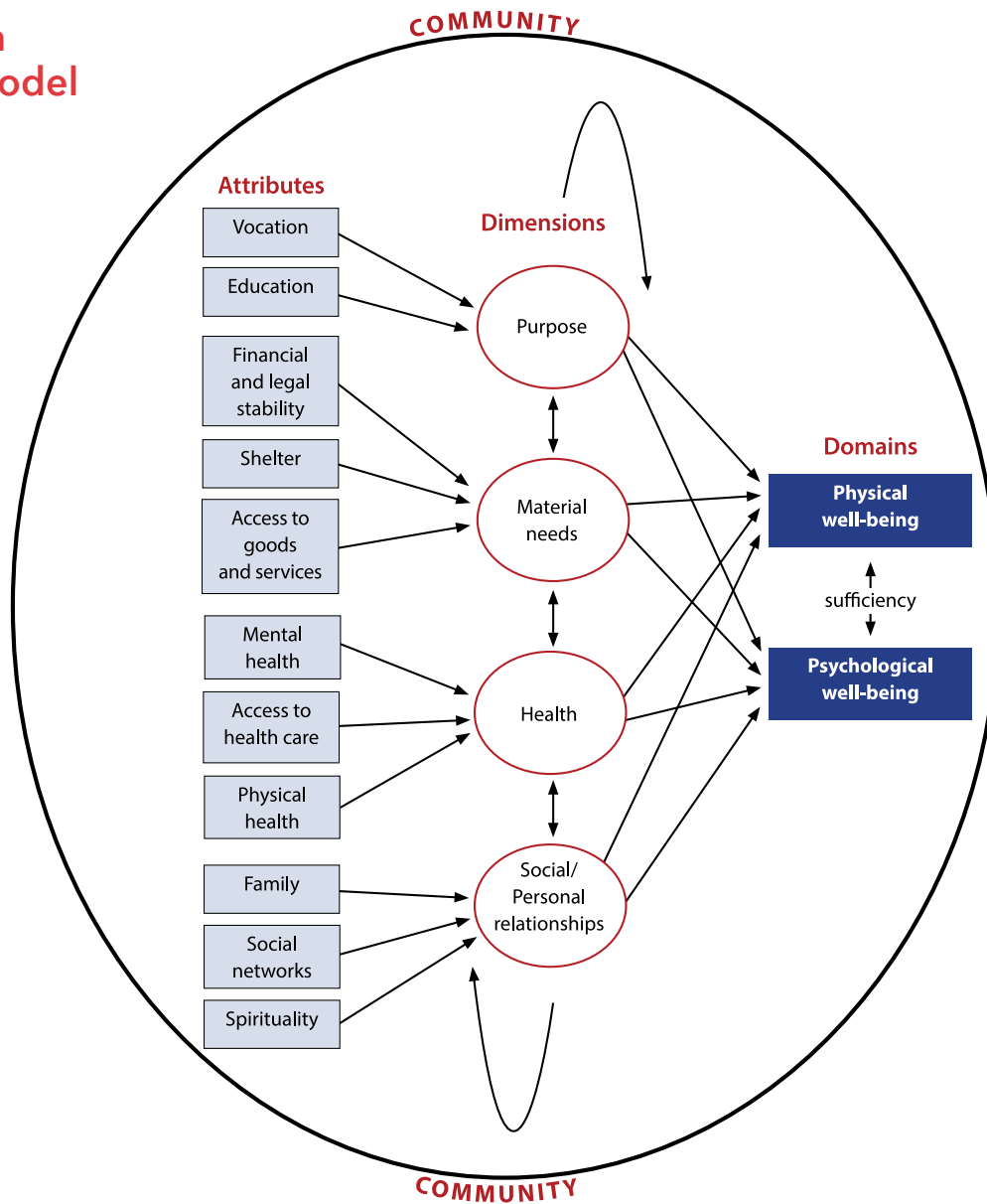
## Successful Veteran Reintegration Program Core Elements

- **Are Well Informed:** Identify needs, map existing resources, identify gaps, and understand military;
- **Connect:** Reach out to veterans and military families to identify them and earn their trust;
- **Strategize:** Build an action plan based on data and information;
- **Collaborate:** Create strategic partnerships to leverage resources, mitigate unnecessary duplication, and strengthen support;
- **Use a Case Management Approach:** Address unique needs of each veteran through personal-touch programming and connection to services; and
- **Evaluate:** Assess the efficacy of programming and partnerships.

Source: *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities Report*, Center for a New American Security, 2012<sup>29</sup>



## The Veteran Wellness Model



“Our research found that the most effective community-based reintegration models (hereafter referred to as “community models,” or just “models”) for delivering appropriate care and services for veterans at the local level are those that base operations at a credible, local nonprofit organization that coordinates and deploys both public and private resources and stakeholders to address the needs and recognize the skills of service members, veterans and their families.”

*Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities, 2013*

Source: *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities*, Center for a New American Security, 2012, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_WellAfterService\\_BerglassHarrell.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_WellAfterService_BerglassHarrell.pdf)

Erin, Shaneece and Mary are just a few of the women veterans who benefited during their transition from established community solutions.

## Erin



Erin, the experienced Air Force veteran who struggled to find civilian employment, made a community connection to Easter Seals. Nationwide, Easter Seals specializes in helping jobseekers with employment barriers find jobs. Easter Seals Serving DC | MD | VA highlighted its employment expertise and assistance for veterans and military spouses in a veterans' discussion on LinkedIn. Knowing the professional networking site was a job search best practice tool, Erin regularly used LinkedIn. She pursued previous LinkedIn posts and offers of assistance, but none panned out. She wondered, would this time be any different? The final words of the Air Force Airman's creed are "I will never falter, and I will not fail." With those words in mind, Erin pursued the lead, which turned into the community connection she needed to put her on a path to transition success.

An Easter Seals employment specialist quickly followed up and connected her to a skilled career coach, who worked with Erin to learn about her unique background, military qualifications, and employment goal. The Easter Seals career coach recognized that Erin was seeking jobs that didn't match her skill set. With the help of the career coach, Erin refocused her employment search on careers that emphasized her strengths and interests. Easter Seals helped Erin develop a strong foundation for success, including writing sample assistance, salary negotiation tips, resume development, mock interviews, and networking presentation practice sessions. Erin regained confidence in her abilities, something she lost during her unsuccessful job search. "I felt like I had my personal career coach," Erin said. "She was accessible and provided motivation. She was always able to provide advice on any topic. If she didn't know the answer, she found someone who did." A few months after connecting with Easter Seals, Erin interviewed for and secured a great position with a county police department. Erin is applying her intelligence background to her current job as a criminal analyst where she analyzes police reports, looks for crime patterns, and develops crime bulletins.



**"Holistic, evidence-based programs for women's health, mental health, and rehabilitation programs must be expanded to address the full continuum of care needed by all veterans, including women veterans."**

*The Independent Budget, Veterans Agenda for the 114th Congress, 2015*

*Source: The Independent Budget: Veterans Agenda for the 114th Congress, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, & Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., 2015, [http://www.independentbudget.org/2016/IB\\_FY16.pdf](http://www.independentbudget.org/2016/IB_FY16.pdf)*

## Shaneece



After many nights living out of her car, Shaneece visited Easter Seals in New York City. She heard the community-based organization had helped other homeless veterans. She was tired of just surviving, she wanted to be thriving

again. "I felt so hopeless. You feel like you have no more support. I was working hard but still coming up short." Shaneece was "very reserved. Apprehensive. Scared. Sad." But her case manager also saw talent, enthusiasm and potential in Shaneece. She just needed a little assistance during transition to help remove the barriers to her success.

Easter Seals Military and Veterans Services employ a team approach to helping individuals achieve transition goals. An Easter Seals case manager immediately went to work to find Shaneece temporary shelter for the night. At the same time, an Easter Seals social worker helped her apply for and receive the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs benefits she earned during her military service. And an Easter Seals employment specialist worked with Shaneece to update her resume, which included translating her military experiences into civilian language. Shaneece received a call-back for an interview for a job that she eventually won. She works full-time as a program support assistant for a VA center in Brooklyn where she helps other veterans during their reintegration. "I feel like I'm a different person. I'm a more improved individual," Shaneece said. "I see myself going places. I'm grateful for the help Easter Seals has given me."

## Mary



While Mary felt disconnected within her community after her deployment to Iraq, her community was always there for her and it responded with the assistance she needed to excel. Mary was referred to Easter Seals New Hampshire, which assists

National Guard soldiers and their families before, during, and after deployments. Initially, Mary was not interested in services, but she welcomed visits to her home by an Easter Seals care coordinator. The early home visits were brief. Mary rarely spoke or even made eye contact. But after weeks of consistent visits, Mary learned to trust the care coordinator. She shared more about her deployment, her grief over her father's death, and her future after her upcoming military discharge. Mary saw a brighter future for herself and her children but didn't know where or how to start. Her care coordinator supported her in identifying and using short- and long-term strategies to meet her short- and long-term objectives. "She was determined to meet her objectives and be here for her kids," her care coordinator said.

Mary was two semesters away from finishing her undergraduate degree when her Guard unit was ordered to Iraq. She wanted to complete college, but her plan hit a bump when an outstanding college bill prevented her from re-enrolling. As part of Easter Seals' team approach, Mary's care coordinator discussed this barrier with the team, which agreed that removing this college reentry barrier was key to full community reintegration. Easter Seals secured locally-raised emergency financial assistance to settle the bill. Mary was also connected to employment resources for help in finding a job and to social service agencies for assistance with her rent, food, and heat. When her car did not pass inspection, the care coordination program partnered with city welfare and paid for repairs. These community connections resulted in Mary securing a job and going back to college to finish her final courses. The attentive and loving mother wants to use her degree to help other veterans—her way of giving back to the community that welcomed and responded to her transition needs. Mary and her family are fully integrated in their community, where they enjoy the support and fellowship of her friends, church and neighbors.

# Bridging the Gap to Meet Transition Needs of Women Veterans

The “Sea of Goodwill” white paper—published by the Joint Chiefs of Staff Office of Warrior and Family Support—challenged policymakers and others to bridge the gap between the services available and the services veterans need during their reintegration into civilian life. New programs and services have been added to increase access to child care, mental health, employment, housing and other key health and wellness supports.

These programs and future services can greatly benefit veterans, including women veterans and their families.

Veterans continue, however, to lack knowledge of or have a difficult time accessing these critical supports when they need them most. Policymakers and others have taken a series of steps to expand community reintegration supports and to help coordinate and connect veterans to available federal, state and local resources.

## Executive Action or Agency Direction

- **Presidential Executive Action on Community**

**Solutions:** Multiple presidential orders have focused on expanding community partnerships to serve America’s veterans. In 2004, President George W. Bush issued an executive order establishing the Center for Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to better meet the social and community needs of veterans and others through partnerships with faith-based and other community organizations.<sup>30</sup> The VA Center develops partnerships with and expands participation of community organizations in VA programs.<sup>31</sup> In 2012, President Barack Obama issued an executive order to establish pilot projects to improve access to mental health services for veterans through partnerships with community organizations and service providers.<sup>32</sup>



**“You all are part of a long line of women who have broken barriers, ... defied expectations and served this country with unparalleled courage and determination.”**

*First Lady Michelle Obama, 2013*

Source: *First Lady Recognizes Women Veterans, Addresses Unemployment*, U.S. Department of Defense News, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=119573>

- **VA Strategic Goals for Promoting Community**

**Solutions:** Enhancing and developing trusted partnerships is one of three strategic goals identified in the Department of Veterans Affairs' long-term (FY 2014-2020) strategic plan.<sup>33</sup> In the VA plan—which is based on rigorous analysis of long-term trends affecting veterans, the VA noted that “no single office, organization, or agency owns the expertise and resources to deliver all of the benefits, services, and resources necessary to meet the needs and expectations of every veteran.” The VA identified a series of objectives and strategies for achieving the collaboration goal, including pursuing “opportunities for partnering with organizations that can best provide what we cannot or should not” and leveraging “productive partnerships to augment VA care, services, and benefits to better serve veteran community members.”

## Congressional Legislation and Investments

- **Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program**

**(HVRP):** Congress created HVRP in 1987 to fund community organizations to help veterans experiencing homelessness to obtain meaningful employment and address their complex reintegration challenges.<sup>34</sup> The U.S. Department of Labor program uses a case management approach and relies on critical community linkages for non-employment support services (similar to the approach recommended in *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities*).<sup>35</sup> The program also funds Homeless Female Veterans and Veterans with Families grants targeted at female veterans experiencing homelessness and veterans with families experiencing homelessness, which are often headed by female veterans.<sup>36</sup>

- **Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program:**

In an effort to reduce veteran homelessness, Congress established SSVF at the Department of Veterans Affairs to tackle the problem at the community level using a holistic, care coordination model. Community organizations are funded to rapidly re-house veterans and their families who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. While stable housing is the ultimate goal, SSVF recognizes the underlying challenges and requires community organization grantees to assist eligible veteran families in obtaining VA benefits and other services to promote overall wellness. These supportive services can include health care, financial planning, transportation, child care, legal services and housing counseling.<sup>37</sup>

- **Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot (RVCP):**

Congress authorized the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot at the Department of Veterans Affairs to coordinate services for rural veterans and their families as they transition from military to civilian life.<sup>38</sup> The RVCP legislation included best practice elements identified in the *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* report, including knowing veteran needs, connecting to veteran families, identifying and coordinating community resources, and evaluating program outcomes and effectiveness. The VA initiated the two-year pilot in 2014 with funding to five community organizations or state entities.<sup>39</sup>

## Other Significant Action

- **State and Local Investments in Veteran Reintegration:**

A number of governors and state legislatures have approved legislation or taken executive action to increase access to and coordination of reintegration services for veterans. In **Colorado**, the state legislature created a new grant program for community organizations and others to provide veterans with reintegration and support

services such as job training, family counseling, mental health, and housing services. In **Nevada**, the governor created a directory program to provide a single location for veterans to access and understand available services, benefits, and resources. In **Kentucky**, the legislature created a program to ease the transition into civilian life for wounded or disabled veterans by connecting them to existing benefits and programs available in the community.<sup>40</sup> City and county leaders have invested in community-based veteran reintegration solutions. The **King County** (Seattle) government approved a tax levy to expand veteran reintegration services and to develop a strategic plan that included a resource and program coordination mechanism. At the city level, the **Phoenix** City Council allocated money from its budget to help address the homeless problem in its city limits by building housing capacity.<sup>41</sup>

- **Private Investments in Community Reintegration:**

Numerous philanthropic and family foundations as well as individual donors are assisting veterans by funding community-based reintegration solutions. Major veteran reintegration community planning activities in Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Cloud, Minnesota, were supported by **Newman's Own**

**Foundation** to identify veteran needs, map existing community resources, and develop a strategic collaboration plan to serve local veterans. In Ohio, major foundations (**The Farmer Family Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and The Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./US Bank Foundation**) collaborated to develop Operation Vets THRIVE, a veteran reintegration initiative based in Cincinnati that is aimed at fostering community supports, engaging employment initiatives and establishing an information and referral system to support veterans and military families in the tri-state region. **The Bob and Dolores Hope Charitable Foundation** invested in a program in Southern California to assist transitioning service members and veterans through personalized employment services, small business development, and outreach with employers looking to hire qualified veterans. And an **anonymous donor** generously funded women veterans' reintegration efforts across the country, including a holistic, care coordination model in New Hampshire, a personalized employment and support services initiative in the Washington, D.C. region, and a nationwide program aimed at meeting urgent, financial needs of women veterans.



**“There’s a sea of goodwill out there from people willing to help. The challenge is in coordinating between them and us.”**

*Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman,  
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010*

Source: Admiral, Mrs. Mullen Speak Out on Veterans' Challenges, U.S. Air Force News, 2010, <http://www.af.mil/News/ArticleDisplay/tabid/223/Article/115075/admiral-mrs-mullen-speak-out-on-veterans-challenges.aspx>

# The Case to Expand Local Reintegration Services for Women Veterans

**D**espite the Sea of Goodwill and recent actions by leaders, funders and organizations, significant gaps in transition services still exist for women veterans. The growing number of women veterans has placed new demands on the VA, the federal agency primarily responsible for caring for women veterans.<sup>42</sup>

Leading veteran service organizations released their Independent Budget of policy recommendations for meeting current needs and projected trends of America's veterans. For women veterans, the Independent Budget authors found that "despite a government that provides an array of benefits to assist veterans with transition and readjustment following military service, serious gaps are evident for women in every aspect of existing federal programs. These gaps impede their successful transitions to civilian life." Reintegration challenges women veterans face "should receive attention from local communities and the federal government at a level that is at least comparable to that received by men," according to these veteran groups.<sup>43</sup>

Congress and the VA have implemented and invested in new programs and initiatives to expand access, increase gender-specific programs and specialists, and improve quality of care for women veterans. These are important foundational steps, but more can and must be done, especially at the community level.

**With another 200,000 women expected to leave the military over the next four to five years to join the current population of more than two million women veterans, the time to act is now.**<sup>44</sup>

The geographic diversity of women veterans complicates reintegration given that federal agencies have insufficient reach into the communities which veterans come and to which they return.<sup>45</sup> The *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* report recommended a comprehensive reintegration strategy focused on veteran wellness and that leverages the reach and resources of local organizations. Community-based organizations can play a key role in the reintegration needs and ultimate success of women veterans given their geographic reach.<sup>46</sup> Researchers also noted that "public-private partnerships offer a potential opportunity to improve the standard of current care" for women veterans and their families.<sup>47</sup>

The gap in reintegration services for women veterans exists not because we do not have a solution. It exists in part because the recommended community-based care coordination solution that connects women veterans to VA benefits and local supports is not readily available in all parts of the country.

# Veteran Reintegration Model in Action

The point of greatest impact on women veterans' transition to civilian life occurs at the local level, where there are boots-on-the-ground to meet their individual needs and to connect them to available local resources and supports. Many communities and organizations, like Easter Seals, have stepped up to help meet those needs by establishing, coordinating and/or expanding community-based reintegration services that assist veterans and their families.

Easter Seals assists veterans and military families to succeed in their communities by providing or connecting them to reintegration supports. Easter Seals began serving veterans following World War II to address gaps in service to veterans returning home with service-connected disabilities. Today, our nation's veterans face similar challenges and once again Easter Seals is there, this time by mobilizing its national network of community-based affiliates and the Easter Seals Dixon Center Military & Veterans Services, which forges reintegration solutions through community collaboration and support networks.

*Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* recommended an expansion of veteran reintegration programs that are based in the community, are focused on veteran wellness and that leverage and coordinate available services.<sup>48</sup> Easter Seals has built upon the core elements identified in *Well After Service* model to address unmet needs and emerging challenges of military and veteran families. The Easter Seals approach recognizes that ongoing access to care coordination supports and direct services increases reintegration success—with emphasis on crisis prevention before a situation requires crisis intervention.

## Core Components of Easter Seals Approach

**Veteran-Centered Approach:** Recognizing the unique and evolving needs of each veteran, Easter Seals meets one-on-one to identify reintegration needs and, together, develop an individualized plan for transition success that includes short-term and long-term objectives and goals. Easter Seals veteran-centered approach starts with respect, honesty, and understanding, which leads to trust: the foundation of successful outcomes.

The success behind Mary, the Army National Guard veteran who struggled following her deployment, began with a series of seemingly unproductive home visits. Instead of rushing the process, the care coordinator responded to Mary's needs and provided the space and time Mary needed to feel comfortable telling her story and seeking services. A veteran-centered approach leads to greater transition success as the plan and supports are tailored to the individual needs of each veteran.

**Care Coordination:** The *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* report found many veteran initiatives focused exclusively on a single transition challenge (e.g., housing, employment) rather than examining the challenges of reintegration as a whole. Easter Seals develops a strategy for veteran reintegration that focuses on all veteran needs rather than addressing a specific challenge in isolation. The Easter Seals team approach to veteran reintegration leverages the expertise and connections of highly-trained and specialized care coordinators.



An Easter Seals care coordinator recognized that Shaneece, the young Army veteran from New York, faced multiple barriers instead of viewing her only through the lens of being homeless. Using the holistic care coordination approach, an Easter Seals team of specialists helped put Shaneece on a path to success. The case manager helped to find emergency shelter and, later, permanent housing. The employment specialist developed an employment plan with Shaneece and assisted her in finding a job. The social worker helped Shaneece apply for the VA benefits she had earned and connected her to supportive services in the community.

**Community Connection:** Easter Seals recognizes that a veteran and his or her family are best served when they are connected to and benefit from the full strength and alignment of the community they call home. In addition to providing high-quality direct services and care, Easter Seals military and veteran programs also leverage existing resources and supports in the community.

Easter Seals Crossroads, located in Indianapolis, provides employment and other supports to veterans and homeless veterans in eight counties in central Indiana. Easter Seals Crossroads has developed key partnerships for the areas of housing, health care and family services with more than 40 community organizations, including the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, the Central Indiana Workforce Investment Board, Indiana University Health, Hoosier Veterans Assistance Foundation, Indiana Department of Veteran Affairs, Indiana National Guard, and Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

**Emergency Financial Assistance:** A single unexpected expense or bill can immediately disrupt a veteran's transition to civilian life or block her path to reintegration success. However, emergency financial assistance is often overlooked or unfunded in many veteran reintegration programs.

**"Service members and spouses turn to families first for information, then to faith-based groups, then to friends and neighbors. Family, faith-based groups and neighbors are likely to draw on community-based organizations and the internet for information."**

*RAND study, 2015*

Source: *Public-Private Partnerships for Providing Behavioral Health Care to Veterans and Their Families*, RAND Corporation, 2015, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR900/RR994/RAND\\_RR994.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR900/RR994/RAND_RR994.pdf)



Cynthia, a U.S. Marine veteran, lost her job after nine years as a hospital CT Scan technologist. While out-of-work, she became ill and was in and out of the hospital before she was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. Her Crohn's symptoms improved, but the situation left her financially depleted. Unable to find a local job in her field, Cynthia expanded her job search. A short time later, she was offered a good job at a hospital in a nearby state. With the good news came a flood of worries about her ability to cover moving costs and an apartment deposit before her first paycheck arrived. Easter Seals works aggressively with partners to find or raise local and national funds to help meet, on a case-by-case basis, emergency requests for financial assistance. Through a generous national donor, Easter Seals assisted Cynthia with her moving costs, which put her on the road to success. The assistance helped Cynthia get back on her feet so she could, in her own words, "start my new job with less stress, and worries. I cannot thank you enough."

**"Many women who return from deployments are made stronger by their experiences, but some have difficulty in their transitions and are not fully supported by existing federal programs."**

*The Independent Budget, Veterans Agenda for the 114th Congress*

Source: *The Independent Budget: Veterans Agenda for the 114th Congress, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, & Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., 2015, [http://www.independentbudget.org/2016/IB\\_FY16.pdf](http://www.independentbudget.org/2016/IB_FY16.pdf)*

### **Ongoing Preventative and Follow-Along Supports:**

A key aspect of all Easter Seals programs, including its veteran reintegration efforts, is its follow-along supports to program participants. Easter Seals recognizes that reintegration challenges can surface throughout a veteran's lifetime—starting for some the moment they separate from the military and for others coming several months or years following their service to our nation.

Easter Seals recently helped a female veteran named Cindy who had never fully dealt with the military sexual trauma (MST) she experienced in the U.S. Army decades earlier (1992–1996). When she first exited the military, Cindy applied for benefits through the VA to help address her post-traumatic stress caused by MST. But her claim was denied. Years later, when Cindy's struggle turned to crisis, she was referred to Easter Seals. "She was angry, in despair, and experiencing emotional and financial stress," her care coordinator remembered. After learning about Cindy's MST and the decade-old denied VA claim, the Easter Seals care coordinator helped Cindy appeal the original decision. The appeals process was mired in delays and frustration, but the persistence and ongoing Easter Seals support paid off. The VA heard her appeal and awarded her benefits for her injuries and post-traumatic stress. "I don't feel alone trying to accomplish tough military issues anymore," Cindy said. "Easter Seals has made a huge difference in my life that my family and I feel every day." The program that assisted Cindy has experienced a steady uptick in referrals from veterans with needs that surface a year or more after the initial transition to civilian life. These out-of-cycle cases require more intensive staff time and service dollars than those for recently separated veterans—which reinforces the need to invest in ongoing supports. The Department of Veterans Affairs sees the benefit of an ongoing preventative case management approach in meeting the needs of veterans. "The complex and multiple needs of our veterans have resulted in a growing need for ongoing clinical case management for homeless veterans in community-based settings."<sup>49</sup>

## Easter Seals Military & Veterans Services:

- **Caregiver Services and Supports:** programs and supports for military and veteran caregivers.
- **Community OneSource:** national information and referral service for veterans and military families.
- **Employment Programs and Job Training:** assistance to help veterans and military families achieve and maintain meaningful employment.
- **Health and Wellness:** medical rehabilitation services to help veterans live as independently as possible.
- **Reintegration and Supportive Services:** care coordination services to assist veterans and military families during transition.
- **Respite Services:** specialized time-off options to support veteran caregivers and military families.
- **Women Veterans Financial Assistance Project:** assistance in meeting urgent and financial needs of women veterans.

For more information about Easter Seals and its services visit [www.easterseals.com](http://www.easterseals.com)

## Easter Seals affiliates and service sites



Easter Seals believes veterans and military families can succeed where they live. Our mission is to ensure that is possible in every community.

**MILITARY & VETERANS SERVICES**

# Call to Action: Promoting Successful Community Transitions

Study after study confirms that communities are the cornerstone of transition success for women veterans. For every Erin, Shaneece and Mary who received the specialized help they need, however, there are equal numbers of women veterans who could benefit from a little help during transition but whose communities are not equipped to meet their reintegration needs.

Recognizing the key role of communities, policymakers and others have invested in community-based reintegration solutions that focus holistically on the needs of veterans and that leverage local supports and services. None the less, the transition needs of women veterans continue to go unmet. A major veterans' needs assessment concluded that strategic investments in prevention and early intervention can "stave off the looming bow wave of need" among transitioning veterans.<sup>50</sup>

**Action is needed to rapidly expand community-based reintegration efforts to meet the transition needs of one of the fastest growing and most underserved segments of the veteran population.**

*Call to Action: Support Community Efforts to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life for Women Veterans* urges federal and state policymakers to take the following actions to accelerate best-practice models for serving America's women veterans.

## CALL TO ACTION: Federal Policymakers

1. Authorize and fund federal care coordination programs for women veterans
2. Support existing federal programs that utilize the community care coordination model
3. Dedicate funding within federal programs to meet needs of women veterans

## CALL TO ACTION: State Policymakers

1. Authorize and fund state care coordination programs for women veterans
2. Fund community asset-mapping and service coordination efforts

## Call to Action: Federal Policymakers

### **RECOMMENDATION:** Authorize and fund federal care coordination programs for women veterans

Numerous national studies and reports have touted the importance of coordinated community-based reintegration services for easing the civilian transition for veterans. Effective veteran reintegration programs use a community care coordination model that assesses a veteran's needs as a whole, instead of in isolation, and that leverages community assets and services for long-term reintegration success. This best-practice approach is also good policy. Researchers found "these models also demonstrate efficiencies of scale and how to meet a continuum of service-related needs by building on existing community resources."<sup>51</sup> Key federal programs use a community care coordination model to address long-term unemployment (i.e., HVRP) and homelessness (i.e., SSVF).

Through a new program focused solely on women veterans, the community care coordination model could be used to target the reintegration challenges women veterans face. The women veteran reintegration program could include best-practice elements (e.g., veteran-centered case management, a holistic continuum

of care, collaboration and evaluation) and should be designed to test service delivery efficiencies and promote program scale by awarding single grants to community organizations as well as multi-community or regional grant awards.

**Congress should immediately authorize and fund community care coordination program grants to community organizations to address the initial transition and ongoing reintegration challenges women veterans face.**

### **RECOMMENDATION:** Support existing federal programs that use the community care coordination model

Congress has established and invested in community care coordination models to meet the reintegration needs of veterans and military families through programs that include the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, and the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot (RVCP). These programs are important in addressing the needs of veterans, including women veterans. Through HVRP, the care coordination model was used to effectively serve about 17,000 homeless veterans nationwide in FY 2015 through 154 community-

**"Women veterans have been underserved for far too long by the federal, state, and local programs."**

*The Independent Budget,  
Veterans Agenda for the 114th Congress*

Source: *The Independent Budget: Veterans Agenda for the 114th Congress, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, & Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., 2015,*  
[http://www.independentbudget.org/2016/IB\\_FY16.pdf](http://www.independentbudget.org/2016/IB_FY16.pdf)



based grants, 18 of which that focused exclusively on homeless female veterans and veterans with families.<sup>52</sup> Through SSVF, the care coordination model helped 130,000 veterans, including 11,397 women veterans in FY 2015 to remove reintegration barriers and to secure permanent housing.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these accomplishments, women veterans still face gaps in service. These serious gaps could be closed if federal veteran reintegration programs were expanded or fully funded.<sup>54</sup> For example, Congress annually authorizes \$50 million for the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program yet the program receives less than \$40 million (\$38 million in FY 2015) through the annual appropriations process. In addition, these effective veteran reintegration programs face uncertain futures without long-term authorizations. HVRP has received single-year authorizations instead of the preferred multi-year reauthorization proposed in bipartisan legislation. The Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot is set to expire after the two-year pilot.

**Congress should approve long-term reauthorizations for veteran reintegration programs, such as HVRP, SSVF and RVCP. In addition, Congress should take immediate steps to expand and fully fund these programs that use the community care coordination model.**

## RECOMMENDATION:

### Dedicate funding within federal programs to meet needs of women veterans

Women veterans represent one of the fastest growing segments of the veteran population. Congress has worked to address the needs of women veterans by adding new benefits, programs, and services through legislative provisions included in the Veterans' Benefits Improvements Act, Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act, Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act, and the recent Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act.<sup>55</sup> Yet women veterans still face serious gaps in service, which leads to transition difficulty.<sup>56</sup>

Current federal programs focused on veteran reintegration must prioritize funding and services to address the unique reintegration challenges women veterans face. The Department of Labor targets the needs of homeless veterans by funding separate grants to address the needs of women veterans within Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program funding.

**Congress should expand veteran reintegration programs to reserve a portion of the funding for grants targeted at the unique and growing needs of women veterans.**



**"A community-based solution is required for channeling the tide of this Sea of Goodwill to assist high-and low-risk service members, veterans, and families as they adjust and reintegrate into civilian life."**

*Sea of Goodwill report, 2011*

Source: *Sea of Goodwill: Matching the Donor to the Need*, Office of the Chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff, Warrior and Family Support, 2011, [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/CORE/SOGW\\_donor\\_to\\_need.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/CORE/SOGW_donor_to_need.pdf)

## Call to Action: State Policymakers

### **RECOMMENDATION:** **Authorize and fund state care coordination programs for women veterans**

Veteran reintegration success occurs when the federal government, states, communities, and organizations work together to provide high-quality, coordinated services at the local level. The *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* report concluded that “the current governmental framework for veteran care does not and cannot accommodate the service-related needs of today’s all-volunteer force.” Another study noted that “the federal government cannot provide all the health care, education, employment and housing support needed by women and their families.”<sup>57</sup> State leaders—many whom have served in the military—have recognized their important role in improving veteran reintegration by introducing and passing laws and resolutions focused on mental health, counseling, post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, substance abuse treatment, and veterans courts.<sup>58</sup> The need continues, however, especially for women veterans. State-funded veteran reintegration programs are needed to meet the immediate and evolving needs of women veterans who transition into communities in their states.

**State leaders should immediately approve and fund care coordination program grants to community organizations to address the initial transition and ongoing reintegration challenges women veterans face.**

### **RECOMMENDATION:** **Fund community asset-mapping and service coordination efforts**

Admiral Michael Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said “there’s a sea of goodwill out there from people willing to help. The challenge is in coordinating between them and us.”<sup>59</sup> A recent veterans’ report found that “community support for veterans and their families is plagued by fragmentation. There are a multitude of services available to the nation’s veterans, but the disjointed nature of how they are provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, other federal agencies, and a wide variety of state and community-based organizations makes it difficult for veterans to receive the services they need.”<sup>60</sup> Without coordination and consolidation of resources and service delivery, communities and their military and veterans’ organizations are simply creating another maze of bureaucracy and confusion for women veterans.

Each community must undertake the hard work of identifying all of the community resources, organizations, and programs aimed at helping women veterans with which to create a single community profile and foster linkages and potential consolidation of existing community assets. The *Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home* report recommended that “more community-wide assessments, local coordination, and collaboration are needed to enhance the effectiveness of health care, social supports, and transition services for both men and women.” The community coordination effort must also operationalize a *no wrong door* process so that no matter how or where the female veteran accesses the community she is immediately connected to the resources and programs that can assist in her reintegration.

**State leaders can assist in reducing fragmentation and aligning reintegration resources for women veterans by funding community asset-mapping and service coordination.**

# Conclusion

Women veterans can thrive during their transition into civilian life, especially if the communities they transition into are prepared and coordinated in their response to these veteran's reintegration challenges. An expanding number of communities and organizations are taking steps to coordinate, leverage and implement veteran reintegration resources and services, many as a result of key investments and actions government and private funders have taken.

A serious and immediate gap in reintegration services exists, however, for women veterans—a gap that will grow as thousands of women exit the military over the coming years. The reintegration challenges exist not because we do not have a solution; these challenges exist because community-based solutions have not been implemented across the country.

The place at which women veterans experience the greatest impact of their transition to civilian life is at the local level. Community after community and organization after organization have stepped forward to facilitate reintegration success. However, these communities and organizations need the support of federal, state, and private leaders and funders to help increase access to community-based services and supports that can facilitate reintegration success for women veterans like Erin, Shaneece, and Mary.

*CALL TO ACTION: Support Community Efforts to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life for Women Veterans* was produced through the generous support of an anonymous donor.



**“Public-private partnerships offer a potential opportunity to improve the standard of current care for veterans and their families.”**

*2015 RAND study*

*Source: Public-Private Partnerships for Providing Behavior Health Care to Veterans and their Families, RAND Corporation, 2015, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR900/RR994/RAND\\_RR994.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR900/RR994/RAND_RR994.pdf)*



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**“For many military families, the period of transition from service member to veteran is stressful. Exacerbating the stress is the near total disappearance of the extraordinary level of community support offered to military families as the service member becomes a veteran.”**

Center for a New American Security needs assessment, 2013

Source: *Needs Assessment: Veterans in the Western United States*, Center for a New American Security, 2013, [http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS\\_NeedsAssessment\\_CarterKidder.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_NeedsAssessment_CarterKidder.pdf)

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