



(NOVEMBER 14, 2011)

In order to further improve the lines of communication and to respond to the concerns between the National VA Council and you our members, I have established a National VA Council Briefing. This NVAC Briefing will bring you the latest news and developments within DVA and provide you with the current status of issues this Council is currently addressing. I believe that this NVAC Briefing will greatly enhance the way in which we communicate and the way in which we share new information, keeping you better informed.

Alma L. Lee

National VA Council, President

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**In This Briefing: VA in the News [November 4, 2011-  
November 11, 2011]**

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AFGE **VA in the NEWS** [document icon, head icon, eye icon, globe icon]

November 4 - November 11, 2011

**Beyond The Battlefield: Lack of Long-Term Care Can Lead To Tragic Ends For Wounded Veterans
HuffingtonPost.com**

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/12/beyond-the-battlefield-3-jimmy-kinsey_n_1000357.html?view=print&comm_ref=false

Veterans face tough job market

USA Today

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/story/2011-11-10/veterans-face-tough-job-market/51159930/1?csp=34news>

Senate approves jobs benefits for veterans

CBS News

http://www.cbsnews.com/2102-250_162-57322605.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody

Veterans coming home have services available

The Lower Hudson Valley Journal News

<http://www.lohud.com/article/20111111/NEWS01/111110336/Veterans-coming-home-services-available?odyssey=tab|topnews|text|News>

VA health care centered on heroes

The Tennessean

<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20111111/OPINION03/311110049/VA-health-care-centered-heroes>

Shifting service: Veterans Affairs makes changes to target females

The Killeen Daily Herald

<http://www.kdhnews.com/news/story.aspx?s=62196>

Lag in mental health care found at a third of VA hospitals

USA TODAY

<http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Department+of+Veterans+Affairs>

Veterans to use telemedicine for care

United Press International

http://www.upi.com/Health_News/2011/11/04/Veterans-to-use-telemedicine-for-care/UPI-82841320464141/

VA Serving Increasing Number of Female Veterans

The Charleston Gazette

<http://wvgazette.com/News/201111100191?page=2&build=cache>

Study Finds Homeless Veterans Stay Homeless Longer Than Others

The New York Times

<http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/study-finds-homeless-veterans-stay-homeless-longer-than-others/?pagemode=print>

Homeless veterans more likely to stay homeless, new survey finds

The Los Angeles Times

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/nationnow/2011/11/homeless-veterans-more-likely-to-stay-homeless-new-survey-finds.html>

Fort Howard project gets good report, but some disagree

The Baltimore Sun

http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-11-10/news/bs-md-co-forthoward-20111109_1_fort-howard-project-veterans-affairs-military-veterans

Federal agency to audit Haley

St. Petersburg Times

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/military/veterans/federal-agency-to-audit-haley/1201036>

PTSD — there's an app for that

Federal News Radio

<http://www.federalnewsradio.com/?nid=85&sid=2622766>

Senate OKs Bill To Boost Hiring Of Veterans

National Public Radio

<http://www.npr.org/2011/11/11/142227725/senate-oks-bill-to-boost-hiring-of-veterans>

Veterans face tough job market

USA Today

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/story/2011-11-10/veterans-face-tough-job-market/51159930/1?csp=34news>

By Marisol Bello, USA TODAY

PHILADELPHIA – On Veterans Day, Americans cheer newly returned veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and honor them with parades.

Jobs would be better.

"It's easy to say, 'We support you and appreciate you,' " says Troy Miller, 40, who has been looking for work since he retired from the Navy in January. "It's harder to say, 'We support you and appreciate you and give you a job and fair pay.' "

Veterans who served since 9/11 have been hit particularly hard. The unemployment rate for them is 12.1%; the national rate is 9%.

The hardest-hit group is male veterans ages 20-24. One in three are jobless.

The problem may get worse as more men and women return from Iraq and Afghanistan. The [White House](#) projects 1 million will enter civilian life in the next five years.

These young vets are facing a competitive labor market with extra handicaps: youth, a lack of education and experience other than the military, and wounds of war that left some with physical or mental disabilities.

"This is a major problem that should be a national embarrassment," says [Paul Rieckhoff](#), a veteran who founded Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. The troops defending the USA "are making the economy possible, so they should benefit from it," he says.

The Obama administration, Congress, businesses and private groups are trying to help veterans transition from the military to the civilian work world. Their efforts range from a presidential push for new tax incentives to hire veterans to expanded training programs, targeted job fairs and personalized career counseling.

Even so, their efforts are not trickling down to veterans such as former [Marine Corps](#) squad leader Brandon Schoonover. He earned a finance degree after he left the service, but two years after he graduated, he's still looking for full-time work.

His problem, he says, is that he has no business experience to match his degree. His main experience is four years in the Marines leading a 12-man squad into Iraqi combat zones.

"I was in the infantry," he says. "What do you do with that in the real world?"

He attended a recent job fair for veterans in Philadelphia, sponsored by the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#). It was Schoonover's third job fair in the past year, the second for veterans only.

"It's just discouraging," he says. "I did a lot of hard work in the military and then went on to get my degree, but there's no willingness to give me a chance."

Today, he works part-time in a used car lot.

Post-9/11 vets in 'weakest situation'

Older veterans are doing better. In fact, veterans as a whole have a jobless rate of 7.7%, more than a point below the nation's overall 9%.

Once veterans find jobs, they do better than non-veterans. The median income for male veterans in 2010 was \$35,725, compared with \$30,822 for male non-veterans. Female veterans had a median income of \$30,540, compared with \$20,634 for female non-veterans.

The problem lies with the post-9/11 vets, 240,000 of whom are jobless.

"They are in the weakest situation," says Adriana Kugler, chief economist at the Labor Department. A little over half are 20 to 29.

Younger people, ex-military or not, have high unemployment rates regardless of the economy, says David Loughran, a senior economist with RAND Corp., a think tank.

"If they are young and separated from the military fairly recently, then they have a transition period," he says. "It takes time to find a job, so it's unsurprising that younger vets have higher unemployment rates than others."

In 2010, the jobless rate for veterans 20 to 24 was 20.6%. For non-veterans in the same age group, it was 15.4%.

The gap between young vets and their non-vet counterparts is widening. Veterans 20 to 24 have a 29.1% jobless rate; for non-veterans in that group, the rate is 13.2%.

Experience and education are their hurdles. Young veterans say employers don't consider military experience.

Ruby Santiago, 28, joined the Army in 2001 after high school. She left in 2009 with eight years' experience in information technology, including setting up computer systems in Iraq, but she can't find a job in her field.

"I don't have a degree, and a lot of places are looking for a degree or certificate," she says. "Experience should count for something."

She's going to community college to get a degree in computer technology.

Employers have their own concerns about hiring veterans. Some worry that a veteran may have mental health problems, the VA says. Others fear a vet will be called back to duty.

Veterans deserve help, says retired Air Force general Allison Hickey, undersecretary for benefits at the Department of Veterans Affairs: "They've done the most dangerous work. The best thing we can help them with is a good job."

Michael and Eleanor Thornton are Air Force veterans. Their company, Visionary Consulting Partners, employs three veterans.

The Thorntons say they're good workers and worth occasional small concessions.

One of their vet employees has a brain injury that requires weekly doctor's appointments. Eleanor Thornton says if they docked him as sick every time he went to the doctor, he'd have no sick time left.

"As employers, you want them to do their job, but you need to step back and look at their special needs," she says. "They can't do their jobs if they are in pain."

In a highly competitive economy, veterans are also battling a perception that they don't need help because the government takes care of them. Eleanor Thornton says she was at a party when a business owner questioned whether veterans deserve special treatment. They did their duty, she responded, and employers have a duty, too. She added, "Did you serve your country?"

White House issues call to action

[President Obama](#) has called on businesses to hire or train 100,000 veterans and military spouses in the next two years. So far, 86 companies have agreed to hire 25,000 veterans, the White House says.

On Monday, Obama announced more help: six months of career counseling, a website to match military work to civilian jobs and an online job bank with over 500,000 listings.

Part of Obama's \$447 billion jobs proposal includes tax incentives for companies that hire veterans. The Senate passed the incentives on Thursday. The bill goes to the [House of Representatives](#) next week.

It would give a company up to \$5,600 for hiring an unemployed veteran. Hiring a veteran with a service-related disability would mean as much as a \$9,600 tax credit.

RAND's Loughran says tax incentives are an ineffective way to spur hiring. "You are paying it to people who might have done that hire anyway," he says. He says it isn't known if the programs for jobless vets work because there is little tracking.

Miller, who retired from the Navy and lives in Nashville, relied on HirePatriots.com, a website where people can post day jobs for veterans, when he left the Navy after 20 years of service.

Unemployed, he says he applies for 20 jobs a week. He's in school full time, studying business administration. He doesn't understand why his military experience hasn't helped him more in his job search. "If you serve in the military for 20 years, you are incredibly multittrained," he says. "So it's frustrating to find out how meaningless 20 years of service to our country has been to employers out there."

Senate approves jobs benefits for veterans

CBS News

http://www.cbsnews.com/2102-250_162-57322605.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody

A united Senate emphatically approved legislation Thursday intended to help unemployed veterans and companies doing business with the government, endorsing a measure that includes the first small slice of President Barack Obama's jobs plan that is likely to become law.

The 95-0 vote will let senators head home for Friday's Veterans Day events and take credit for helping some of the 240,000 jobless veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The bill would give tax credits of up to \$9,600 to companies hiring disabled vets who have been jobless at least six months, and improve job training and counseling for veterans. Obama included the tax breaks in his \$447 billion jobs plan, which has otherwise gone nowhere so far in Congress.

"Our veterans are one issue we should never be divided on," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., chief author of the veterans' provisions.

The bill also repeals a law requiring federal, state and local governments to withhold 3 percent of their payments to contractors. That statute, which has yet to take effect, was designed to thwart tax cheats, but lawmakers now say it makes it harder for those companies to hire more workers.

The House could pass the legislation next week.

For weeks, the two parties have battled to a standoff over Obama's jobs package, which features a payroll tax break for workers and employers and money for repairing bridges and hiring police officers. Thursday's vote represented a momentary respite in that struggle, waged in the shadow of 2012 presidential and congressional elections that are sure to be dominated by the economy.

Underscoring the ongoing partisan strife over the bleak employment picture, senators rejected a GOP jobs proposal by a mostly party-line 56-40 vote. The plan combined more than two dozen GOP anti-tax, anti-regulatory proposals and contrasted sharply with Obama's approach, which leans more toward federal spending.

"Our vision is, let's unleash the private sector," said Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky. "Theirs is they're going to hire a few more people to dig ditches and fill them in."

The GOP jobs proposal would have revamped the tax code by dropping the top individual and corporate income tax rates from 35 percent to 25 percent and require the Senate to vote on a balanced-budget amendment to the Constitution. It would have repealed Obama's health care overhaul, legislation passed last year to tighten federal oversight of Wall Street, and other labor, energy and environmental regulations.

Despite their divisions over the nation's economic problems, senators were united in their desire to stage a preholiday vote to help veterans and show they are taking steps designed to protect jobs.

A backdrop to Thursday's vote was White House figures showing that about 240,000, or 12 percent, of veterans who have served since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, are unemployed.

Beyond increasing to \$9,600 the tax credit for hiring disabled veterans, the bill also would create new tax credits of up to \$5,600 for employers hiring veterans who have job hunted at least half a year and \$2,400 for those out of work for four weeks or more.

In addition, it would expand education and job training benefits for veterans, improve employment counseling they receive while still in the military and provide an extra year of job services for disabled veterans.

Overall, the tax breaks and jobs programs for veterans would cost just over \$1 billion, Democratic aides said. It would be paid for by extending a fee the Veterans Affairs Department charges to back home loans.

The law requiring governments to withhold 3 percent of their payments to contractors was enacted five years ago under President George W. Bush in reaction to government investigations finding that thousands of contractors were behind in

their taxes by billions of dollars. But with politicians focusing these days on job creation, lawmakers say the requirement would keep companies from using the cash to hire more workers.

Economists say repealing the withholding requirement would have an imperceptible, if any, impact on jobs. Implementation has been delayed until 2013.

Annuling the withholding law would cost the government \$11.2 billion over the next decade. The legislation makes up the lost revenue by making it harder for some Social Security beneficiaries to qualify for Medicaid, the federal-state health program for low-income people.

Veterans coming home have services available

The Lower Hudson Valley Journal News

<http://www.lohud.com/article/20111111/NEWS01/111110336/Veterans-coming-home-services-available?odyssey=tab/topnews/text/News>

Richard Liebson and Michael Risinit

When Capt. Rod Carlson of White Plains was discharged from the Marine Corps in 1970 after serving as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, "there were none of the counseling or services available like there are now," he said.

"I don't think people had any sense at all of why people had difficulties readjusting to civilian life," he said. "For a lot of us, it wasn't easy. We just didn't feel like we belonged.

"There's a lot of help out there now," said Carlson, who participates in counseling sessions at the Vet Center in White Plains and recently wrote about one of his Vietnam experiences for "Afterwords," a book published by the Fordham Veterans Writing Workshop. "I just hope the kids coming back now will take advantage of it."

As the newest generation of veterans come home from Iraq and Afghanistan, local support agencies say they're aware of the problems many will face and are equipped to help. Their concern, they say, is that returning soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines won't avail themselves of the services and benefits to which they're entitled.

"The biggest challenge we face is getting the word out that we're here and that we want to help," said Vito Pinto, a Vietnam veteran and director of the Westchester County Veterans Service Agency. He said the Department of Veterans Affairs "won't share information on recently discharged veterans with local agencies because of privacy issues, so we have no way of knowing when, or who, is coming home. It's very frustrating. We can't help returning veterans if we can't get their names and make contact with them."

Pinto said there are about 23,000 veterans on his agency's mailing list, "but I'm sure there are many more out there who should be taking advantage of what we have to offer."

Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties all have veterans service agencies, part of the state's network for veterans. They provide an array of services, including help in applying for such VA benefits as home loans, pensions and disability compensation, medical treatment, property tax exemptions, education benefits and more. They can also help veterans find housing and get jobs or job training.

"There's no direct link" between the five branches of the military and the VA, said Elizabeth Steiner, who manages programs for homeless veterans at the Montrose VA campus, where staffers spend much of their time trying to make contact with returning veterans.

Montrose is part of the VA's Hudson Valley Health Care System, which also includes Castle Point in Dutchess County and outpatient clinics in Carmel, New City, Poughkeepsie and three others. The VA also has clinics in White Plains and Yonkers. The system offers eligible veterans primary and specialty care, women's health care, long-term care, mental health and residential care for those dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and homelessness.

The VA's Vet Center in White Plains serves about 8,000 combat veterans and their families, providing individual and group readjustment counseling that addresses a variety of issues —including PTSD, substance abuse and depression — plus screening and referrals for medical issues and employment opportunities.

"We have the resources and the services — we need the soldiers," said Vietnam veteran Roger Paulmeno, the center's director. "Too often, for a variety of reasons, they don't ask for help when they get home. Chances are that anyone who's been in combat has some issues to deal with. We have all kinds of resources for them but, if we don't know they're home, we can't help. They have to take the first step, by getting in touch with us."

Vietnam veteran Karl Rohde, who heads the Putnam County Office of Veterans Affairs, said many don't feel they are owed services.

"I shunned it for years," he said. "I didn't feel anything was owed to me. A lot of guys feel that way."

"You're not interested in benefits; you're interested in getting home," said Rockland Veterans Service Agency's Jerry Donnellan, another Vietnam veteran. "And when you get home, the last thing you want to do is deal with the government. There's also the John Wayne-Audie Murphy thing. Guys think that they're basically OK and they don't want to use up benefits that could better serve someone else. It's a noble thought, but it's stupid thinking. All veterans should register and get a veterans ID card, even if they don't intend to use any benefits. The more people there are in the VA system, the more funding we get to help those who do really need it."

In 2008 Donnellan sent the VA a list of Rockland ZIP codes and asked for the names and addresses of all veterans discharged since 2001 who lived in those postal zones. The VA sent the list, he said, but it was too outdated to be of much use. Now, he said, he's working with a number of elected officials to change the regulations so that the VA could forward such lists weekly, or monthly.

"If the VA could release contact information on a weekly basis based on ZIP codes, we could contact veterans on a one-to-one basis, and counsel them based on specific needs," he said. "A lot of good could be done for these young veterans. They could get jobs, go to school, have their health-care needs met. Perhaps not end up homeless, addicted or suicidal. We can certainly do a better job, given better tools."

Donnellan said he's hopeful such a change will happen. Until then, he said, local veterans service agencies will have to continue to do as much outreach as possible and encourage returning warriors to contact them.

"The help's here waiting for them," he said.

Additional Facts

Local agencies help with benefits

Some local agencies that can help veterans apply for benefits and provide an array of other services:

- VA Vet Center, 300 Hamilton Ave., White Plains; 914-682-6250 or 877-927-8387
- Westchester County Veterans Service Agency, 112 E. Post Road, White Plains, 914-995-2145/2146
- Rockland County Veterans Service Agency, 20 Squadron Blvd., New City, 845-638-5244

- Putnam County Veterans Affairs, 110 Old Route 6 — Building 3, Carmel, 845-808-1620
- Yonkers Department of Veterans Services, 120 New Main St., Yonkers, 914-377-6700

VA health care centered on heroes

The Tennessean

<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20111111/OPINION03/311110049/VA-health-care-centered-heroes>

November 10, 2011

Written by Juan A. Morales

As a nation, we honor all who served throughout our history today as well as those who presently serve. Staff serving veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs Tennessee Valley Healthcare System (VA TVHS) also pay tribute today to the brave men and women who wore our nation's uniform. TVHS employees see daily the physical and emotional wounds these brave men and women bear from their service to our country. These wounds are a reminder that sacrifice, valor and honor are just few of many words synonymous with the title veteran.

Because of this, veterans have earned and expect health care tailored to their individual needs in an environment that reflects gratitude for their service. VA TVHS has been a leader in the VA implementing this type of care —which is becoming known as patient-centered. As the director of VA TVHS, I am proud of the practices and programs that meet the expectations of Middle Tennessee veterans.

The VA Health Administration (VHA) has set the goal to become patient-centered in its more than 1,600 health-care facilities nationwide. In January, VHA created a national office to oversee this task. Just last week, VA TVHS was asked to showcase its Nashville facility as a co-host for the National Planetree Conference. This conference focused on patient-centered health-care practices. VA TVHS was the first VA health-care system to co-host this annual conference. It allowed us to showcase programs and practices which represent a change in the VA as a whole.

Access to health benefits is also essential. My staff and I work diligently to ensure VA health care is conveniently available to veterans in Middle Tennessee. An example of this is the Maury County clinic slated to open in 2012.

Veterans must also have access to a host of services adapted to their specific health needs. Programs like the Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom /Operation New Dawn Program (OEF/OIF/OND) which provides care specifically to veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Enrolled veterans in this program are assigned a case manager who directs them through the process of maximizing their health benefits.

VA TVHS's Music Therapy Program is another example of how alternative care therapies are being used in the care of veterans. This program offers a variety of therapeutic outlets using music as the foundation to help address patient needs. The program helps with communication, stress reduction, and making veterans comfortable in a group environment. This therapy is available to both inpatients and outpatients.

Equally, advances in care available to female veterans are priority. Veterans at VA TVHS have care available to them in a facility suited to their specific needs regardless of gender. The Women Veterans Comprehensive Healthcare Clinic is an example of this. This clinic was designed for female veterans by female veterans, ensuring needed services are available.

Another important aspect of patient-centered care is creating a healing environment. Over the past few years, we have made great strides to improve our facilities. These improvements have been both internal and external in both patient care and general facility areas; and each of these environments helps the veteran, the family and other visitors. We are very proud of the improvements throughout the health-care system and we look forward to continuing improvements.

Moreover, the health-care system will continue to set the example in regard to providing patients with care they deserve.

God bless our country and the men and women who have and continue to sacrifice for its freedom.

Juan A. Morales is director of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Tennessee Valley Healthcare system.

Shifting service: Veterans Affairs makes changes to target females

The Killeen Daily Herald

<http://www.kdhnews.com/news/story.aspx?s=62196>

Thursday, November 10, 2011

By Colleen Flaherty

Sgt. Laura Todd was inside Forward Operating Base Warrior, Iraq, during a 2009 deployment with 2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, when a rocket landed just outside its confines.

"There was an explosion off the (base) and the concussion blast blew me off my feet," said Todd. She finished her deployment with the rest of 3rd Battalion, 82nd Field Artillery Regiment. "We just run on pure adrenaline." It was only upon returning home that Todd noticed something was wrong.

"I couldn't figure out which slot the fork went into in the drawer, or I couldn't (remember) how to tie my shoes, things like that," she said.

Todd was soon diagnosed with traumatic brain injury and assigned to Fort Hood's Warrior Transition Brigade, where she is undergoing treatment for the condition and beginning to think about leaving the military after more than 13 years of combined active-duty, Reserve and National Guard service.

"My military career is done, so I'm learning now to transition, how to be a civilian," said Todd, 45.

Todd's story, not uncommon, highlights the ever-changing role of women in the military. Although the Defense Department still restricts female soldiers in direct ground combat, the asymmetrical nature of the fights in Iraq and Afghanistan have pushed women to the front lines anyway.

"The nature of today's conflicts is evolving; there are no front lines in Afghanistan," or Iraq, said department spokesperson Eileen M. Lainez in an email interview. "While women are not assigned to units below brigade level whose primary mission is direct combat on the ground, this doesn't mean they are not assigned to positions in combat zones that could place them in danger."

Of women, Lainez said, "They are an integral part of our military, and we could not perform the mission without them."

Fastest-growing group

Last fiscal year, 16 percent of all active-duty soldiers were females, according to the Department of the Army. A

III Corps spokesman said 7,700 of them are assigned to Fort Hood among about 53,000 soldiers total.

Since 2003, 89 Army women have died in combat, of 3,232 soldiers in all.

Female veterans are the fastest-growing group of veterans, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In the last 10 years, women's enrollment at the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System has grown from about 1,000

to 12,000, said Vivian Minns, women's outreach specialist. That's led the hospital complex to revamp its women's clinics with increased maternity and other services, in addition to kid- and family-friendly touches in recent years.

"We are constantly thinking of different tools to target female veterans," said Minns, a Navy veteran. "For a long time we weren't recognized, but now they're starting to really recognize women through all the advocacy that we have done and all the changes that have come down the pipeline."

Evolving roles

At nearly 40 years of active-duty service, Chief Warrant Officer-5 Jeanne Pace has seen female service members' roles evolve first-hand.

Widely believed to be the Army's longest-serving female soldier, Pace entered the military in 1972 as part of the Women's Army Corps. The branch was absorbed by the Army in 1978, after the end of the Vietnam War and during the women's liberation movement.

"They knew they weren't going to get enough volunteers from the men to serve in all the different support roles and free men up to serve in the true combat arms," said Pace, 57, who deployed once to Iraq with III Corps Headquarters and currently is assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division Band's rear detachment.

Although Pace said the military has come a long way since then, the early years of integration proved difficult, especially as she moved up in rank.

"I had significant challenges in my early days," she said. "I felt going up through the ranks, the more authority you gain, you have that authority over males, and there's more resistance to it."

Pace said she fielded comments from subordinates such as, 'I joined the Army to get away from my mother, I don't want to have to listen to you.'"

Todd, an Army mechanic, agreed. Women historically have had to work harder to gain the respect of their male counterparts, she said. "If they give 100 percent, you've got to give 110 percent. If they show up at 6:30 (a.m.), you've got to show up at 6 (a.m.). You've always got to stay one step ahead of the curve, until you do get accepted into the little group and proved you can do it, then you're fine after that."

Fitting in easier

Capt. Trish Kelley, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, who was born in 1978, said there are relics of the "old boys club" in today's Army, a traditional male proving ground, but she knows she had it easier than female soldiers who came before her.

Kelley said she often tells senior female officers and noncommissioned officers "thank you" for paving the way for younger soldiers.

"I just know that she's done something, overcome some major hurdle in her career," she said. "Every single one of them I've met has had a story to tell."

Lag in mental health care found at a third of VA hospitals

USA TODAY

<http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Department+of+Veterans+Affairs>

By Gregg Zoroya and Paul Monies,

Veterans seeking mental health therapy at nearly a third of the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#)' hospitals must wait longer than the VA's goal of seeing patients in 14 days or less, according to a USA TODAY analysis of internal VA data.

More Iraq War veterans are seeking mental health care. Department of Veterans Affairs clinicians have raised concerns about limited resources to help them.

More Iraq War veterans are seeking mental health care. Department of Veterans Affairs clinicians have raised concerns about limited resources to help them.

The findings are in contrast to the VA's assertion that fewer than 5% of patients must wait too long to begin therapy with psychiatrists or psychologists.

The USA TODAY analysis follows concerns raised by scores of VA clinicians in an August survey that the VA does not have the resources to handle growing numbers of veterans with mental health issues. The survey showed that it takes about three to six weeks for veterans to begin mental health treatment.

"These numbers show that ... in many communities, the VA is unable to give our veterans the timely access to health care they deserve," says Sen. [Patty Murray](#), D-Wash., chair of the Senate VA Committee, who plans a Nov. 30 hearing on the issue.

The number of veterans seeking mental health care has increased since 2006 from nearly 900,000 to 1.2 million last year, according to a [Government Accountability Office](#) study. The number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in therapy increased from 35,000 in 2006 to 139,000 in 2010.

During that time, the VA nearly doubled mental health staffing to 21,000.

VA officials say they do well on access when calculating the time period from the date requested by a veteran for a mental health appointment — called the "desire date" — to when therapy begins. By that calculation, the VA meets its two-week access goal for more than 95% of patients.

Vets seek therapy

Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans in therapy:

But by calculating the actual time that transpires between the date that a veteran makes a request for an appointment and when therapy begins for new patients, the VA meets its two-week goal 68% of the time at 152 hospitals and 974 clinics across the country, the USA TODAY analysis shows.

"While the VA has made good progress in increasing the number of qualified staff systemwide, there may not be enough of the right staff at the right place to meet the demand," says Tom Mannle, who co-authored a recent RAND Corp. study of the VA mental health program.

The RAND study gave the VA high marks for care of patients once in therapy. It did not address how long it takes the VA to provide care. The data analyzed by USA TODAY was made public by the Senate VA Committee and showed access rates for nearly all VA hospitals in the first six months of fiscal 2011.

VA officials acknowledge chronic difficulties in monitoring access to mental health care with a 25-year-old computerized scheduling system. The VA hopes to begin installing a new scheduling program by 2013, says [Michael Davies](#), VA national director of systems redesign.

A VA document sent to Congress last year described about 20 ways that hospitals "game" the system in order to improve access scores. In one case, the "desired date" was based on clinic availability and not the date requested by the patient. These "workarounds may mask the symptoms of poor access," the document says. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki vowed last year to crack down on workarounds.

To improve quality control, the VA aims to sample the way "desired dates" are entered by schedulers and whether they reflect a patient's desired date to begin therapy, documents filed with the VA Committee say.

According to the data, veterans seeking psychiatric care at hospitals in Pennsylvania, Alabama and Montana asked for desired dates five weeks away on average, while veterans at hospitals in California and [New York](#) ask to begin therapy in a week or less on average.

Veterans to use telemedicine for care

United Press International

http://www.upi.com/Health_News/2011/11/04/Veterans-to-use-telemedicine-for-care/UPI-82841320464141/

November 4, 2011

BOSTON, Nov. 4 (UPI) -- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs providers will care for veterans using telemedicine for behavioral health, oncology and perioperative care, officials say.

The VA and American Well today announced the initiative to bring telehealth services to U.S. veterans in their homes, workplaces and other convenient locations, following an award from the VA Innovation Initiative (VAi2) Industry Innovation Competition.

The initiative focuses on using American Well's Online Care system to make needed care more accessible, convenient and efficacious for veterans, particularly those remotely located from VA medical centers.

"VA is dedicated to providing veterans with the highest quality, most patient-centric care possible -- and we see technology as a critical enabler in our mission," Jonah Czerwinski, director of VAi2, said in a statement. "This initiative with American Well will allow VA to use telehealth to deliver needed care directly into the homes of veterans, who might otherwise struggle with barriers such as distance, mobility or the need to take time away from work or family."

Veterans will be able to have online visits with their own providers, as well as multi-disciplinary care teams when needed, via the Internet. Using two-way video, secure text chat and/or phone, providers will be able to review patients' clinical information, discuss symptoms, provide medical advice and diagnose and prescribe medications as appropriate, Czerwinski said.

VA Serving Increasing Number of Female Veterans

The Charleston Gazette

<http://wvgazette.com/News/20111100191?page=2&build=cache>

By [Megan Workman](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- As the number of female veterans in the armed forces continues to rise, officials with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs are expanding efforts to help women deal with issues like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, sexual trauma and even homelessness.

Of the 22.6 million veterans in the nation, 1.8 million are women, a number that continues to steadily rise, according to the VA's most recent data. In 1980, there were 1.1 million women veterans. By 2020, the VA predicts there will be 1.9 million.

There are 167,200 veterans in West Virginia, while 11,900 of them are female. Meanwhile, the projected population of male veterans in the U.S. is expected to decline.

"It's increasing every year. Right now we have 1,000 female vets [at the [Huntington VA Hospital](#)]," said Nancy Bostar, nurse practitioner and women veteran's program manager at the Huntington VA Hospital. "We expect that to increase more."

Friday, Charleston will honor female veterans during a Veteran's Memorial at the state Capitol. After a 10 a.m. parade, the community is encouraged to meet at Haydock Park where female veterans will be honored.

After more than 13 years, and much controversy, an 8-foot-tall bronze female veteran statue will join the four servicemen statues on the Capitol grounds. Charleston artist Joe Mullins sculpted the \$200,000 statue, as well as the other four male statues.

"There's nothing honoring female veterans in the state," said Keith Gwinn, cabinet secretary for the state Department of Veterans Assistance. "We decided today would be a perfect day to notice their achievements. Women vets have developed in the past 100 years and some are in combat positions now."

In response to the growing number of female veterans, the Huntington VA Hospital is building a three-story women's health clinic next to the hospital.

Women veteran's health clinics are a new concept, said Amber Brunetti, outreach social worker for the state Department of Veterans Assistance. Before gender-specific health clinics were introduced, women weren't able to receive their care at the VA separately from men, but now they can, she said.

Their voices are being heard, Bostar said, as female veterans are currently involved in the construction process. So far, the veterans have chosen the interior design and requested that pictures on the walls depict successful female veterans.

While the health clinic won't be completed until late 2012, the Huntington VA Hospital opened a temporary women's clinic 60 days ago.

"We would not be building this building if we were not expecting an increase at a [significant] magnitude," said Debbie Bramer, a spokeswoman for the Huntington VA hospital.

"It's going to be a very soothing place where they can obtain their health care," Bostar said. "It's their voice and we've listened to them."

With the projected larger numbers and full integration into all branches -- including combat units -- women will not only change the face of the military, but of the veteran population as well, according to [Women Veterans: Past, Present, and Future](#), a report released by the VA.

Women will make up a larger share of the veteran population, add to its diversity and they will require veteran services geared to their specific needs, according to the report.

As the number of female veterans increase, so do their demands for health care.

In 2009 and 2010, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hypertension and depression were the top three diagnostic categories for women veterans treated by the Veterans Health Administration, according to the VA. Bramer said those also are top diagnoses for men at the Huntington VA Hospital.

"Women come back with PTSD and I think they're being overlooked," said Miles Epling, state adjutant at the American Legion, Department of West Virginia. "Over the years, everyone has already considered PTSD more related to the men but now ... [women] are out right on the front with everybody else. We need to make sure we're not overlooking them at the VA hospitals."

Homelessness among vets

Homelessness among female veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars has increased every year for the past six years - from 150 in 2006 to 1,700 this year - according to the VA.

A five-year goal has been set to end veteran homelessness, Brunetti said.

In 1987, the VA established the Health Care for Homeless Veterans program to provide services designed to identify homeless veterans in the community, link them with case management services and streamline access to VA mental health, substance abuse, and physical health services.

On any given night, there are 76,000 veterans who are homeless, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

"It breaks your heart to think of anyone being homeless. What's even worse is these people fight for our country and don't have anywhere to go," Brunetti said.

One option for veterans, she said, is the HUD-VASH Program. HUD and Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) combined rental assistance for homeless veterans and their families with case management and clinical services provided by the VA at its medical centers and in the community, according to HUD's website.

"They give female vets and families preference, but the problem is vouchers run out so fast," Brunetti said. "There's just not enough vouchers for the amount of homeless people."

Women veterans are at a much higher risk of homelessness than male veterans, according to the VA.

While female veterans suffer the same stresses that can lead to homelessness among men -- brain injuries, drug and alcohol abuse and PTSD -- many women also contend with sexual trauma, domestic abuse and pregnancy - often while trying to raise children alone, according to a Los Angeles Times article last month.

One in 5 female veterans report sexual trauma in the military compared with 1 in 100 men, according to the VA.

The Military Sexual Trauma Program is available to veterans who seek mental health help through the VA, Brunetti said.

"The VA has stepped up overall and is working on the people returning ... we have to be more aware of the veterans when they're coming home," Epling said. "One day you're watching to make sure you don't get shot and the next day you're back in the [U.S.]. That's a big switch in life ... a big turnaround."

Study Finds Homeless Veterans Stay Homeless Longer Than Others **The New York Times**

<http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/study-finds-homeless-veterans-stay-homeless-longer-than-others/?pagemode=print>

By [JAMES DAO](#)

Once veterans become homeless, they are likely to remain homeless longer than non-veterans. And they are also more likely to report having serious health problems, according to a [new report](#) by an advocacy group, the [100,000 Homes Campaign](#).

The report is based on surveys conducted over several years with 23,000 homeless people, of which nearly 3,500 were veterans. Officials with the campaign said the surveys were drafted with the intention of finding out more about why veterans are disproportionately represented among the homeless population. (The survey found that while veterans are 9 percent of the total population, they were more than 15 percent of the homeless people surveyed. That is similar to the findings of a recent [federal report](#) on homeless veterans.)

They found no clear answers, but came up with some interesting data. Perhaps most significantly, veterans on average reported being homeless for 5.7 years, significantly longer than the 3.9 years reported by non-veterans. And 62 percent of veterans reported having been homeless for two years or longer, compared with half of non-veterans.

Read the full report from the 100,000 Homes Campaign.

The report notes that older people tend to be homeless longer — and indeed the survey found that 21 percent of the veterans in its sample were over 60 years old, while only about 9 percent of the non-veterans were over that age. But the report asserted that age alone could not explain why veterans seem to be living on the street or in shelters longer than other people, as researchers found that even after controlling for age, veterans were homeless longer.

Like the federal report from last month, which found that homeless veterans were more likely to have disabilities, the 100,000 Homes report found that homeless veterans in its sample more often reported health problems, including liver or kidney disease, emphysema, tuberculosis, heart disease or hepatitis C.

The survey also found that veterans who had been homeless for 2 years or longer were substantially more likely to have served time in jail or prison, and to have a substance abuse problem, than veterans who had been homeless for less than 2 years.

The survey was conducted by volunteers trained by community organizations or by the campaign itself, which is a project of Community Solutions, a nonprofit group. The year-old campaign has set a goal of working to help communities find permanent housing for 100,000 homeless people by 2013.

Becky Kanis, a 1991 West Point graduate who is the campaign director, said the group is focusing on reducing the time it takes for veterans to receive housing vouchers through the federal government, known as [Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing](#). She said the vouchers have proven effective in reducing veteran homelessness, but that the application process can take months and sometimes nearly a year.

However, two centers of veterans homelessness, New York City and Los Angeles, have managed to shave two months off their processing time by eliminating steps and improving coordination between the various local and federal agencies involved in approving the vouchers, she said. More improvements are expected, she added.

“Two months is a long time when you’re on the street,” Ms. Kanis said.

[Homeless veterans more likely to stay homeless, new survey finds](#)
The Los Angeles Times

November 9, 2011

The survey of 23,000 homeless people [was released](#) Tuesday by the 100,000 Homes Campaign, a nonprofit coalition of local community groups combating homelessness. The survey found that, although veterans make up 9% of the country's population, they accounted for more than 15% of the homeless people surveyed.

"We've known that veterans were particularly at risk to become homeless, but now we know that they're more likely to stay homeless and face life-threatening conditions on the street," the campaign's director, Becky Kanis, said in a statement. "The data paint a picture of an extremely at-risk population that is unlikely to get off the streets without targeted help."

Among the other findings:

- Veterans reported being homeless an average of 5.7 years, compared with 3.9 years reported by nonveterans.
- More than 6 out of 10 veterans reported being homeless more than two years, versus half of nonveterans.
- Among the 12,500 people who said they had been homeless for more than two years, veterans averaged nine years, compared with 7.3 years for nonveterans.
- Of those, 3 out of 4 veterans reported a substance abuse habit, and nearly two-thirds reported a serious physical health condition.
- 55% of homeless veterans reported health conditions linked to heightened mortality risk, versus 44% of nonveterans.
- 21% of veterans surveyed were at least 60 years old, compared with 9% for nonveterans. The report said age did not entirely explain why veterans stayed homeless for longer periods.
- Homeless veterans were 11% more likely than nonveterans to suffer from a life-threatening condition, including liver or kidney disease, or frequent frostbite.
- Among veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, 27% reported traumatic brain injuries, compared with 19% of other veterans. The signature insurgent weapon in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has been roadside bombs, which typically cause traumatic brain injuries in addition to loss of limbs among service members who survive the explosions.
- 46% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans surveyed reported receiving mental health treatment, versus 41% for other veterans. The Pentagon has become more attuned in recent years to the need for mental health treatment and counseling for service members returning from combat.

The organization said its survey is the first to be based on face-to-face interviews with homeless veterans across the country. It was conducted by 2,500 trained volunteers in 47 communities.

The 100,000 Homes Campaign has set a goal of securing housing for 100,000 homeless people by July 2013. It says it has found permanent homes for 11,244 people as of this week. The group works with the VA and community agencies in Los Angeles and New York to speed up the process of finding housing for the homeless.

The new survey mirrored a profile of homeless veterans provided in an [annual report](#) by two government agencies issued late last month. That report, by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, put the number of homeless veterans at 144,000 in 2010.

The federal report found that veterans under 30 were twice as likely to become homeless as nonveterans of the same age. Veterans made up 13% of homeless adults in shelters, according to the government survey.

Fort Howard project gets good report, but some disagree

The Baltimore Sun

http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-11-10/news/bs-md-co-forthoward-20111109_1_fort-howard-project-veterans-affairs-military-veterans

Study finds no significant environmental impact or opposition

November 10, 2011

By Arthur Hirsch, The Baltimore Sun

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has released a report on the potential environmental impact of a proposed 1,473-unit residential development on the Baltimore County waterfront that can be summed up in two words: no problem. Opponents of the Fort Howard project disagree, and they mean to make waves.

The 171-page report, open for public comment through Nov. 25 finds that the proposal by Fort Howard Development LLC would have "no significant impacts" on air, water, wildlife, land use or local traffic, and "no significant public controversy is anticipated." While the report refers to a previous study showing several areas of the 95-acre site where hazardous materials were used or stored in the past, it concludes that if handled according to state and federal laws, these should not present a danger.

The report was commissioned by the VA, which owns the property now used only for a medical clinic. Jo Schuda, a VA spokeswoman, said in an email that the report's finding is a "recommendation, but VA needs the public's input, if any, before it can issue the official" finding.

The report is an early step forward for the proposal. The county's process of reviewing the \$530 million project — hailed by the developer as a "national model for serving our nation's veterans" — hasn't started yet.

While the project that would give housing preference to veterans has the support of some veterans and the County Council member from that district, it is opposed by neighborhood groups. A community meeting is scheduled Tuesday night at the North Point-Edgemere Volunteer Fire Hall. Organizers say the event will show there's strong opposition to the plan, which was announced by the developer about a year ago.

Some say the project is too big and would jam the two-lane North Point Road. Others want the entire complex set aside strictly for military veterans, rather than giving veterans of any age first chance to buy homes, then offering the rest to any prospective buyer who is 55 or older.

"It's too massive of a complex for that tip of a peninsula," said Russell S. Donnelly, of Edgemere, who is not a veteran but has worked as a volunteer helping the veterans who were getting medical care at Fort Howard. Donnelly has coordinated efforts of several community organizations opposed to the project.

"That's a lot of cars traveling up and down North Point Road," Donnelly said. "It's crowded now."

Donnelly said opponents have "over 4,000 signatures" on petitions calling for the site to be used for long-term medical care and housing for veterans only. He said the petitions will be presented to elected officials, including President Barack Obama.

Alfred E. Clasing Jr., a Navy veteran of World War II and member of an opposition group called Fort Howard Project Exclusively for Veterans, said he disagrees with the report's findings on traffic and local opposition.

"A lot of people have contacted me and joined our following," said Clasing, who said his group would like to see the site set aside as a national park, with greater emphasis on its history. A marker alongside the main road into Fort Howard identifies the spot as the landing point for 4,700 British troops in September 1814, whose march to Baltimore was turned back by American soldiers in the Battle of North Point.

With the project as now planned, Clasing said, "we will be giving away the heritage of the United States of America. ... Once they give up that property, it's gone forever."

The developer has said that along with restaurants, office buildings and a new medical clinic, plans include a museum to house artifacts representing the history of the site. The peninsula that lies where the Patapsco and Back rivers meet the Chesapeake Bay was turned into a fort by the U.S. government in the 19th century, then became home to a VA hospital during World War II. The hospital closed in 2002.

The developers plan to offer an array of choices of types of housing, from those providing nursing care to independent living. The plan includes houses in several styles and price ranges, including town houses and single-family homes.

The zoning for that area only allows about 500 housing units, about a third of the number planned, but the developers plan to pursue the project as a planned unit development, or PUD. That process allows the developer to exceed zoning limits in exchange for providing some benefit to the community, such as land for a park or a donation to a local organization.

A PUD cannot be considered until the district's County Council member introduces a resolution to the council asking to begin the review. Councilman John Olszewski Sr. of District 7, who was quoted in a developer's news release in April supporting the project, has not introduced such a measure. He could not be reached for comment on this article.

Federal agency to audit Haley

St. Petersburg Times

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/military/veterans/federal-agency-to-audit-haley/1201036>

By [William R. Levesque](#), Times Staff Writer
November 11, 2011

TAMPA —The Department of Veterans Affairs has ordered a financial audit of the James A. Haley VA Medical Center after reports the facility has struggled to close multi-million-dollar deficits the last three years.

The review will be conducted by the agency's Management Quality Assurance Service and auditors will visit Haley for a week in January, according to documents obtained by the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Haley and VA officials with oversight of the audit did not respond to requests for comment on Thursday.

Auditors plan to interview business employees at Haley, which is one of the nation's busiest veterans hospitals, and will examine a wide range of financial records, documents show.

The *Times* has published a series of stories this year on Haley's tumultuous finances.

It took a \$28.7 million cash infusion from a regional VA reserve fund to cover a deficit at the end of fiscal 2011, which ended Sept. 30.

Haley's leaders took "emergency measures" to eliminate the deficit, while denying that those measures would impact veteran care.

Still, some veterans have complained about difficulties getting the facility to pay for some types of medical care.

Haley, for example, cut access to a program in which the VA pays for a veteran's treatment outside the VA in cases in which the VA does not offer a service, is too busy or in emergencies, documents show.

This program is called "fee basis."

Haley spokespersons have denied making budget cuts, denied operating under a deficit and denied cuts to "fee basis" spending, in spite of budget documents contradicting their statements.

PTSD — there's an app for that **Federal News Radio**

<http://www.federalnewsradio.com/?nid=85&sid=2622766>

Tuesday – November 8, 2011

By [Jack Moore](#)

A smartphone application — released by the Defense and Veterans Affairs Departments in the spring — leverages the power of mobile technology to help veterans better manage post-traumatic stress disorder.

[PTSD Coach](#), a 508-compliant free app, was created for service members, veterans and, even, civilians with PTSD or PTSD-like symptoms, said Dr. Sonja Batten, VA's deputy chief consultant for specialty mental health, in an interview on the [Federal Drive with Tom Temin and Amy Morris](#).

It provides users with stress-management tips and tools — but with a mobile twist. For example, users can upload special photos or their favorite soothing music. When they're stressed, the app provides a convenient place to turn for de-stressing.

The app is not a replacement for standard face-to-face care, Batten acknowledged. "But it provides tools that can be used by the individual either alone or in collaboration with a treatment provider, either during or before sessions," she added.

The app was launched in April and, so far, has seen about 31, 500 downloads, Batten said. The app was developed by VA's National Center for PTSD over about 15 months, she said.

Much of the effort in developing the app was spent on researching the content — not necessarily software development, Batten said. "With the PTSD coach, we wanted to make sure that the information would be, first of all, relevant and useful to veterans and what they would be looking for from such an app, but also that it would be clinically appropriate, and that what we would be providing would be helpful to individuals to get through those difficult moments," she explained.

Batten said the app — which has a five-star rating in the iTunes app store — has received positive, though mostly informal feedback from users. One of the possible benefits of the app, though, is that it can be downloaded anonymously, Batten said.

She said the app could be a "first step" for people who still sense a stigma attached to PTSD.

The Federal Communications Commission recently awarded the "PTSD Coach" app its [Advancements in Accessibility Award](#). The FCC award "is really a validation for us," she said.

Senate OKs Bill To Boost Hiring Of Veterans

National Public Radio

<http://www.npr.org/2011/11/11/142227725/senate-oks-bill-to-boost-hiring-of-veterans>

by [Scott Horsley](#)

November 11, 2011

The Senate has approved just in time for Veterans Day a series of tax credits designed to make it easier for veterans to find jobs.

Some 240,000 veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are out of work. The Senate bill would provide tax breaks of up to \$9,600 to private employers who hire them.

The tax credits are the first sliver of President Obama's \$447 billion jobs package to actually win bipartisan approval in the Senate. Obama says service members who fought for their country shouldn't have to fight for jobs when they come home.

"If you can oversee millions of dollars of assets in Iraq, you can help a business balance its books here at home," he said during a visit to a Virginia military base last month.

'The Least We Could Do'

Obama might have been talking about Maria Canales. The former Army staff sergeant was a finance management specialist in Iraq, where she served as a kind of war zone ATM for the troops.

"We would go on missions to bring soldiers money in cash," Canales said. "If they wanted to send extra money home, we would have check-cashing services there as well."

After Canales left the Army in 2007, she struggled for years to find permanent work, finally landing a job with an insurance company just a few weeks ago. Nearly 1 in 8 veterans who left the service in the past decade is unemployed — a higher jobless rate than the national average. Canales says that with tens of thousands of additional troops set to come home to a tough job market, more help is needed.

"Some guys and gals have been deployed well over four or five times," she said. "That kind of price is very high. And the least we could do is give them peace of mind when they come home."

President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama meet troops during a stop at Joint Base Langley-Eustis in Hampton, Va, on Oct. 19. Obama says service members who fought for their country shouldn't have to fight for jobs when they come home.

Veteran-Civilian Gap

Surveys by the Pew Research Center found veterans are generally more critical of Obama's role as commander in chief than is the general public. But Obama scores higher with recent veterans — the troops he calls "the 9/11 generation."

"Already your generation has earned a special place in America's history," he told troops at Joint Base Langley-Eustis in Virginia last month. "For that you've got a grateful nation."

The nation has been quick to tell veterans how grateful it is. Nine in 10 veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan told Pew researchers someone has thanked them for their service. At the same time, 84 percent say the public doesn't understand the problems that military families face. Longtime war correspondent Tom Ricks says he worries about the widening gap between the 1 percent of Americans who now fight U.S. wars and the 99 percent who are increasingly detached from military service.

"I'm always struck when I'm in that part of America where nobody knows anybody in the military," Ricks said. "And they're still sort of puzzled about why people do this and what it means. Then there's other parts of the country, usually around bases, where everybody knows somebody. And it simply is a different America."

Ricks, who is now with the Center for a New American Security, recalls talking with a kindergarten teacher just outside Fort Campbell, Ky., the home of the 101st Airborne Division and some key special forces.

"She said one day a kid came running in off the playground and said two Black Hawks collided over Mosul," Ricks recalled. "She said, 'Do you know what that means? To be a kindergartener and know what a Black Hawk is? To know what Mosul is? And to know the implication: that some of our parents might be dead?' "

'People Are Stepping Up'

First lady Michelle Obama has tried to bridge the gap between civilians and the military with her Joining Forces campaign. She reassured soldiers and airmen at a Virginia military base last month that the other 99 percent of Americans haven't forgotten them.

"I know sometimes it feels like a struggle," she said. "Like sometimes we don't know as a nation what you sacrifice. What your families sacrifice. But know that people are stepping up."

Michelle Obama announced Thursday new commitments from the private sector to hire 100,000 veterans and military spouses over the next couple of years. She says everyone can do something to honor the men and women who serve — especially when so many owe so much to so few.

These media clippings are put together by AFGE's Communications Department, for any inquiries please contact us at 202.639.6419