

Thresholds, VNA Foundation launch initiative to address growing need for women veteran mental health services

The Women Veterans Health Project will provide comprehensive treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and military sexual trauma while connecting veterans to employment, housing and family services

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Chicago – A new mental health and social services program specifically tailored for women veterans, and which will create a model for women veteran-serving programs throughout the state and country, will launch in Chicago this month.

Thresholds, an agency experienced in addressing the health needs of veterans and others, and the VNA Foundation, a funder of healthcare access for underserved populations, worked together to develop the Women Veterans Health Project. The Project was created to respond to the increasing number of women veterans that require a broad range of mental health and social services to manage the impact of military-related traumas. A first-of-its kind program in the Chicago area, the Project partners Thresholds with the VA and other social service agencies to help servicewomen get the resources they need to live hopeful, healthy and productive post-military lives.

“Alarming rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, substance abuse, unemployment, and homelessness plague all veterans. But the cause of these negative outcomes, and the barriers to recovery, are different for women veterans. That’s why we are developing a groundbreaking approach exclusively for women,” said Thresholds’ CEO Mark Ishaug. “They have served us heroically. Now, it’s our duty and obligation to serve them, to give them hope and to help them overcome the challenges they face.”

The Women Veterans Health Project, funded in large part with a planned three-year grant from the VNA Foundation, aims to serve women veterans by providing housing assistance, employment and education counseling and linkage, post-traumatic stress disorder therapies, substance abuse counseling, primary care, psychiatry, free day care, and more. In its first year, the initiative will ramp-up and

build networks while piloting an evidence-based intervention, developed by Dr. Kim Mueser, formerly of Dartmouth College, and presently the Executive Director of the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University, for veterans facing post-traumatic stress disorder. Years 2 and 3 of the initiative will expand the program to serve more women, and will use evaluation data to inform the creation of a scalable model for other service providers to implement.

Thresholds is uniquely positioned to launch an innovative and comprehensive initiative that addresses the multifaceted needs of women veterans. For the past two years it has served approximately 300 veterans through its Veterans Project, and it is now leveraging these resources, partnerships and knowledge as it implements the Women Veterans Health Initiative.

"Women veterans face all the same challenges as their male counterparts—but with additional burdens as well," said VNA Executive Director Rob DiLeonardi. "As has been increasingly documented via congressional hearings, military tribunals and newspaper articles, many women serving in our armed forces have been victims of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) or face other mental and physical health issues. In addition, many are single mothers who require assistance with childcare and transportation in order to access healthcare. The Women Veterans Health Program, with its holistic and comprehensive approach, is specifically designed to address their distinct needs. We are excited to help implement this groundbreaking program to assist these most-deserving veterans."

DiLeonardi added that VNA Foundation's support comes under the auspices of its Special Initiatives program. VNA Special Initiatives are proactive grants for innovative purposes, and represent the foundation's highest level of philosophical and financial commitment. In fact, VNA's grant of \$150,000 to support year one of the Women Veterans Health Program is, he said, the largest single grant in VNA Foundation history.

The program's acknowledgement—and accommodation--of the distinct needs of women veterans is what fuels both VNA's and Thresholds' strong commitment to the program. For example, Project programming is designed with the recognition that many women do not identify themselves as veterans—nor do they actively seek out services from the Veterans Administration, because the VA can be perceived as patriarchal and unfriendly towards women. As a result, women veterans are more scattered throughout the greater social service network and less inclined to take advantage of programs specifically designed to help them adjust to post-military life.

Some of the services provided under the Women Veterans Health Project include the following.

- **Treatment for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).** Incidents of rape and sexual assault in the military go widely under-reported; in fact, a sample of servicewomen

raped in the military indicated that an alarming 75 percent did not report the incident. Also, because recent military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan have seen more women than ever before on the front lines, increasing numbers of women veterans are experiencing PTSD but their barriers to recovery are different.

- **Cognitive Restructuring Therapies** in both individual and group settings, taking participants through the recovery process and allowing them to share their experiences.
- **A Holistic and Comprehensive Approach Providing an Array of Services.** The “difference maker” of the Women Veterans Health Project is its recognition that efforts to treat PTSD or MST cannot be fully accomplished unless other hurdles such as homelessness, unemployment or substance abuse are also cleared. To do so, Thresholds seeks to connect women veterans to a variety of complimentary services including: housing assistance (community- and agency-based housing using HUD-VA vouchers and Thresholds’ Client-Assistance Fund); child care support; Employment and Education Support (veterans will work with supportive education specialists to assess their educational background and explore education options); Physical and Psychiatric Health Care (through a long-standing partnership with the UIC College of Nursing, Thresholds maintains two Integrated Health Care (IHC) clinics to ensure both physical and mental health needs are promptly addressed).

“As more and more women enlist, deploy, and return home, the need for comprehensive stand-alone women veteran programs is greater than ever,” said Ishaug. “Thresholds is well positioned to become a leading provider of programs geared specifically toward women based on a proud record of serving all veterans, and the mental health community overall.”

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About Thresholds

Established in 1959, [Thresholds](http://www.thresholds.org) provides healthcare, housing, and hope for thousands of persons with mental illness in Illinois. Through research, employment, advocacy, care, and housing, Thresholds assists and inspires people with mental illness to reclaim their lives. For more information about Thresholds, please visit our website at www.thresholds.org

About the VNA Foundation

VNA Foundation was founded in 1890 as the Visiting Nurse Association of Chicago, an organization that employed its own nurses and other health professionals to provide health care to the underprivileged. Among its founders was pioneering social activist and Nobel Prize winner Jane Addams.

Since 1995, however, the VNA Foundation has not provided direct nursing services. Instead, VNA has operated exclusively as a grant making foundation, giving financial support to nonprofit organizations offering home- and community-based care to the medically underserved. In FY 2013, the VNA Foundation awarded 62 grants amounting to more than \$2 million. Recipients of the grants include a variety of agencies providing healthcare and health services to the working poor, the homeless, and the disenfranchised. For more information on the VNA Foundation, please visit www.vnafoundation.net.