



Highlights of GAO-09-899T, a testimony before the Subcommittees on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs and Health, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Historically, the vast majority of VA patients have been men, but that is changing. VA provided health care to over 281,000 women veterans in 2008—an increase of about 12 percent since 2006—and the number of women veterans in the United States is projected to increase by 17 percent between 2008 and 2033. Women veterans seeking care at VA medical facilities need access to a full range of health care services, including basic gender-specific services—such as cervical cancer screening—and specialized gender-specific services—such as treatment of reproductive cancers.

This testimony, based on ongoing work, discusses GAO's preliminary findings on (1) the on-site availability of health care services for women veterans at VA facilities, (2) the extent to which VA facilities are following VA policies that apply to the delivery of health care services for women veterans, and (3) some key challenges that VA facilities are experiencing in providing health care services for women veterans. GAO reviewed applicable VA policies, interviewed officials, and visited 19 medical facilities—9 VA medical centers (VAMC) and 10 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC)—and 10 Vet Centers. These facilities were chosen based in part on the number of women using services and whether facilities offered specific programs for women. The results from these site visits cannot be generalized to all VA facilities. GAO shared this statement with VA officials, and they generally agreed with the information presented.

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## VA HEALTH CARE

### Preliminary Findings on VA's Provision of Health Care Services to Women Veterans

#### What GAO Found

The VA facilities GAO visited provided basic gender-specific and outpatient mental health services to women veterans on-site, and some facilities also provided specialized gender-specific or mental health services specifically designed for women on-site. Basic gender-specific services, including pelvic examinations, were available on-site at all nine VAMCs and 8 of the 10 CBOCs GAO visited. Almost all of the medical facilities GAO visited offered women veterans access to one or more female providers for their gender-specific care. The availability of specialized gender-specific services for women, including treatments after abnormal cervical cancer screenings and breast cancer, varied by service and facility. All VA medical facilities refer female patients to non-VA providers for obstetric care. Some of the VAMCs GAO visited offered a broad array of other specialized gender-specific services on site, but all contracted or fee-based at least some services. Among CBOCs, the two largest facilities GAO visited offered an array of specialized gender-specific care on-site; the other eight referred women to other VA or non-VA facilities for most of these services. Outpatient mental health services for women were widely available at the VAMCs and most Vet Centers GAO visited, but were more limited at some CBOCs. While the two larger CBOCs offered group counseling for women and services specifically for women who have experienced sexual trauma in the military, the smaller CBOCs tended to rely on VAMC staff, often through videoconferencing, to provide mental health services.

The extent to which the VA medical facilities GAO visited were following VA policies that apply to the delivery of health care services for women veterans varied, but none of the facilities had fully implemented these policies. None of the VAMCs and CBOCs GAO visited were fully compliant with VA policy requirements related to privacy for women veterans in all clinical settings where those requirements applied. For example, many of the medical facilities GAO visited did not have adequate visual and auditory privacy in their check-in areas. Further, the facilities GAO visited were in various stages of implementing VA's new initiative to provide comprehensive primary care for women veterans, but officials at some VAMCs and CBOCs reported that they were unclear about the specific steps they would need to take to meet the goals of the new policy.

Officials at facilities that GAO visited identified a number of challenges they face in providing health care services to the increasing numbers of women veterans seeking VA health care. One challenge was that space constraints have raised issues affecting the provision of health care services. For example, the number, size, or configuration of exam rooms or bathrooms sometimes made it difficult for facilities to comply with VA requirements related to privacy for women veterans. Officials also reported challenges hiring providers with specific training and experience in women's health care and in mental health care, such as treatment for women veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder or who had experienced military sexual trauma.