



United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

160523

**Health, Education and Human Services Division**

B-280037

May 21, 1998

The Honorable Lane Evans  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
House of Representatives

Subject: Women Veterans' Health Care: VA Efforts to Respond to the  
Challenge of Providing Sexual Trauma Counseling

Dear Mr. Evans:

The enclosed information responds to your follow-up questions about our testimony before the Subcommittee on Health on April 23, 1998, on VA's sexual trauma counseling programs and supplements that testimony. We will make copies of this correspondence available to other interested parties on request.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this information further, please contact me on (202) 512-7101.

Sincerely yours,

Stephen P. Backhus  
Director, Veterans' Affairs and  
Military Health Care Issues

Enclosure

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION ON VA'S  
SEXUAL TRAUMA COUNSELING PROGRAMS

This enclosure details your questions and our responses, which supplement information in our testimony before the Subcommittee on Health, Women Veterans' Health Care: VA Efforts to Respond to the Challenge of Providing Sexual Trauma Counseling (GAO/T-HEHS-98-138, Apr. 23, 1998).

1. **Did you make attempts to contact women veterans' coordinators at medical facilities or regional offices during your study? How accessible by phone are they? Would you recommend that VA designate more full-time coordinators?**

The scope of our work did not include calling women veterans' coordinators to determine their accessibility by phone nor did we try to determine whether VA needs more full-time women veterans' coordinators. The objectives of our study were to determine (1) the extent to which sexual trauma counseling services are available, (2) the extent to which women veterans are using these services, and (3) what VA is doing to evaluate the effectiveness of its sexual trauma counseling programs. Before starting our study, we neither knew that the accessibility of women veterans' coordinators was a concern, nor did women veterans indicate that they had such concerns during our discussions with them. The women veterans' coordinators at the medical centers we visited were full-time coordinators. The women veterans' coordinators at the two regional offices we visited, however, were part time; although both expressed a desire to have more time for outreach efforts, they did not indicate that they could not respond to women veterans' concerns and calls.

2. **Did you make any effort to systematically evaluate individuals' preference for counseling services in VA, in Vet Centers, or by contract? What were your findings about the advantages or disadvantages to care in each setting?**

We did not evaluate individuals' preferences for counseling services in VA, Vet Centers, or by contract. We asked women veterans what they liked and disliked, however, about the health care and counseling services available to them. The women we spoke with were generally pleased with the services they were receiving regardless of the setting. The women veterans who were receiving counseling in Vet Centers liked the less formal atmosphere and thought the Center gave them more privacy. One veteran commented that she worked for VA and felt she could better keep her counseling confidential at the Vet Center.

**3. Is it GAO's opinion that VA has adequate resources to address the growing demand for these services?**

Our review of VA's sexual trauma counseling program did not include an analysis of VA's resources so we cannot evaluate the adequacy of VA's funding for sexual trauma counseling services. It is difficult to identify the resources allotted for sexual trauma counseling because funding for most of VA's sexual trauma counseling programs is not earmarked or specifically identified. Although Vet Centers may possibly be able to identify sexual trauma counseling resources because they identify the counselors dedicated or qualified to provide this counseling, this is not the case for medical centers. Sexual trauma counseling is one of many services provided with resources allocated for medical centers' mental health care. We did note in our testimony, however, that staff associated with the sexual trauma counseling programs at three locations we visited expressed some concern about their ability to adequately respond to the demand for counseling.

**4. Did you uncover needs for any enhanced authority for VA sexual trauma counseling services during your study?**

Our work revealed that (1) reservists and National Guard personnel traumatized while serving on active duty for training and (2) individuals traumatized while on active duty but separated from the military with less than 2 years of service are not eligible for sexual trauma counseling. According to an opinion by VA's Office of the General Counsel, a legislative amendment would be needed to make these veterans eligible for sexual trauma counseling. Although we do not know to what extent this presents a problem for these veterans nationwide, VA officials told us that some of these individuals have unsuccessfully sought care in the VA system. This is one area that may warrant closer attention and additional evaluation.

(406153)



---

  

---

**Ordering Information**

**The first copy of each GAO report and testimony is free. Additional copies are \$2 each. Orders should be sent to the following address, accompanied by a check or money order made out to the Superintendent of Documents, when necessary. VISA and MasterCard credit cards are accepted, also. Orders for 100 or more copies to be mailed to a single address are discounted 25 percent.**

**Orders by mail:**

**U.S. General Accounting Office  
P.O. Box 37050  
Washington, DC 20013**

**or visit:**

**Room 1100  
700 4th St. NW (corner of 4th and G Sts. NW)  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC**

**Orders may also be placed by calling (202) 512-6000  
or by using fax number (202) 512-6061, or TDD (202) 512-2537.**

**Each day, GAO issues a list of newly available reports and testimony. To receive facsimile copies of the daily list or any list from the past 30 days, please call (202) 512-6000 using a touchtone phone. A recorded menu will provide information on how to obtain these lists.**

**For information on how to access GAO reports on the INTERNET, send an e-mail message with "info" in the body to:**

**[info@www.gao.gov](mailto:info@www.gao.gov)**

**or visit GAO's World Wide Web Home Page at:**

**<http://www.gao.gov>**

---

**United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001**

<p><b>Bulk Rate Postage &amp; Fees Paid GAO Permit No. G100</b></p>
---

**Official Business  
Penalty for Private Use \$300**

**Address Correction Requested**

---