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## For women who served, getting them to see themselves as veterans is a battle

U.S. Army veteran Tiffany Rogers suffered from depression and other issues that left her homeless recently. New Visions House of Hope has helped her find a home and get her life back on track.

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### VA, service organizations reach out to female veterans.

Tiffany Rogers watched the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, unfold from the gym at Fort Lewis, Wash. The installation was quickly locked down, tanks began rumbling through the streets and Rogers' career in the Army changed dramatically.

She deployed to Germany as a medic, helping treat troops wounded in Afghanistan and then Iraq.

"At first it was exciting," she said. "It seemed to be what I wanted."

She had joined the Army as a carefree teenager out of high school in Anne Arundel County, but as the conflicts wore on, Rogers said, a depression settled over her, and she left the military in late 2003.

Rogers, now 34, said she's still processing her military experience. But it wasn't until this year that she started working with the VA to get help.

Her experience is typical of women leaving the military, advocates say: They often don't think of themselves as veterans — they're not men, they might not have served in combat, they might not have completed their 20 years and retired. As a result, many overlook the services due to them — sometimes for years.



Maryland is home to about 58,000 female veterans, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. They make up about 13 percent of the total veteran population in the state — for now.

The VA expects the number to grow in coming years while the number of male veterans declines. By the end of the decade, Maryland is forecast to have the highest proportion of female veterans of any state.

With the Defense Department set to open almost all military jobs to women next year, veterans service organizations expect the health care needs of future female veterans to change. They're trying to prepare now.



The American Legion is planning a survey to better understand the attitudes of female veterans. LaRanda Holt, the organization's assistant director for women and minorities, said she hopes the results will reveal why women often don't identify themselves as veterans.

"We would like to see where the disconnect is," she said.

For years, Rogers said, pride — and a sense that others needed help more — stopped her from reaching out.

"I figured, 'Save the resource for another veteran who isn't as able as I am,'" Rogers said. After she left the Army, she worked a succession of jobs, including a stretch managing a Radio Shack in Washington state.

Her life changed this year when she was charged with domestic assault in Tennessee. A judge ordered her home to Maryland, and she was on the brink of homelessness.

"Now it's sink or swim," Rogers said. "I need those resources now."

Rogers got help from New Vision House of Hope, a Baltimore organization that works with veterans and others who need housing. She's now renting a home in West Baltimore and beginning a process of introspection and counseling to try to come to terms with some of her experiences in the military.

"I have the internal resources to maintain a stable life," she said. "It's just very hard to get past the emotional aspects of things."

With women reluctant to come forward, the VA and other organizations try to advertise their services — with mixed results.

An expo for female veterans at the Baltimore War Memorial last week attracted recruiters from several employers, but at noon there appeared to be few women browsing the stalls.

Officials at the Maryland VA's women's health care program said they're working to encourage female veterans to come to the hospital.

Dr. Catherine Staropoli has seen the services for women grow in the past two decades. When she started in 1995 the VA had a part-time women's clinic with about 200 patients. Today that's up to about 4,200, but she wants to see the figure continue to grow.

"One of our biggest goals is to get women veterans to come in," Staropoli said.

Some of those who seek help on leaving the military find it smooths their transition back to civilian life.

Inita Nesmith left the Army as a sergeant in 2000. She didn't know what she wanted to do next in her life, but almost immediately began hunting for veterans' resources.

"When you get out of the military there's nobody standing there waiting," she said. "I had to maneuver myself in the system and find out what different services work for me."

But once she was plugged into the VA system, she secured money to study for an associate's degree in computer information systems. When she was pregnant three years ago, she had all her maternity care at Baltimore's VA medical center.

"That for me is going to stick with me for the rest of my life," said Nesmith, 42. Without the aid she's been able to tap into, she said, she'd be lost.

Veronica Young never really found her footing after a seven-year stint in the Army in the late 1980s. She quickly ran through a severance payout and struggled to find steady work. She moved to Baltimore and started using drugs.

The VA suggested she consider enrolling at the Maryland Center for Veterans Education and Training, a program in East Baltimore with housing for women. Young was unsure, but decided last Veterans Day to stop by — half hoping, she said, that it would be closed and she could at least tell people she had tried.

"It was not until I went to MCVET that I felt like, 'I am a veteran,'" she said. "There are people just like me who went through some of the same stuff."

Young moved into an apartment in July. She's still getting support from MCVET. At 51, she feels ready to move on with her life.

"I got a foundation," she said. "I feel optimistic about being able to accomplish more."

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