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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Survey finding: VA needs to improve MST screening for women veterans**

*American Legion survey finds gender-specific VA medical services lacking in many areas*

WASHINGTON (March 23, 2011) – Nearly 40 percent of female veterans surveyed by The American Legion about VA health care were dissatisfied with the screening process for military sexual trauma. Among those, 26 percent said they were “very dissatisfied” with the screening process, which mandates that all enrolled veterans are universally screened for military sexual trauma.

These and other findings from the Legion-sponsored survey were made available March 22 during a press conference at the National Press Club. The online survey was conducted Jan. 5-31 by ProSidian Consulting, LLC, based in Charlotte, N.C.

At the press conference, Legion officials and ProSidian staff explained results of the 67-question survey, which was taken by 3,012 U.S. military women veterans worldwide. The survey measured 10 attributes of service quality regarding VA – reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, tangibles and understanding the customer. The survey provided an assessment of specialized services for women at VA and wasn’t designed to present a reflection of general VA services that women receive, according to ProSidian.

Among the findings: one in three female VA health-care users reported they were dissatisfied with their most recent experience with VA’s Women Veterans Program Manager, who counsels female patients in the system. The survey suggests there is room for significant improvement for VA to provide gender-specific services such as PAP smears and mammograms. And 38 percent of the survey’s respondents said they wouldn’t use a VA doctor for a second opinion – even if that opinion was offered at no charge.

“Research on this subject is important, yet it’s lacking,” said Verna Jones, director of the Legion’s Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division. “Women represent a vastly growing portion of U.S. veterans, comprising almost 20 percent of our armed forces and representing the fastest growing population of the VA health-care system.

“The results from this survey will be used to refine The American Legion’s outreach efforts (and) enhance its written and oral testimony to Congress and federal agencies. The survey results will also help identify unmet needs among women veterans and guide the

development of strategic remedies.”

The survey results provided insight about the gap between desired and actual performance of the VA health-care system for women using it. Of the 2,936 respondents who answered that specific question, 63 percent were enrolled in the VA health-care system. Of those, almost 30 percent were dissatisfied with the “reliability” of health care provided by the VA when compared to private health-care providers, and more than 30 percent were dissatisfied when they compared the “responsiveness” of VA to that of private health-care providers.

About 30 percent of respondents reported that they were not allowed an appropriate amount of time with their provider to discuss their specific health-related issues, and 38 percent expressed at least some level of dissatisfaction when asked to compare the credibility of health care provided by VA against similar services provided by private practitioners. Eleven percent were “very dissatisfied.”

“We found in our survey about 66 percent of the women ... not only registered for VA health-care service, but they also maintained their private health-care service,” said Adrian Woolcock, managing principal of ProSidian. “In addition in that subset, only 40 percent have ever used VA. The women veterans overall do know what their benefits are. It’s really a matter of focusing on improving the quality of service provided to women veterans.”

Other findings from the survey:

- Almost 25 percent of the respondents rated the convenience of VA facilities locations as poor, indicating that gender-specific care is difficult to obtain for a significant number of women.
- More than 25 percent of those surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with VA in security-related issues – especially the degree of sensitivity surrounding a patient’s personal information.
- Approximately one-fourth of the respondents said they were dissatisfied with the level of competence demonstrated by VA health-care providers when compared to private practitioners.
- Almost a quarter of the respondents gave VA a courtesy rating of less than positive.

Demographic information from the survey indicated that 34.6 percent of respondents were between ages 52 and 61, while 24.9 percent were ages 42-51. Eighty percent were white. More than 68 percent were non-combat veterans; the highest percentage of combat veterans who responded (16 percent) served in Operations Iraqi or Enduring Freedom.

Some who took the survey contacted The American Legion to offer details about their responses. In those discussions, the women said they didn't want a separate VA health-care system for women; rather, they want the same quality health care that men receive but tailored to meet gender-specific needs. Others said they hesitate to use VA facilities because they can't get child care on the days of their appointments.

"Changes in culture take time, and VA is starting to change its approach dealing with women veterans," American Legion National Commander Jimmie L. Foster said. "The American Legion wants to help VA make this important transition. VA health care needs to be more reliable, responsive and competent in its treatment of women."

A copy of the 82-page survey was delivered to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki by Peter Gaytan, the Legion's executive director in Washington, during the organization's 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Washington Conference.

"To move into the future, we have to recognize the changing demographics of America's veteran population," Gaytan said. "The commitment of this organization is to take this information, stand side by side with the leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs, (and) say there's a need to listen to what's being said.

"The Legion can be the voice, we can also be the action, but we need buy-in from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the administration and the leadership in this country."

To view the complete survey report, go [www.legion.org](http://www.legion.org).

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