



ISSUE BRIEF: ASSURE EQUITY IN ACCESS, UTILIZATION AND HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR MINORITY VETERANS

The Situation

- Growth in the number of women, ethnic and racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ members serving in the military has created an increasingly diverse veteran population. This diversity has created challenges for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)—specifically, to ensure equity in services, benefits, and health outcomes for all the veterans it serves.
- Black, Latino, and other ethnic minorities now comprise about 20% of VA's patient population; women veterans make up around 9% and an estimated one million veterans identify as LGBTQ+.

The Challenge

- Racial and ethnic minorities experience disparities in medical treatment and health outcomes. For example, rates of COVID-19 among Black and Hispanic veterans are double those experienced by white veterans. Among Veterans Health Administration (VHA) users, Black and Hispanic veterans fare worse than or the same as white peers on many mortality measures (except suicide). For example, Black veterans using VHA care are more likely to die of breast cancer, colorectal cancer, and HIV than their white peers. Hispanic veterans are more likely to die of colorectal cancer and HIV. Homelessness and unemployment are also more prevalent among Black veterans.
- Some veterans, including women and LGBTQ+ veterans, perceive VA health care environments as unwelcoming or threatening. There are also reports of delaying or foregoing VA care because of harassment.

The Solution

- The VA must work to identify common factors and biases that contribute to health inequities and disparate health outcomes for minority veterans, and develop educational tools and training protocols to ensure equitable, high-quality care for all veterans.
- The VA must investigate methods for increasing diversity among its staff (i.e., Black employees are under-represented in VA leadership roles with about 4% of Black vs. 12% of white employees) and increase the use of minority peer specialists to improve cultural sensitivity and personalize veterans' experiences within the system.
- The VA must ensure that women and veterans of color are appropriately represented in research, and that if disparate health outcomes for these groups are identified, they are thoroughly evaluated and resolved.

- The Veterans Experience Office should evaluate the VA experience for all minority veterans as it did with women veterans—including examining the patient care experiences of Black, Latino, Native American, and LGBTQ+ veterans.
- VA leadership must fully support the White Ribbon campaign to end veterans' harassment within all VA facilities—dedicating the proper resources and staff to achieve goals and successful culture change within the department.
- VA must create a culture throughout the system to ensure that *all* veterans are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve, and feel safe and welcome in seeking their earned benefits.