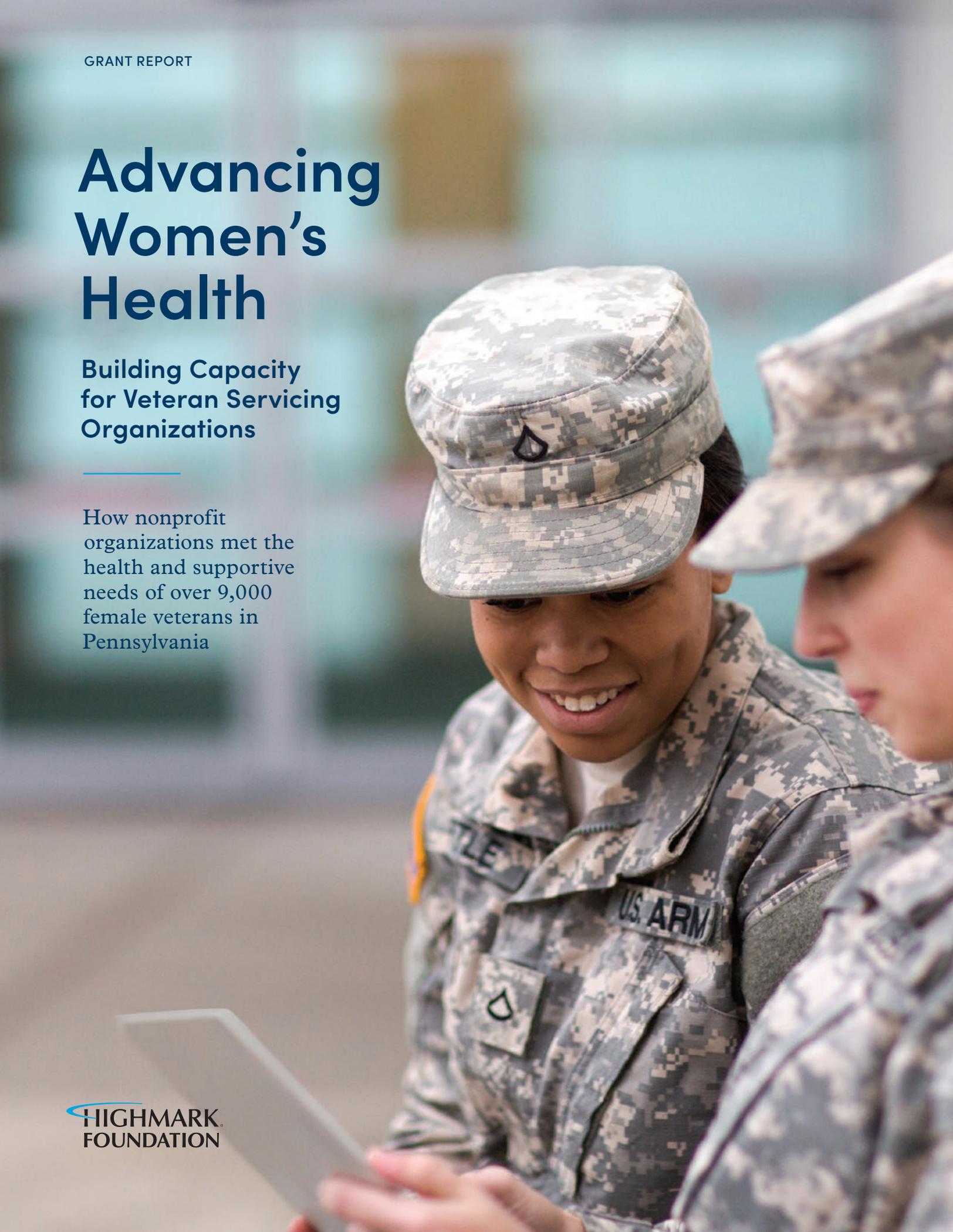


Advancing Women's Health

Building Capacity for Veteran Servicing Organizations

How nonprofit organizations met the health and supportive needs of over 9,000 female veterans in Pennsylvania





Synopsis: Female Veterans Capacity Building Grants

The Highmark Foundation (Foundation) has a history of addressing the health care needs of individuals and communities served by Highmark Inc. and its subsidiaries and affiliates.

In 2018, the Foundation issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to initiate or enhance services for female veterans with capacity building grants.

Eight organizations in central and western Pennsylvania were awarded a total of \$275,000 to implement measurable actions and interventions to address health care barriers for female veterans. The funding helped to provide accessible, coordinated, and comprehensive care

and supportive services, while encouraging these women to have an active role in their health.

As a result, these veterans now have access to quality resources and social services to help meet their needs, especially when dealing with challenges like military sexual trauma, depression, and homelessness.

In total, more than 9,000 lives were positively impacted by the initiative.

“The defense of our nation is a shared responsibility. Women have served in the defense of this land for years before our United States was born.”

RETIRED GEN. GORDON R. SULLIVAN
CHIEF OF STAFF OF THE ARMY, 1991-1995

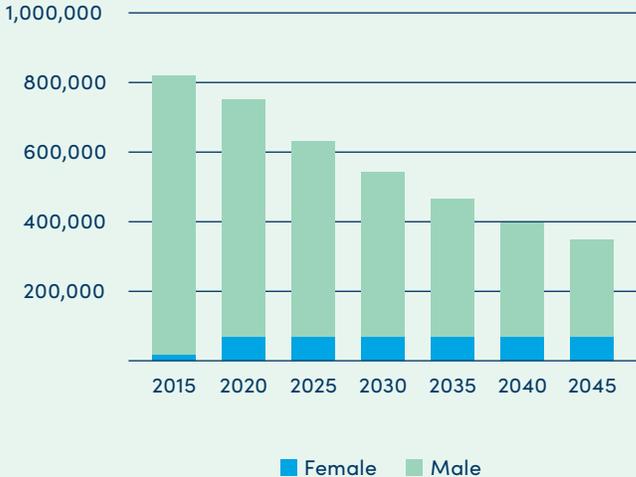


Understanding the challenges female veterans face

Women are the fastest growing group within the veteran population, comprising 10% of the current total. And, it's estimated that the population will continue to grow as the number of male veterans decreases. Pennsylvania forecasts follow this national trend.

With this fundamental shift in the veteran population comes unique challenges. Unfortunately, women do not have the support and guidance they need to meet even their basic needs. While some veterans adjust smoothly back into civilian life, others face complex challenges.

Pennsylvania Veteran Population by Gender Over Time



CHALLENGES

RETURNING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

For the first time, the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts saw American women engaged in direct combat — fighting on the battlefield side by side with men.

It's not surprising to now see, after returning to civilian life, these women experiencing conditions that have impacted male veterans for years — post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health issues, and physical disabilities.

Top Transitional Challenges	%
Navigating VA programs, benefits, and services	59%
Finding a job	55%
Financial struggles	47%
Depression	41%
Getting socialized to civilian culture	38%
Skills translation	37%
Contradictory information from different sources	33%
Disability	32%
Understanding GI Bill benefits	31%
Employment preparation	30%

Since 2002, Veterans Affairs (VA) has seen an 80% increase in female veterans seeking treatment and assistance. However, there are few gender-specific programs and services for female veterans.

LACKING BASIC HEALTH CARE ACCESS

The complex health and supportive needs of female veterans range from access to primary care and gender-specific providers to individual

and family support. Access to care includes a variety of concerns including:

- Insurance eligibility and benefits
- Proximity to a VA facility
- Rural settings
- Age, differently abled, or chronically ill
- Gender-specific health care needs
- Minority status

BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

It is estimated that 45%-75% of female veterans are in need of behavioral health services. Studies show that female veterans have higher rates of substance use disorders and suicide compared to both civilian women and male veterans.

Reports also show women veterans have higher rates of interpersonal trauma compared to male veterans, including much higher rates of military sexual trauma (MST) and intimate partner violence (IPV).

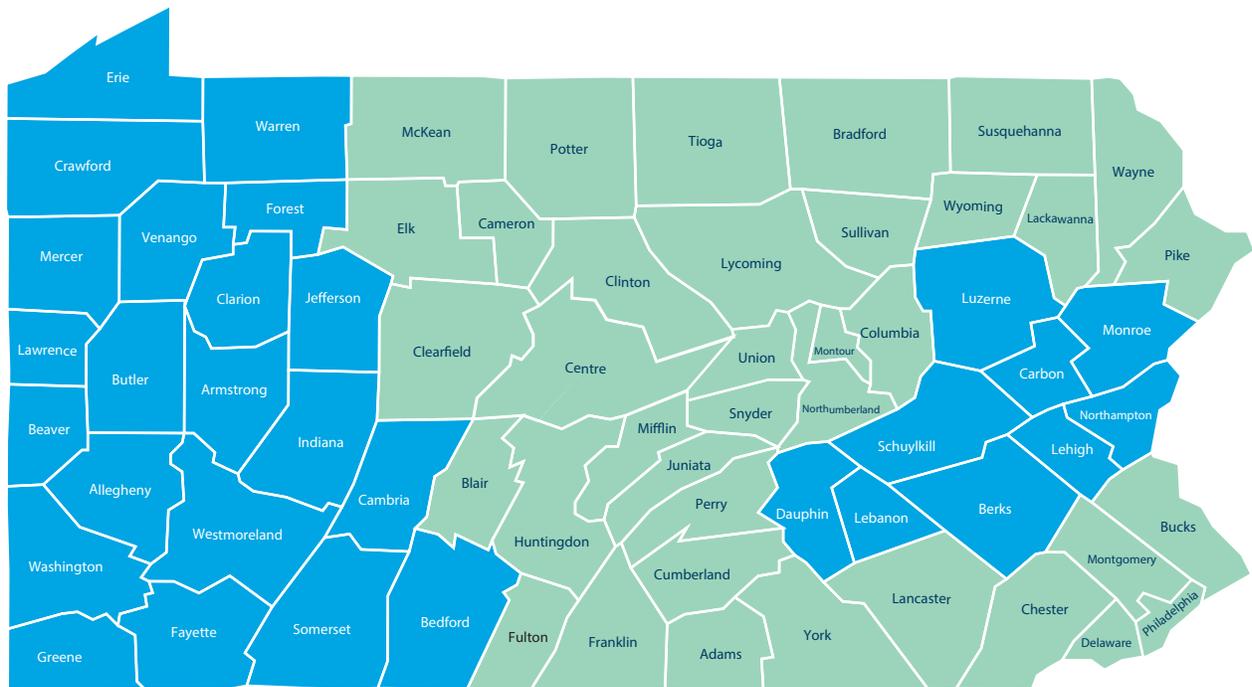
Unfortunately, the current uneven access to appropriate mental health services that returning U.S. veterans encounter echoes the disparities in access to quality mental health services for the general population.

To best support those who have served, it is imperative that programs supporting female veterans address these critical mental health needs in order to improve their overall health and well-being.

SUPPORTIVE SERVICE NEEDS

A growing number of female veterans face financial hardships. They are two to four times more likely than their civilian counterparts to be homeless and 9.4% of female veterans live in poverty.

Their most reported needs include housing and rent, employment, physical and mental health, and utilities. A VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) survey of women veterans showed that 38% of women who reported experiencing homelessness also have children. These women face unique barriers to overcoming homelessness, and frequently commented on the lack of support from anyone who could understand those barriers.



The grant program’s reach is indicated by the counties in blue.

About the eight organizations funded

In response to the Foundation’s RFP, eight organizations in central and western Pennsylvania were awarded a combined total of \$275,000 to implement measurable actions and interventions to address the health and wellness barriers facing female veterans.

Each organization’s grant activities supported these unmet needs across three categories:

- 1 **Access to care**
 - Providing continuity of care and linkages to community-based services
 - Connecting patients to care using a well-functioning referral system
 - Expanding or improving health

- 2 **Service delivery systems**
 - Team-based care
 - Integration of physical, oral, or behavioral health with primary care
 - Chronic disease management

- 3 **Education**
 - Health education and health promotion programs that empower individuals to improve their quality of life

The awarded grants allowed the organizations on the following page to establish integrated models of care, develop collaborative partnerships, and provide critical clinical services to female veterans.

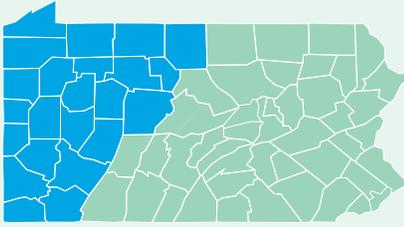
Take a look at the eight organizations funded, their grant purpose, and some program highlights.

	ORGANIZATION	GRANT PURPOSE
ACCESS TO CARE	United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania	This capacity building grant will enable the United Way 2-1-1 to develop an integrated platform that connects female veterans to quality and timely health and health-related services.
	Veterans Place of Washington Boulevard	Took a multi-pronged approach as it expands its Day Program support services to reach an increased number of female veterans who are homeless or at risk for becoming homeless.
SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEMS	Highlands Health: Services to Female Veterans	Utilizes patient navigators to establish a systematic, patient-centered approach focused on individual female veteran patients. The program will also collaborate with organizations that provide services to female veterans including referrals and consultations.
	Lehigh Valley Hospital, Inc.	The grant addresses military sexual trauma among women veterans in the Lehigh Valley through outreach and educational programming that foster post-traumatic growth.
	YWCA of Greater Harrisburg	Offering an evidence-based practice of illness management recovery (IMR), provided through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to female veterans residing in south central Pennsylvania counties.
EDUCATION	Adagio Health	The program will increase access to health and wellness services and promote integrated health care services for women veterans across western Pennsylvania.
	Institute for Military Veterans and Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University	This grant supports the PAServes Network, with support from the Coordination Center at Pittsburgh Mercy Health System, to overcome systemic challenges and to service delivery and health care access for veterans.
	Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit	This project, a joint venture with Duquesne University Veterans to Bachelors of Science in Nursing (VBSN) program, will train and certify groups of female veterans in mental health first aid.

HIGHLIGHTS	VETERANS SERVED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased available health-related resources in the 2-1-1 database from 220 to 242 in a veterans-specific database section. Connected 1,692 calls from female veterans with a veteran resource navigator. 	5,595
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Served four times as many female veterans this year than compared to past years, reaching 44 women. Hired a formerly homeless female veteran as the female veteran program specialist to oversee and help implement the female veterans program. 	44
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connected 56 veterans to care at the Highlands Health Clinic. Provided information regarding available support services to 1,152 female veterans in collaboration with local VFWs, VAs and other local veteran servicing organizations. 	1,208
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The timing of this project aligned with state and federal advocacy efforts to raise awareness of issues related to MST. Collaborated with 9 regional veteran servicing organizations to distribute resources to women who participated in focus groups and in-depth interviews. 	17
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The IMR series assisted 22 veterans in understanding their illness/diagnosis, symptoms, treatment, and how to use medication effectively and prevent relapses. All participants showed achievement in one or more of their recovery goals after completing the 11-week series led by a certified recovery specialist. 	22
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connected 400 women to care for a total of 658 unduplicated veteran patients attending nearly 1,700 medical visits. This included addressing behavioral health needs. Provided a pop-up health clinic at Veterans Place of Washington Boulevard. 	1,871
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the grant period, the PAServes network had its strongest growth to date, with 5,470 requests made by 1,872 unique clients. PAServes served 18 new female veteran clients with 26 health and wellness service requests. 	331
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three female veterans successfully completed the national Mental Health First Aid Training course to learn to identify and address the needs of those experiencing potential issues with mental illness. Project positively affected awareness of community attitudes about mental health and illness for female veterans who completed the training. 	3

Program Highlight: Adagio Health

FOOTPRINT



PREVIOUS LEARNINGS: PHASE I

Prior to the Highmark Foundation grant, Adagio launched Phase 1 of the Women Veterans Health (WVH) program to begin the assessment for and development of an integrated model of care for female veterans across Adagio's 23-county region. Adagio learned that female veterans sought out health services three times more often than male veterans. They also saw that the largest majority of female veterans were served at Adagio Health clinics in New Castle and Uniontown areas.

EXPANDING THEIR REACH: PHASE II

Receiving the grant from the Highmark Foundation, Adagio Health was able to launch the WVH Outreach and Education Campaign.

Campaign goals included:

- Expanding reach in Erie and Indiana counties.
- Building trust among female veterans.
- Implementing an integrated model of care.
- Providing education and

awareness around specific health care needs.

- Promoting health and wellness services – including family planning, reproductive health, breast and cervical cancer screenings, access to nutritional food, health care referrals, education and breastfeeding support, prenatal care, and education on topics such as healthy relationships and substance abuse.

PROGRAM DETAILS

Integrated model of health care: Using a collaborative care model of practice, Adagio Health partnered with behavioral health providers to give on-site evaluations and interventions at their clinics.

Educational Programming: Using curriculum focused on the health care needs of female veterans, Adagio Health provided holistic education and resource connections at their Indiana and Erie clinics.

I Am Not Invisible Campaign: Produced by the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs and now being replicated in 30 places around the United States, I Am Not Invisible (IANI) is a national awareness campaign designed to honor our female veterans, educate the public about some of the unique challenges women veterans face when they come back from their service, and give our communities an opportunity to show them they are respected and supported – that they are not invisible.

Adagio Health brought this campaign to western Pennsylvania, featuring 89 female veterans from 15 different counties and representing all branches of the armed forces.

Held on November 6, 2019 as a salute to Veteran's Day, Adagio Health held the IANI exhibit and reception at the Senator John Heinz History Center to honor those who participated in the photoshoot.

RESULTS

- **Connected 400 women to care for a total of 658 unduplicated veteran patients attending nearly 1,700 medical visits** – including gynecological (family planning, STD screenings, and prenatal care), domestic/ interpersonal violence services, mammography, diabetes screenings, tobacco cessation, and immunizations.
- **Increased access to gender-sensitive sexual and reproductive health care available to veterans** – regardless of ability to pay – across 23 counties of western Pennsylvania, including many that are extremely rural.
- **Using Adagio Health data and patient-reported outcome measures to address the behavioral health needs of women veterans** as they relate to trauma, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and other behavioral health issues. The data also drove clinical decision-making to

improve behavioral health outcomes for patients in the care of Adagio Health.

- Hired new team members, including a director of integrated care to implement behavioral health screenings, assessments, treatments and/or referral programming, and two licensed behavioral health clinicians
- Collaborated with behavioral health and veteran servicing organizations, including Health Options, Community Care Behavioral Health, and PAServes to provide on-site behavioral health evaluations and interventions at Adagio Health clinics
- **Provided holistic education and resource connections to female veterans in Indiana and Erie counties.** The goal of the series is to increase knowledge of healthy lifestyle choices and preventive care options.
 - Held two all-day educational wellness retreats designed to help women make better choices in regard to nutrition, behavioral health, self-care, physical fitness, and sexual and reproductive health
 - 139 women participated, all indicating a greater understanding of the Seven Pillars of Mental Health* and recognizing symptoms of sexually transmitted infections



“ I felt Adagio Health and their personnel were so professional, helpful, and eager to advance the awareness and health of women veterans and women in general. Thank you. ”

**PARTICIPANT OF THE I AM
NOT INVISIBLE CAMPAIGN**

Successful Programming

Although services varied, each organization provided vital programming to meet the needs of Pennsylvania's female veteran population. Grantees established integrated models of care, developed collaborative partnerships, and provided critical clinical and behavioral health services to nearly 8,000 female veterans.

While many of these programs began and ended in 2019, a few programs expanded into 2020 and were impacted by Coronavirus CDC recommendations and state mandates. Some in-person group programs and educational sessions were able to go virtual, while others were suspended.

Successes achieved by these organizations demonstrate the impact that female veteran specific programming can have, while highlighting the gaps of care and unique needs of female veterans. In some cases, their impactful work has created funding opportunities to sustain and expand current efforts in servicing female veterans, and the learnings from this project can then be brought in to inform those conversations.

LESSONS LEARNED

Access to care

- Outreach, access to care, and social support coordination remain a challenge in rural areas.
- The most requested social services are housing, employment, physical and mental health, rent, car payments, and utilities.
- Due to social expectations and family obligations, female veterans tend to be harder to recruit for programs; child care was reported as a main challenge.
- Sensitivity in the health care setting is critical; participants had mixed feelings about being asked if they are a veteran or any questions about their military experience.
- A calming and welcoming environment is key to a positive health care experience.
- There is a significant need to provide at-risk and underserved women veterans with wraparound

services for their physical and mental health, employment, housing, and legal needs.

- It is extremely important that when veterans are asked for input on their experiences in life, they leave the conversation feeling listened to and validated so that they see the experience as valuable.

Service delivery systems

- Many referral opportunities may be missed due to service providers not being aware of the unique needs of veterans.
- Gender-specific care guidelines and services are necessary for women veterans.
- Integrated care management and follow-up care contribute to long-term solutions.
- Lack of trust and validation was expressed as a factor in not sharing needs with health care providers; training providers on the unique needs of female veterans will help validate their experiences in a provider setting and build trust.
- A significant number of veterans indicated they are struggling with anxiety and depression.
- Lack of acknowledgement for their service as a veteran was reported as a theme for many women veterans while in both provider settings and throughout the community.

Education

- The complex and challenging health care eligibility and benefits process deters veterans from receiving eligible benefits and qualifying for coverage.
- Lack of knowledge for this population contributes to unmet needs and feelings of isolation.
- Peer support provides a safe space for women who have served to share similar challenges.
- Education around symptoms, treatment, stress, how to use medication effectively, and handling triggers is imperative.

Although many women were reached through this funding, there are still unmet needs. Additional investment to sustain and grow these existing programs can minimize gaps in care and help our female veterans.



Special thanks to:
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Megan Andros

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- *A program modeled after Dr. Don Colbert's holistic approach to health from his book, "The Seven Pillars of Health."



Celebrating **20** years

ABOUT THE HIGHMARK FOUNDATION

The Highmark Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) private, charitable organization dedicated to improving the health, well-being, and quality of life for individuals who reside in the communities served by Highmark, Inc. and its subsidiaries and affiliates.

We fulfill our mission by awarding high-impact grants to charitable organizations that implement evidence-based programs aimed at improving community health. Central to the Foundation's mission is identifying and continuously reevaluating our region's prevailing health care needs.

By doing so, the Foundation remains at the forefront of those needs, well-equipped to pinpoint the issues that most urgently need support.

For more information, visit highmarkfoundation.org or call 1-866-594-1730.