

Women Veterans Health Care Summit

June 18-19, 2026 Sponsored by Richard H. Stewart Jr., American Legion Post 543

★ HONORING MORE THAN 250 YEARS OF SERVICE BY AMERICA'S WOMEN VETERANS ★

1775
REVOLUTIONARY WAR



1860s
CIVIL WAR



1917
WORLD WAR I



1940s
WORLD WAR II



1950s
KOREA



1960s-1975
VIETNAM



FIRST GULF WAR



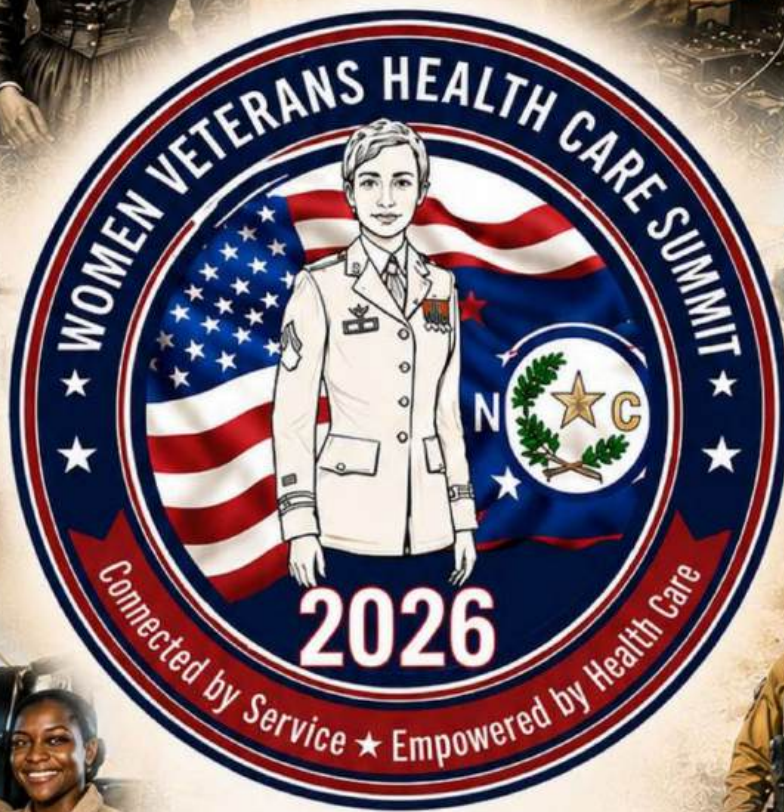
2000s
IRAQ / AFGHANISTAN



TODAY'S FORCE



TODAY'S FORCE



— 2026 — WOMEN VETERANS HEALTH CARE SUMMIT

★ OFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS

Connected by Service ★ Empowered by Health Care

Richard H. Stewart, Jr.
American Legion Post 543
St. James, North Carolina

★
June 18-19, 2026

VOLUME I

SUMMIT PROCEEDINGS AND
STRATEGIC PLAN FRAMEWORK



OFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS

Volume I, *Summit Proceedings and Strategic Plan Framework*

The 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit

Connected by Service • Empowered by Health Care

Hosted by

Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543, St James, North Carolina, 28461

June 18–19, 2026

Copyright

© 2026 Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543, St James, North Carolina 28461

All rights reserved.

This publication serves as the official historical record of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit conducted June 18–19, 2026. The Proceedings document the planning, presentations, panel discussions, breakout sessions, findings, recommendations, and community partnerships that emerged from the Summit.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced without permission except for brief quotations used for educational, governmental, or scholarly purposes.

Dedication

This volume is dedicated to the women who have served the United States in every generation of America’s military history.

Their courage, sacrifice, leadership, and continued service to their Nation and their communities inspired the creation of this Summit.

May these Proceedings honor their service while helping future generations of women veterans receive the recognition, health care, and community support they have earned through their selfless service to our Nation.



Preface

These Proceedings were prepared to document the first Women Veterans Health Care Summit and to preserve the knowledge, partnerships, and recommendations that emerged during the event.

Rather than functioning solely as a conference transcript, this publication chronicles the development of a community initiative designed to strengthen collaboration among organizations serving women veterans throughout coastal North Carolina.

National organizations—including the Department of Veterans Affairs, academic institutions, and veteran advocacy organizations—have produced extensive research identifying the challenges facing women veterans. Those studies have documented important progress while also identifying persistent barriers affecting access to health care, behavioral health services, transportation, awareness of benefits, and gender-specific care.

The Summit was intentionally designed to build upon that body of research.

Its purpose was not to repeat existing findings, but to ask a practical question:

How can communities translate national research into meaningful local action?

Throughout these Proceedings, readers will see that theme reflected repeatedly. Research informed the discussions. Education strengthened understanding. Collaboration generated ideas. Community partnerships produced recommendations intended to improve the lives of women veterans where they live and receive care.

Throughout the Summit, participants shared research, professional expertise, lived experiences, and practical strategies for improving access to care and strengthening support systems. The conversations consistently emphasized that meaningful progress depends not only on national policy but also on local leadership and sustained community collaboration.

These Proceedings preserve the presentations, discussions, recommendations, and lessons learned during this inaugural event. They are intended to serve as both a historical record and a practical resource for organizations seeking to improve services for women veterans in their own communities.

These Proceedings therefore represent both a historical record and a call to continued collaboration.



How to Use These Proceedings

The *Official Proceedings of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit* serve as both a historical record of the Summit and a practical resource for those committed to improving the health and well-being of women veterans.

This report is published as a coordinated two-volume set. Volume I, *Summit Proceedings and Strategic Plan Framework*, presents the historical narrative, keynote presentations, panel discussions, and strategic recommendations of the Summit. Volume II, *Presentation Materials, Reference Resources, and Digital Resources*, preserves the educational presentations, supporting documents, participant evaluation results, speaker profiles, and reference materials. Together, the two volumes provide a comprehensive and permanent record of the inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit.

Presentation summaries are contained in Volume I. The corresponding presentation slides, handouts, speaker profiles, participant evaluation results, and supporting reference materials associated with the Summit have been compiled in Volume II. Readers are encouraged to use both volumes together. While Volume I documents the history, proceedings, discussions, and strategic plan resulting from the Summit, Volume II preserves the educational resources and supporting materials that informed those discussions and recommendations.

Women veterans will find information about health care, wellness, community resources, and organizations dedicated to supporting those who have served. Health care professionals, Veteran Service Organizations, community leaders, and public health practitioners will find summaries of educational presentations, breakout discussions, and recommendations that may inform future programs and partnerships. Planning committees and event organizers may use these Proceedings as a reference for developing future Women Veterans Health Care Summits and other community-based initiatives supporting women veterans. Researchers, educators, and policymakers will find documentation of a community-centered approach that complements existing national research by focusing on practical implementation at the local level.

While these Proceedings document the events of June 18–19, 2026, they also reflect a broader commitment to translating research into action through education, collaboration, and sustained community partnerships. Readers are encouraged to use this publication not only as a record of the inaugural Summit, but also as a resource for continued learning, collaboration, and action in support of women veterans.



Acknowledgments: *A Community United in Service*

The Planning Committee extends its deepest appreciation to the many individuals, organizations, and community partners whose vision, generosity, expertise, and dedication made the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit possible. The Summit was not the work of a single individual or organization. Rather, it was the result of a shared commitment to improving the health and well-being of women veterans through collaboration, education, and service.

We first acknowledge the women veterans whose service to our Nation inspired the creation of this Summit. Their experiences, resilience, leadership, and continued engagement provided both the purpose and the motivation for this community initiative. We are especially grateful to every woman veteran who attended, participated, shared her experiences, and contributed to the discussions that shaped the Summit's recommendations and future direction.

The Planning Committee expresses its sincere appreciation to the leadership of Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543, and especially Commander Michael R. Carton, CMSgt, USAF (Ret.), whose steadfast support, leadership, and commitment made the inaugural Summit possible. As the Summit's host organization, Post 543 generously provided the meeting facilities, refreshments, organizational support, and countless hours of volunteer service that created a welcoming environment for participants and guests.

Special recognition is extended to the Planning Committee: Dr. Kathleen K. Roth, LTC, U.S. Army (Ret.); Michael R. Carton, CMSgt, USAF (Ret.); Dr. Jim McCriskin; and Steve Muir. Their collaborative leadership, thoughtful planning, and unwavering commitment transformed an idea into a successful community event dedicated to serving women veterans.

The Planning Committee also gratefully acknowledges the professional event staff of the Town of St. James, whose expertise and hospitality contributed significantly to the success of the Summit. We extend our appreciation to Lorna Brennan, Event Center Manager, and Meetings and Events Specialists Jon Zaley and Austin Ireland for their exceptional professionalism and attention to detail throughout the planning and execution of the event.

Our sincere appreciation is extended to the distinguished presenters and subject matter experts who generously shared their knowledge, professional experience, and passion for improving the lives of women veterans. Their educational presentations established the foundation for meaningful discussion, collaboration, and action.

We also gratefully acknowledge our community partners and participating organizations, including *Brunswick County Health Services, Fayetteville Coastal Veterans Affairs, Trillium*



Health Resources, Brunswick County Veteran Services, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, AARP North Carolina, Fayetteville Technical Community College, NAMI Wilmington, Home Instead, and many others whose partnership strengthened the Summit and expanded the resources available to participants.

Special appreciation is extended to women veterans Denise Kloeppell, Hillary Thomas, and Valerie Webster for their generous financial support of the inaugural Summit. Their willingness to invest personally in an event dedicated to fellow women veterans reflects the enduring spirit of service and commitment that continues long after military service has ended.

The Planning Committee also gratefully acknowledges the many volunteers whose generosity of time and service contributed to the success of the Summit. Volunteers included members of Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543, Summit attendees who willingly stepped forward to assist throughout the event, and other community members who supported registration, hospitality, logistics, and countless behind-the-scenes activities. Their willingness to serve wherever needed reflected the same spirit of service and teamwork that inspired the Summit itself. Finally, we express our sincere gratitude to Bruce Blomgren and Dr. Jim McCriskin for preserving the history of the Summit through photography and public relations documentation. Their efforts ensure that the story of this inaugural event will continue to inform, inspire, and encourage future generations of leaders committed to improving the health and well-being of women veterans.

As these Proceedings demonstrate, meaningful change is achieved when communities unite around a common purpose. It is our hope that the partnerships established through the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit will continue to grow, inspiring future collaboration and expanding opportunities to serve women veterans for years to come.

To everyone who contributed to this historic event, we offer our deepest gratitude and appreciation. Thank you for helping transform a shared vision into a lasting commitment to those who have served our Nation.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Contents

Table of Contents.....	vii
OFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS	ii
Volume I, <i>Summit Proceedings and Strategic Plan Framework</i>	ii
Copyright	ii
Dedication	ii
Preface	iii
How to Use These Proceedings	iv
Acknowledgments: <i>A Community United in Service</i>	v
PART I EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEALTH CARE IMPROVEMENT FOR WOMEN	1
Chapter 1 From Research to Action.....	1
What Do We Already Know?	1
From Research to Community Action	2
Chapter 2 Planning and Development of the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit	3
Recognizing a Community Need	3
Establishing the Vision	4
A Collaborative Planning Process.....	4
Developing the Requisite Format and Content Areas for the Summit.....	5
From Research to Community Action	6
Announcing the Summit	7
Building a Sustainable Initiative.....	7
Chapter 3 The Summit at a Glance.....	8
Summit Snapshot.....	8
Summit Theme	9
Summit Goals and Objectives	10
Summit Goals	10
Summit Objectives.....	10
Program Highlights	11



Community Partners	11
Attendance.....	12
Educational Resources.....	12
Regional Scope of the Summit	13
Chapter 4 Opening the Summit.....	14
Welcome to the Summit!	14
Welcome Remarks	15
Michael R. Carton Commander, Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543.....	15
Setting the Stage	16
Chapter 5 Introduction of the Summit Chair	17
Opening Address	17
Dr. Kathleen K. Roth, LTC, U.S. Army (Ret.) Summit Chair	17
From Research to Action.....	17
Recognizing a Changing Veteran Population	17
Learning from Research.....	18
Building Community Partnerships	18
Listening to Women Veterans	19
A Call to Action	19
Looking Toward the Future	19
Key Messages	20
Part II EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATIONS	20
Chapter 6 Public Health and Community Partnerships	21
Introduction	21
The Role of Local Public Health	21
Connecting Veterans with Community Resources.....	22
Prevention as a Foundation for Wellness	22
Building Stronger Community Partnerships	22
Key Takeaways	23
Looking Ahead.....	23



Presentation Materials	23
Chapter 7 Expanding Access to Behavioral Health Services	24
Introduction	24
Understanding Behavioral Health	24
Trillium's Mission	25
Improving Access to Care	25
Community Collaboration	25
Resources for Women Veterans	26
Key Takeaways	26
Looking Ahead	26
Presentation Materials	27
Chapter 8 Aging, Lifelong Wellness, and Preparing for the Future	27
Introduction	27
Redefining Healthy Aging	28
Prevention Remains the Best Medicine	28
Preparing for the Future	29
Supporting Caregivers	29
The Value of Community Engagement	29
Key Takeaways	30
Why This Matters	30
Presentation Materials	31
Chapter 9 Living with a Healthy Heart	31
Introduction	31
Understanding Heart Disease in Women	32
Major Risk Factors	32
Recognizing the Warning Signs	33
Prevention Through Healthy Living	33
Women Veterans and Cardiovascular Health	34
Taking Charge of Your Health	34



Key Takeaways	34
Why This Matters	35
Presentation Materials	35
Chapter 10 Behavioral Health, Suicide Prevention, and Supporting Women Veterans: Understanding Mental Wellness Through Awareness, Education, and Community Action	35
Introduction	36
The Changing Face of Women Veterans.....	36
Understanding the Challenges	37
Moving Beyond Awareness	37
How can communities translate research into meaningful local action?.....	38
Suicide Prevention: Every Conversation Matters	38
Building a Community of Support	39
Key Takeaways	39
Why This Matters	39
Every Life Matters	40
Immediate Resources	40
Additional Resources.....	40
Chapter 11 Breakout Session I	41
<i>Barriers to Effective Health Care for Women Veterans</i>	41
Chapter 12 Breakout Session II	45
<i>Behavioral Health and Mental Wellness</i>	45
Chapter 13 Breakout Session III	48
<i>Women's Health Across the Lifespan: Pre-, Peri-, and Post-Menopausal and Heart Health Care for Women Veterans</i>	48
PART IV SUMMIT OUTCOMES AND FUTURE DIRECTION	52
Chapter 14: Strategic Action Plan for Improving the Health and Well-Being of our Local Women Veterans.....	52
Introduction.....	52
Developing the Strategic Action Plan	53
Evidence Supporting the Strategic Action Plan	53



Strategic Priorities and Strategic Action Plan	54
Strategic Priority 1 - Prepare Today for Current and Future Health Care Needs of Women Veterans	54
Strategic Priority 2 - Improve Access to Comprehensive and Coordinated Health Care	56
Strategic Priority 3 - Strengthen Community Partnerships	58
Strategic Priority 4 - Expand Behavioral Health and Whole-Person Wellness.....	59
Strategic Priority 5 - Ensure Women Veterans' Voices Inform Future Planning	60
Strategic Priority 6 - Sustain the Women Veterans Health Care Summit	61
Chapter 15 Looking Forward	62
The Summit Was Only the Beginning	62
From Conversation to Action	62
Building on the Momentum	63
A Model for Other Communities	63
Continuing the Journey	63
Closing Reflection	64



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

PART I EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEALTH CARE IMPROVEMENT FOR WOMEN

Chapter 1 From Research to Action

What Do We Already Know?

For more than a decade, government agencies, universities, health care systems, and veteran advocacy organizations have examined the unique health care needs of women veterans. Their research has documented substantial progress while continuing to identify barriers involving access to care, behavioral health services, transportation, childcare, outreach, gender-specific care, awareness of available benefits, and coordination among service providers.

These national studies have provided an essential foundation for improving policies and programs serving women veterans. They have helped shape strategic planning throughout the Department of Veterans Affairs and informed recommendations from numerous public and private organizations.

Yet one important question remains:

How can these recommendations be implemented effectively within local communities?

The Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit was organized to begin answering that question.

Hosted by Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543, the Summit convened women veterans, health care providers, veteran service organizations, behavioral health professionals, public health agencies, community leaders, and government partners for two days of education, discussion, and collaborative problem-solving.

Rather than revisiting issues already documented in national research, participants examined how those findings affected women veterans in coastal North Carolina. They explored practical opportunities for improving coordination among existing organizations, increasing awareness of available resources, strengthening community partnerships, and identifying actions that could realistically be implemented at the local level.

Throughout the Summit, presenters contributed evidence-based information drawn from their respective fields, while women veterans shared their own experiences navigating health care systems and community resources. These combined perspectives produced recommendations grounded in both research and lived experience.



Accordingly, these Proceedings are organized around four guiding themes:

- **Research** — Understanding the current body of knowledge regarding women veterans' health care.
- **Education** — Sharing expertise and existing services from health care professionals, veteran organizations, and community partners.
- **Collaboration** — Bringing together organizations and individuals committed to improving services for women veterans.
- **Action** — Identifying practical recommendations capable of improving health outcomes through local implementation.

The Summit demonstrated that meaningful progress occurs when empirical research is combined with local leadership, community partnerships, and sustained commitment to implementation.

From Research to Community Action

Over the past decade, the Department of Veterans Affairs, academic researchers, and numerous public and private organizations have substantially expanded the body of knowledge concerning the health care needs of women veterans. These efforts have documented important progress while continuing to identify persistent barriers to care, including access to services, behavioral health, transportation, childcare, awareness of benefits, and gender-sensitive health care.

The Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit was not convened to duplicate this important work. Rather, it was established to build upon that foundation by bringing together women veterans, health care professionals, Veteran Service Organizations, community leaders, and public agencies to explore how nationally recognized challenges could be addressed through local collaboration.

Throughout the Summit, participants repeatedly returned to one guiding question:

What can we do—together, in our own communities—to improve the health and well-being of women veterans?

The presentations, discussions, and breakout sessions documented throughout these Proceedings reflect that shared commitment. They demonstrate how education, partnership,



and coordinated community action can complement existing research by translating knowledge into practical solutions.

In this way, the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit served not only as an educational event, but also as a catalyst for continued collaboration in support of women veterans.

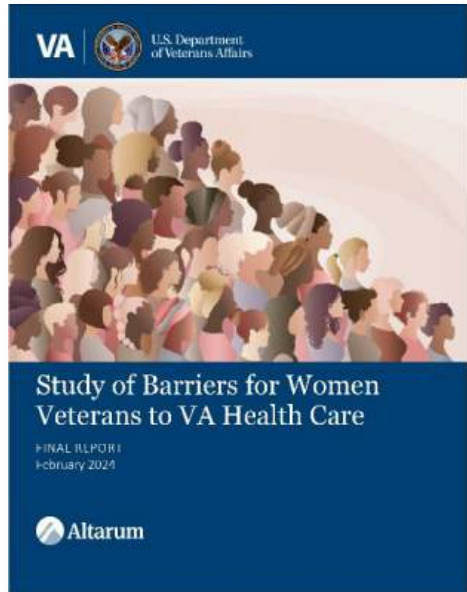
Chapter 2 Planning and Development of the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit

Recognizing a Community Need

The idea for the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit grew from a simple observation: *although women veterans represent one of the fastest-growing segments of the veteran population, relatively few community programs were designed specifically to address their unique health care needs.*



Across the east coast North Carolina, women veterans often received information about available resources through organizations that primarily served the broader veteran community. While these organizations provided valuable services, there is a perception that there are limited opportunities for women veterans to gather in an environment dedicated to discussing



issues unique to their military service and long-term health and wellness.

At the same time, numerous national studies conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs and other organizations have documented significant progress in women's veteran health care; however, these same studies identify many barriers that remain today. These reports consistently recommended improvements in outreach, coordination of care, behavioral health services, women's health programs, and access to community resources.

The question became whether meaningful progress could also begin at the local level.

Rather than waiting for solutions to emerge solely through national initiatives, leaders at Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543 envisioned a community-based summit that would bring together organizations already serving women



veterans while creating opportunities to identify practical solutions tailored to the needs of local veterans.

The result was the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit.

Establishing the Vision

From its earliest planning meetings, organizers agreed that the Summit should accomplish more than just simply present information.

The planning committee envisioned an event that would:

- Increase awareness of health care resources available to women veterans.
- Foster collaboration among federal, state, county, nonprofit, and community organizations.
- Encourage women veterans to engage directly with health care providers and resource specialists.
- Provide opportunities for participants to discuss barriers affecting access to care.
- Develop practical recommendations that could strengthen services within local communities.
- Establish a foundation for future Women Veterans Health Care Summits.

This vision shaped every aspect of the planning process, from speaker selection and panel discussions to breakout sessions and community exhibits.

As the first event of its kind hosted by Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543, the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit was to establish a foundation upon which future Summits—and future women health community initiatives—could continue to build.

A Collaborative Planning Process

On January 28, 2026, NC Post 543 Commander Mike Carton announced to the Post membership that he wanted the Post to be more proactive in women veteran health care. He also expressed his interest holding a conference on the topic and that he was standing up a planning group to explore the concept. Hearing no objections, Commander Carton



subsequently asked US Army veteran and NC Post 543 member Dr. Kathleen Roth, to move forward to establish a planning team to hold the conference.

The planning committee consisted of the following personnel:

- Dr. Kathleen K. Roth, Chair
- Mike Carton, Commander NC Post 543
- Jim McCriskin, MD, Public Relations Officer NC Post 543
- Steve Muir, Service Officer NC Post 543

Planning for the Summit reflected the collaborative approach that ultimately became one of its defining characteristics. Selected representatives from government agencies, health care organizations, veteran service organizations, nonprofit partners, and community leaders contributed their ideas and expertise throughout the planning process. Rather than focusing on a single organization or program, planners intentionally sought broad participation from partners representing multiple areas of women veterans' health and wellness.

This partnership model reinforced an important principle:

Improving the health and well-being of women veterans requires sustained cooperation among organizations whose missions intersect in service to women veterans.

Developing the Requisite Format and Content Areas for the Summit

The planning team explored different conference formats and decided on a hybrid approach for the Summit. A decision was made to format the event in such a way as to encourage veteran participation, allow for networking, ensure visibility of service provider resources, and select knowledgeable speakers who were specialists in various fields of women health and wellness.

In order to accomplish this, the following format was selected:

- Pre-event registration process including meal choices and breakout group selection;
- Plenary sessions where all attendees could attend;
- Selected topic breakout sessions where attendees could pre-select to attend;
- An open floor plan where service organizations could man their respective organizational areas and also could hear and see all presentations;
- Food and coffee service setup in same room to facilitate easy access during presentations;
- Special topic panel discussions; and
- Question and answer periods inserted after each speaker presentation.



This selected format was seen to have several benefits. For example, it would include formal presentations by subject matter experts while incorporating multiple opportunities for participant engagement. Panel discussions encouraged dialogue among professionals representing diverse disciplines. Service organization exhibits allowed participants to speak directly with organizations providing services to veterans and their families.

Most importantly, structured breakout sessions would give women veterans and community stakeholders an opportunity to discuss challenges, identify priorities, and recommend practical actions for improving local support systems.

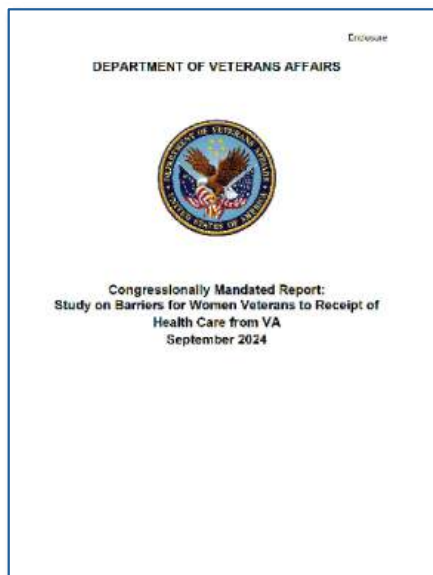
From Research to Community Action

Throughout the planning process, planners recognized that the Summit would benefit from the substantial body of research already produced by the Department of Veterans Affairs, academic researchers, and national veteran organizations. Rather than attempting to duplicate those efforts, planners chose to use existing research as the foundation for local discussion.

After reviewing the findings of several national studies conducted during the 2022-25 period, the planning team realized that these findings would be an excellent place to start the Summit discussions. From these findings, a list was developed of Summit topics and served as a foundation to develop the agenda items and identify speakers.

Topics selected included:

- The quality and accessibility of women's health care within the Department of Veterans Affairs;



- Local community health resources available for local veterans;
- Behavioral health services local availability;
- Current cardiovascular health of women veterans;
- Healthy aging and effects of menopause on women veterans;
- Suicide prevention and incidence statistics;
- Women veteran benefits and support services;

Each topic was selected to contribute to a broader understanding of women's health while encouraging



participants to view health care through a comprehensive lens that included physical, behavioral, emotional, and social well-being.

The program was designed to provide participants with both evidence-based information and relevant local resources related to the selected topics. It was also developed to ensure that attendees would have access to local regional experts on these topics. The Summit agenda can be found in **Appendix B** of this publication.

Announcing the Summit

Once the agenda was established, the planning team turned their attention to developing the Summit theme, unique artwork, announcement flyer, invitational letters, registration procedures, media coordination, and social media posts. To facilitate registration, a QR code was created to allow for more convenient registration using smart phones.

The announcement flyer can be found in **Appendix A** of this publication. It contained the QR code which provided the electronic link to the online registration site – <https://givebutter.com/womenVets>. Flyers were emailed to various service organizations including all American Legion posts in District 9. The flyer was posted on social media frequently as well as other online publication venues. Notification was also provided to local news outlets as well as neighborhood online newsletters. Hardcopies of the flyer were distributed to major local businesses nonprofit organizations. Press releases were published announcing the Summit and at least one announcement was made in the State Port Pilot as shown here.

A list of local subject matter experts was made and letters via email were sent to each potential speaker. Each potential speaker's letter contained an overview of recent empirical research, overarching Summit vision and goals. They were also informed in the letter of the Summit's anticipated key result which was to shape an actionable and measurable plan to move forward with.

Building a Sustainable Initiative

Although conceived as a one-day educational event and later expanded to a two-day event, planners consistently viewed the Summit as the beginning of a continuing initiative rather than a single conference.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Relationships established during planning continued to strengthen throughout the event as organizations discovered shared goals and identified opportunities for future collaboration.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that improving the health and well-being of women veterans requires ongoing communication among health care providers, veteran service organizations, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and women veterans themselves.

The inaugural Summit therefore served not only as an educational conference but also as the foundation for a growing regional network committed to improving services for women veterans.

Chapter 3 The Summit at a Glance

Summit Snapshot

Theme: Connected by Service • Empowered by Health Care

Host Organization: Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543

Location: Southport, North Carolina

Dates: June 18–19, 2026

Purpose: To improve the health and well-being of women veterans through education, collaboration, and community partnerships.

Primary Components:

- Opening / Welcome
- Educational Presentations
- Community Resource Exhibits
- Panel Discussions
- Breakout Sessions
- Participant Networking
- Summit Recommendations

Featured Topics:



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

- Public Health
- Behavioral Health
- Healthy Aging
- Cardiovascular Health
- Suicide Prevention
- Women's Health Across the Lifespan
- Community Partnerships

Legacy Goal: To establish a sustainable model for community collaboration supporting women veterans while creating a foundation for future Women Veterans Health Care Summits.

The official promotional flyer developed for the Summit is reproduced in Appendix A as part of the historical record.

A Historic Beginning

On June 18–19, 2026, Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543 hosted the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit, bringing together women veterans, health care professionals, Veterans Affairs representatives, public health officials, veteran service organizations, nonprofit agencies, elected officials, and community leaders for two days dedicated exclusively to improving the health and well-being of women veterans.

As the first event of its kind organized by the Post, the Summit represented a significant milestone for coastal North Carolina. It created an environment in which education, collaboration, and community engagement could occur across organizational boundaries while keeping the experiences and needs of women veterans at the center of every discussion.

Participants represented a broad spectrum of military service, professional disciplines, and community organizations. Their collective experience enriched every presentation, panel discussion, breakout session, and informal conversation throughout the event.

The Summit demonstrated that meaningful partnerships begin by bringing people together around a common purpose.

Summit Theme

Connected by Service • Empowered by Health Care



The Summit theme reflected the shared commitment of every participating organization.

Although attendees represented different agencies, professions, and backgrounds, they remained connected through a common mission: improving the lives of women veterans.

Health care was viewed broadly—not only as medical treatment, but also as behavioral health, preventive care, education, advocacy, community support, and access to services that promote lifelong wellness.

Throughout the Summit, this theme served as a reminder that no single organization can meet every need. Lasting progress depends upon cooperation among providers, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, veteran service organizations, and the women veterans they serve.

Summit Goals and Objectives

The Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit was organized to:

Summit Goals

- Share current evidence, policy updates, and best practices relevant to health care delivery;
- Promote interdisciplinary collaboration among clinicians, administrators, researchers, and community partners;
- Provide practical learning through breakout sessions focused on specialized women veteran topics; and
- Forge actionable strategies to improve health outcomes, quality, and accessibility for women veterans in our local community.

Summit Objectives

- Identify specific issues that negatively affect local women veterans from receiving quality health care; and
- Develop a measurable list of solutions that can be locally achieved through collaboration of services, resources, and health care providers.

These Summit goals and objectives guided both the planning process and the educational program presented throughout the two-day event.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Program Highlights

The Summit program combined several educational formats designed to maximize participant engagement.

Highlights included:

- General session presentations by subject matter experts;
- Interactive panel discussions;
- Community resource exhibits;
- Networking opportunities;
- Structured breakout sessions;
- Distribution of educational publications and resource materials; and
- Collaborative development of recommendations for future action.

This varied approach encouraged participants not only to receive information but also to contribute their own experiences, insights, and recommendations.

Community Partners

The success of the Summit reflected the participation of numerous organizations committed to supporting women veterans.

Representatives from federal, state, county, nonprofit, and community organizations provided educational presentations, staffed information tables, answered questions, and connected attendees with available services.

Together, these organizations demonstrated the value of coordinated community partnerships in improving access to care and expanding support for women veterans.

AARP-NC

American Legion *Be The One*

American Legion NC Legislative Commission

American Legion NC Post 543

Brunswick County Community Health

Brunswick County Veterans Services

Brunswick County Community Health

Brunswick County Sheriff's Dept

National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI)

Novant Cardiology

Novant Health Community Outreach

Novant Health Mobile Team

Office of Rep. Greg Murphy, District 1

Pointsett Publications

The CBD Medicinal Store

Trillium Health Resources



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Clear Skies Therapy

DAV Wilmington Chapter 11

HomeInstead

LifeCare

Veterans Creative Arts Program (VCAP)

VFW Post 12196

VA Fayetteville Veterans Health Care
Suicide Prevention Program

VA Fayetteville Veterans Health Care
Women's Health Program

VA Suicide Prevention Program

Attendance

The Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit welcomed participants from across coastal North Carolina and beyond. A total of **66 individuals preregistered** for the inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. **Fifty-two participants attended**, representing an **attendance rate of approximately 79 percent**.

Attendees included:

- Women veterans
- Family members and caregivers
- Veterans Affairs representatives
- Health care providers
- Public health professionals
- Veteran Service Organizations
- Nonprofit agencies
- Community organizations
- American Legion members
- Local leaders and invited guests

The diversity of participants contributed significantly to the richness of discussion throughout the Summit.

Educational Resources

Participants received a comprehensive collection of publications, informational guides, and reference materials prepared by participating organizations.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

These resources extended the educational value of the Summit beyond the two-day event and provided attendees with practical information they could continue to use and share within their communities.

Topics included:

- Women Veterans Health Care
- Behavioral Health
- Suicide Prevention
- Heart Health
- Community Health Services
- VA Benefits
- Women's Wellness
- Healthy Aging
- Community Resources

A complete bibliography of distributed materials is included in the Resource Appendix.

Regional Scope of the Summit

Although the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit was hosted in St. James, North Carolina, the Planning Committee intentionally designed the Summit to address the health care needs of women veterans throughout the approximate catchment area of the Fayetteville Coastal Health Care System. This regional perspective recognizes that women veterans often access health care, benefits, and support services across county boundaries and that meaningful improvements require collaboration among organizations serving this broader geographic area.

Throughout the Summit, participants consistently emphasized that improving the health and well-being of women veterans requires more than excellent medical care. It also depends upon increasing awareness of available resources, strengthening partnerships among organizations, and reducing barriers that prevent women veterans from accessing services. These barriers—including transportation challenges, travel distance, limited awareness of available programs, and coordination among service providers—often extend across multiple counties.



For these reasons, the Summit adopted a regional perspective. By encouraging collaboration among the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Service Organizations, county agencies, health care providers, nonprofit organizations, and community partners, the Planning Committee sought to establish a foundation for sustainable improvements that extend well beyond a single community.

The approximate catchment area illustrated below provides geographic context for understanding the regional focus of the Summit and the collaborative opportunities discussed throughout these Proceedings.



Figure 3.1. The shaded counties within the encircled area represent the approximate catchment area of the Fayetteville Coastal Health Care System as interpreted by the Planning Committee for purposes of illustrating the regional focus of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. This map is intended for planning and discussion purposes only and should not be interpreted as an official Department of Veterans Affairs administrative or service boundary.

Chapter 4 Opening the Summit

Welcome to the Summit!

The 2026 Women Veterans Health Care Summit officially opened with welcoming remarks by **Commander Michael R. Carton**, Commander of Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543. As host organization for the Summit, American Legion Post 543 welcomed women veterans, community leaders, health care professionals, presenters, exhibitors, volunteers, and partner organizations who had gathered for this historic inaugural event.



In his remarks, Commander Carton expressed appreciation to the women veterans in attendance for their military service and reaffirmed the Summit's purpose: to improve awareness of health care resources, strengthen collaboration among organizations serving women veterans, and encourage meaningful dialogue about improving access to care. He challenged participants to become active contributors throughout the two-day event by sharing their experiences, engaging in discussion, and helping identify practical recommendations that could strengthen services for women veterans throughout the region.

Welcome Remarks



Michael R. Carton

Commander, Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome to the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. I am Mike Carton, Commander of Richard H. Stewart, Jr. American Legion Post 543, and it is my pleasure to welcome each of you to this historic event.

First, I want to thank every woman veteran who is with us today and who will be participating over the next two days. Thank you for your service to our Nation. This Summit was created in recognition of your service and your unique health care needs.

Over the next two days, you will hear from outstanding presenters representing a variety of organizations and disciplines. We hope you leave with new knowledge, new connections, and a greater awareness of the resources available to support your health and well-being.

As you participate in the Summit, I encourage you to focus on three important goals.

First, be engaged and actively participate. Your experiences and your stories matter, and your voice is an essential part of these discussions.

Second, help us help you by contributing meaningful ideas and recommendations that can lead to real and lasting improvements for women veterans. This Summit is not only about learning—it is also about identifying practical actions that can strengthen services and improve lives.

Third, share your experiences with your fellow women veterans throughout the next two days. Some of the most valuable conversations will happen not only during presentations, but also through the friendships and connections you make here.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Kathleen K. Roth, whose vision, dedication, and leadership transformed an idea into the Summit we are opening today.



I also extend my thanks to our distinguished speakers, vendors, volunteers, guests, and especially the members of the Summit Planning Committee whose dedication and countless hours of preparation made this event possible.

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedules to participate in this important event. Your presence demonstrates a shared commitment to improving the health and well-being of women veterans in our community.

Before you leave today, I encourage you to visit the exhibitors and resource tables throughout the venue. They have valuable information, services, and educational materials available, and I hope you will take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about the many organizations represented here.

Once again, welcome to the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. I hope you find these next two days informative, meaningful, and inspiring.

Thank you, and enjoy the Summit.

Commander Carton's welcome established the collaborative tone that characterized the Summit. His remarks reminded participants that meaningful improvements in women veterans' health care depend upon active participation, shared experiences, and sustained partnerships among veterans, health care providers, community organizations, and public agencies. Those themes became a common thread throughout the educational sessions, panel discussions, and breakout groups that followed.

Setting the Stage

As the opening remarks concluded, participants began a two-day educational program focused on improving understanding of women veterans' health care while identifying opportunities for collaboration and community action.

The sessions that followed combined evidence-based research, professional expertise, lived experience, and practical discussion. Together, they reflected the Summit's central theme:

Connected by Service • Empowered by Health Care

The inaugural Summit had begun.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Chapter 5 Introduction of the Summit Chair

Commander Carton introduced **Dr. Kathleen K. Roth, LTC, U.S. Army (Ret.)**, Summit Chair, recognizing her leadership in developing the vision for the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit and coordinating the collaborative effort that brought together presenters, partner organizations, volunteers, and participants.

He noted that under Dr. Roth's leadership, the Summit reflected months of planning and cooperation among organizations committed to improving services for women veterans while strengthening community partnerships throughout the region.

Opening Address



*Dr. Kathleen K. Roth, LTC, U.S. Army (Ret.)
Summit Chair*

Dr. Kathleen K. Roth welcomed participants and officially opened the 2026 Women Veterans Health Care Summit.

In her remarks, Dr. Roth thanked the many organizations, agencies, volunteers, speakers, exhibitors, and community partners whose commitment made the Summit possible. She offered special recognition to the women veterans in attendance, acknowledging their military service, leadership, resilience, and continued contributions to their communities.

From Research to Action

She emphasized that the Summit represented more than a conference. It was the beginning of a collaborative effort to improve the health and well-being of women veterans by bringing together organizations that share a common mission while encouraging practical action at the local level.

Recognizing a Changing Veteran Population

Dr. Roth observed that women veterans comprise one of the fastest-growing segments of the veteran population in the United States. As their numbers continue to increase, so too does the need for health care systems, community organizations, and veteran service providers to recognize and respond to their unique needs.

She noted that many women veterans have served across multiple generations of military history—from World War II through today's All-Volunteer Force. Although their military experiences differ, they often share common challenges related to health care access,



behavioral health, transition to civilian life, awareness of available benefits, and connecting with community resources.

Meeting those needs requires collaboration that extends beyond any single organization or health care system.

Learning from Research

Dr. Roth acknowledged the substantial body of research conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs, academic institutions, and national veteran organizations examining women veterans' health care.

These studies have documented measurable progress while identifying persistent barriers affecting women veterans, including access to care, behavioral health services, transportation, awareness of benefits, gender-specific health care, and community outreach.

She emphasized that this research has provided an invaluable foundation for improving services nationwide.

The Summit was not intended to duplicate those efforts. Instead, it sought to answer a different question:

How can communities translate research into meaningful local action?

It is this question that became the guiding philosophy of the inaugural Summit.

Building Community Partnerships

Throughout her remarks, Dr. Roth emphasized that improving women's veteran health care depends upon partnerships among organizations that often approach the same mission from different perspectives.

Federal agencies, county health departments, nonprofit organizations, veteran service organizations, behavioral health providers, medical professionals, and community leaders each possess valuable expertise and resources. When these organizations work together, they create opportunities that no single organization can accomplish independently.

The Summit was intentionally designed to strengthen those relationships while encouraging continued cooperation long after the conference concluded.



Listening to Women Veterans

Dr. Roth reminded participants that the most valuable insights often come directly from women veterans themselves.

Although research identifies trends and documents barriers, the lived experiences of women veterans provide essential context for understanding how those barriers affect daily life.

For that reason, the Summit incorporated breakout sessions, panel discussions, and opportunities for open dialogue in addition to formal educational presentations.

Participants were encouraged not only to learn from subject matter experts but also to learn from one another.

A Call to Action

Dr. Roth challenged everyone in attendance to view the Summit as the beginning of a continuing effort rather than the conclusion of a planning process.

Education alone would not improve outcomes.

Research alone would not remove barriers.

Real progress would depend upon sustained collaboration, continued communication, and a willingness to implement practical solutions within local communities.

She encouraged participants to leave the Summit with new partnerships, renewed commitment, and a shared determination to improve access to health care and supportive services for women veterans throughout coastal North Carolina.

Looking Toward the Future

In closing, Dr. Roth expressed her hope that the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit would establish a model for future collaboration among organizations serving women veterans.

She envisioned the Proceedings not simply as a record of the event but as a resource capable of informing future initiatives, strengthening partnerships, and encouraging communities to transform knowledge into action.

Her concluding message reflected the purpose that would guide every session throughout the Summit:

•Research provides direction•



•**Partnership creates opportunity**•

•**Action changes lives...**

Key Messages

The Summit Chair's opening address established several themes that would recur throughout the Proceedings:

- Women veterans are a growing and increasingly diverse veteran population.
- National research provides an essential foundation for improving care.
- Community partnerships are critical to implementing meaningful change.
- Women veterans must remain active participants in shaping solutions.
- Collaboration is the bridge between research and action.
- Improving health outcomes requires sustained commitment beyond the Summit itself.

With those messages, the educational program of the Women Veterans Health Care Summit officially began.

Part II EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATIONS

"The educational program formed the foundation of the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. Throughout two days of presentations, panel discussions, and dialogue, subject matter experts shared research, professional experience, and practical guidance addressing the unique health care needs of women veterans.

Representing federal, state, county, nonprofit, academic, and community organizations, the presenters explored a broad range of topics, including public health, behavioral health, healthy aging, cardiovascular wellness, suicide prevention, and access to care. While each presentation addressed a different aspect of women's health, together they reflected a common message: improving the health and well-being of women veterans requires collaboration, education, and sustained community partnerships.

The chapters that follow preserve the educational content of the Summit while highlighting the knowledge, experience, and commitment shared by each presenter."



Chapter 6 Public Health and Community Partnerships

Brunswick County Health Services

Presented by

Diana Hills

Lizeth Alcantar

Introduction

The first educational presentation of the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit highlighted the important role that local public health agencies play in improving access to care, preventive health services, and community wellness.

Representing Brunswick County Health Services, Diana Hills and Lizeth Alcantar introduced participants to the wide range of programs available through the county health department and emphasized how these services can complement care provided through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and other health care providers.

Their presentation reinforced one of the Summit's central messages: improving the health of women veterans requires collaboration among federal, state, county, nonprofit, and community organizations. Local public health agencies serve as essential partners by connecting veterans with preventive services, health education, and community-based resources that support long-term wellness.

The Role of Local Public Health

The presenters described public health as a community-wide effort focused on prevention, education, and improving overall quality of life. While hospitals and medical practices provide individual patient care, county health departments work to strengthen the health of the population through programs that promote healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, early detection, and access to essential services.

For women veterans, these services can complement VA health care by addressing needs that extend beyond clinical treatment, including health education, immunizations, chronic disease prevention, maternal and family health, nutrition, and referrals to additional community resources.



Connecting Veterans with Community Resources

A recurring theme throughout the presentation was the importance of awareness.

Many veterans are unaware of the breadth of services available through their local health departments or may not realize that many programs are available regardless of veteran status. By strengthening relationships between veterans, community organizations, and local health agencies, barriers to accessing care can often be reduced.

Participants were encouraged to view county health departments as valuable partners capable of connecting individuals and families with preventive health services, educational programs, and referrals to specialized care when appropriate.

Prevention as a Foundation for Wellness

The presentation emphasized that preventive care is one of the most effective strategies for improving long-term health outcomes.

Topics discussed included the importance of:

- Routine preventive health screenings.
- Immunizations and disease prevention.
- Women's health education.
- Nutrition and healthy lifestyle practices.
- Early identification of chronic health conditions.
- Access to community wellness programs.
- Referrals to additional health and social services.

These services contribute to healthier communities while supporting individuals in maintaining lifelong wellness.

Building Stronger Community Partnerships

The presenters encouraged continued collaboration between county health departments, the Department of Veterans Affairs, veteran service organizations, nonprofit agencies, and community leaders.



Such partnerships expand awareness of available services, reduce duplication of effort, and improve coordination among organizations working toward common goals.

This collaborative approach closely reflected the overall purpose of the Summit and demonstrated how local organizations can work together to improve the health and well-being of women veterans.

Key Takeaways

Participants were encouraged to consider several important themes:

- Local public health agencies are important partners in serving women veterans.
- Preventive care is essential to lifelong health and wellness.
- Community partnerships strengthen access to care.
- Education empowers individuals to make informed health decisions.
- Increased awareness of available services helps reduce barriers to care.

Looking Ahead

The Brunswick County Health Services presentation demonstrated that improving the health of women veterans is not solely the responsibility of one organization. Success depends upon coordinated efforts among health care providers, public health professionals, veteran organizations, and community partners working together to meet veterans where they live.

This message established an important foundation for subsequent presentations, each of which explored another component of the comprehensive network of care available to women veterans.

Presentation Materials

The presentation materials for this topic are reproduced with permission of the presenter and are included as part of the Volume II of official record of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit.



Chapter 7 Expanding Access to Behavioral Health Services

Trillium Health Resources

Presented by

Cecelia Peers

Vice President, Trillium Health Resources

Introduction

Behavioral health is an essential component of whole-person wellness and was a recurring theme throughout the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. Recognizing that many women veterans face challenges related to mental health, substance use, military transition, caregiving responsibilities, and trauma, the Summit included a presentation highlighting the community resources available through Trillium Health Resources.

Presented by Cecelia Peers, Vice President of Trillium Health Resources, the session introduced participants to the organization's mission, regional responsibilities, and network of services available to veterans and their families throughout eastern North Carolina.

Her presentation reinforced the Summit's guiding philosophy that improving the health of women veterans requires strong partnerships among the Department of Veterans Affairs, local providers, managed care organizations, public agencies, and community organizations.

Understanding Behavioral Health

Behavioral health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It influences how individuals respond to stress, maintain relationships, make decisions, and manage both physical and emotional challenges throughout life.

For many veterans, behavioral health needs may arise during or after military service and can be influenced by deployment, military culture, family transitions, caregiving responsibilities, trauma, or the challenges associated with reintegration into civilian life.

The presentation emphasized that seeking behavioral health services is a sign of strength and an important step toward maintaining overall health and wellness.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Trillium's Mission

Participants learned that Trillium Health Resources serves as a regional managed care organization responsible for coordinating behavioral health, intellectual and developmental disability services, traumatic brain injury services, and other specialized supports across a large service area in North Carolina.

Rather than providing all services directly, Trillium works with a network of qualified providers to connect individuals with appropriate care based on their needs.

This coordinated approach helps ensure that individuals receive timely access to community-based services while improving continuity of care across multiple providers.

Improving Access to Care

One of the presentation's central themes was access.

Many individuals delay seeking behavioral health services because they are uncertain where to begin, are unfamiliar with available resources, or are concerned about stigma.

Participants were encouraged to become familiar with Trillium's access system, care coordination services, and referral pathways so they could confidently assist veterans, family members, and community partners in locating appropriate services.

The presentation emphasized that reducing barriers to care begins with increasing awareness of available resources.

Community Collaboration

Throughout the presentation, Ms. Peers highlighted the importance of collaboration among organizations serving veterans.

Behavioral health needs often intersect with physical health, housing, employment, transportation, caregiving, and social support. Addressing these complex issues requires cooperation among multiple organizations working toward shared goals.

The Summit itself demonstrated this collaborative model by bringing together representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs, county health agencies, nonprofit organizations, veteran service organizations, and behavioral health providers.



Resources for Women Veterans

Participants learned about a variety of services and referral resources available through Trillium's provider network, including:

- Behavioral health assessment and treatment.
- Crisis intervention services.
- Substance use disorder treatment.
- Care management and coordination.
- Community-based support programs.
- Family support services.
- Specialized programs for individuals with complex behavioral health needs.

Attendees were encouraged to share these resources within their communities and to assist women veterans in navigating available services when needed.

Key Takeaways

The Trillium presentation emphasized several important principles:

- Behavioral health is an essential part of overall health.
 - Early intervention improves long-term outcomes.
 - Community partnerships strengthen access to care.
 - Care coordination helps connect individuals with appropriate services.
 - Reducing stigma encourages veterans to seek assistance when needed.
 - Every organization has a role in supporting women veterans.
-

Looking Ahead

The presentation concluded with a reminder that improving behavioral health outcomes requires sustained collaboration among health care providers, community organizations, and veteran service agencies.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

As women veterans continue to navigate changing health care needs throughout their lives, partnerships such as those demonstrated during the Summit will remain essential to ensuring that no veteran faces those challenges alone.

The discussion provided an important foundation for later presentations addressing suicide prevention, community support, healthy aging, and comprehensive wellness.

Presentation Materials

The presentation materials for this topic are reproduced with permission of the presenter and are included as part of the Volume II of official record of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit.

Chapter 8 Aging, Lifelong Wellness, and Preparing for the Future

AARP North Carolina

Presented by

Dr. Shirley Gerrior, US Air Force, Retired

AARP North Carolina

Introduction

As the women veteran population continues to grow, so does the importance of promoting healthy aging and lifelong wellness. Advances in military medicine and health care have enabled veterans to live longer, healthier lives, creating new opportunities—and new responsibilities—for individuals, families, health care providers, and communities.

Representing AARP North Carolina, Dr. Shirley Gerrior, a retired U.S. Air Force officer, presented a comprehensive overview of healthy aging and the practical steps individuals can take to maintain their health, independence, and quality of life throughout the aging process.

Her presentation expanded the Summit's focus beyond treatment of illness by emphasizing prevention, personal responsibility, informed decision-making, and preparation for the future.



Redefining Healthy Aging

Dr. Gerrior encouraged participants to view aging as a lifelong process rather than a stage of decline.

Healthy aging involves maintaining physical health, emotional well-being, cognitive function, financial security, social engagement, and meaningful relationships. It also requires individuals to take an active role in managing their own health through preventive care, education, and informed lifestyle choices.

For women veterans, healthy aging often includes unique considerations related to military service, changing family responsibilities, caregiving roles, and the long-term effects of both physical and emotional stress experienced throughout life.

Prevention Remains the Best Medicine

One of the central messages of the presentation was that many chronic diseases can be prevented, delayed, or better managed through healthy lifestyle choices.

Participants were encouraged to:

- Schedule routine medical examinations.
- Stay current with recommended health screenings.
- Maintain regular physical activity.
- Follow balanced nutritional practices.
- Prioritize adequate sleep.
- Manage stress effectively.
- Remain socially connected.
- Participate in preventive wellness programs.

Dr. Gerrior emphasized that prevention is not simply about avoiding disease—it is about preserving independence, resilience, and quality of life.



Preparing for the Future

The presentation also addressed the importance of planning ahead.

Participants were encouraged to consider issues that are often postponed until a crisis occurs, including:

- Advance care planning.
- Health care powers of attorney.
- Financial preparedness.
- Long-term care planning.
- Caregiver support.
- Estate planning.
- Community resources available to older adults.

Planning early allows individuals and families to make informed decisions while reducing uncertainty during future health challenges.

Supporting Caregivers

Recognizing that many women veterans serve as caregivers—or may one day require caregiving themselves—Dr. Gerrior discussed the critical role caregivers play in maintaining health and independence.

Caregiving can be rewarding, but it also presents emotional, physical, and financial challenges. Participants were encouraged to seek available support services, educational programs, respite care, and community resources designed to assist caregivers in maintaining their own health while caring for others.

The presentation reinforced the message that caregivers also require care.

The Value of Community Engagement

Healthy aging extends beyond medical care.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Maintaining social connections, volunteering, lifelong learning, community involvement, and meaningful personal relationships all contribute to improved physical and emotional well-being.

Participants were encouraged to remain active within their communities, continue developing new interests, and build networks that reduce isolation while promoting purpose and resilience.

For many women veterans, continued service through volunteerism and community leadership represents a natural extension of their military commitment.

Key Takeaways

Dr. Gerrior's presentation emphasized several enduring principles:

- Healthy aging begins long before retirement.
 - Preventive care remains one of the most effective health strategies.
 - Physical, emotional, financial, and social wellness are interconnected.
 - Caregivers deserve support and recognition.
 - Community engagement strengthens overall well-being.
 - Preparation today creates greater independence tomorrow.
-

Why This Matters

Healthy aging is becoming increasingly important as the population of women veterans continues to evolve.

The Summit recognized that improving women's veteran health care requires more than responding to illness. It also requires helping women remain healthy, independent, informed, and connected throughout every stage of life.

Dr. Gerrior's presentation broadened the conversation by reminding participants that wellness is not defined solely by medical treatment. It is strengthened through prevention, education, planning, and continued engagement with family, community, and available resources.



Together with the previous presentations on public health and behavioral health, this session reinforced the Summit's commitment to a comprehensive approach to lifelong health and wellness.

Presentation Materials

The presentation materials for this topic are reproduced with permission of the presenter and are included as part of the Volume II of official record of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit.

Chapter 9 Living with a Healthy Heart

Cardiovascular Health and Disease Prevention for Women Veterans

Presented by

Dr. Linda Calhoun

Introduction

Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death among women in the United States. Despite advances in prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, many women remain unaware of their personal risk factors or may not recognize that heart disease often presents differently in women than in men.

Recognizing the importance of preventive cardiovascular care, the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit featured a presentation by Dr. Linda Calhoun focusing on heart health, disease prevention, and practical strategies for reducing cardiovascular risk throughout life.

Her presentation reminded participants that protecting heart health begins long before symptoms appear. Through education, preventive care, and healthy lifestyle choices, many cardiovascular conditions can be prevented or managed successfully.



Understanding Heart Disease in Women

Dr. Calhoun explained that heart disease develops gradually over many years and is influenced by a combination of inherited risk factors, medical conditions, lifestyle choices, and environmental influences.

Although some risk factors cannot be changed, many can be modified through early intervention and healthy daily habits.

The presentation emphasized that women should understand their individual cardiovascular risk profile and work closely with their health care providers to develop personalized prevention strategies.

Major Risk Factors

Participants reviewed many of the most common contributors to cardiovascular disease, including:

- High blood pressure.
- High cholesterol.
- Diabetes.
- Tobacco use.
- Obesity.
- Physical inactivity.
- Poor nutrition.
- Chronic stress.
- Family history of cardiovascular disease.
- Increasing age.

Dr. Calhoun emphasized that these factors often occur together, making routine preventive care and regular health assessments especially important.



Recognizing the Warning Signs

One of the presentation's most important messages concerned the recognition of heart attack symptoms in women.

While chest pain remains a common symptom, women may also experience:

- Shortness of breath.
- Unusual fatigue.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Pain involving the neck, jaw, shoulders, upper back, or arms.
- Dizziness or lightheadedness.
- Cold sweats.
- A feeling that "something isn't right."

Because symptoms may be subtle or atypical, women should seek prompt medical evaluation whenever they experience signs that could indicate a cardiac emergency.

Early recognition saves lives.

Prevention Through Healthy Living

Dr. Calhoun emphasized that cardiovascular disease is often preventable.

Participants were encouraged to reduce risk through healthy daily practices, including:

- Maintaining regular physical activity.
- Following a heart-healthy eating pattern.
- Controlling blood pressure and cholesterol.
- Managing diabetes effectively.
- Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.
- Avoiding tobacco products.
- Limiting excessive alcohol consumption.
- Managing stress.



- Obtaining adequate sleep.
- Attending regular preventive medical appointments.

Rather than focusing on a single intervention, successful prevention depends upon a combination of healthy lifestyle choices sustained over time.

Women Veterans and Cardiovascular Health

The presentation acknowledged that women veterans may experience additional factors influencing cardiovascular health.

Military service, operational stress, deployments, changing family responsibilities, caregiving demands, and the cumulative effects of aging can all influence long-term health.

For this reason, cardiovascular wellness should be considered within the broader context of whole-person health, including behavioral health, preventive care, nutrition, physical activity, and access to quality medical services.

Taking Charge of Your Health

Dr. Calhoun encouraged participants to become active partners in their own health care.

Knowing personal health numbers—such as blood pressure, cholesterol, blood glucose, and body weight—allows individuals to monitor changes over time and participate in informed discussions with their health care providers.

She emphasized that prevention is most successful when patients understand their health risks, ask questions, and participate in shared decision-making.

Key Takeaways

Dr. Calhoun's presentation highlighted several enduring messages:

- Heart disease remains a leading health concern for women.
- Many cardiovascular risk factors are preventable or manageable.
- Women may experience heart attack symptoms differently than men.
- Routine preventive care saves lives.



- Healthy lifestyle choices have lifelong benefits.
 - Knowledge empowers individuals to make informed health decisions.
-

Why This Matters

One of the central themes of the Women Veterans Health Care Summit was that wellness extends beyond treating illness.

Dr. Calhoun's presentation illustrated how education, prevention, and early intervention can significantly improve long-term health outcomes. By encouraging women veterans to understand their individual risk factors and actively participate in preventive care, the session reinforced the Summit's commitment to empowering women through knowledge.

This presentation also complemented earlier discussions on public health, behavioral health, and healthy aging by demonstrating that lifelong wellness depends upon the integration of physical, emotional, and community health resources.

Presentation Materials

The presentation materials for this topic are reproduced with permission of the presenter and are included as part of the Volume II of official record of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit.

Chapter 10 Behavioral Health, Suicide Prevention, and Supporting Women Veterans: Understanding Mental Wellness Through Awareness, Education, and Community Action

Featured Panelists

Eva Smith

Disabled American Veterans (DAV)



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Shari (Lisa) Turner

Suicide Prevention Coordinator

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Joyce Nelson, LCSW

Dr Linda Calhoun, MD

Introduction

Behavioral health is an essential component of overall health and wellness. Throughout the Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit, participants repeatedly emphasized that improving the health of women veterans requires equal attention to physical health, emotional well-being, mental health, and community support.

Recognizing the importance of this issue, the Summit included a panel discussion devoted to behavioral health and suicide prevention. Rather than focusing solely on statistics or clinical care, the discussion examined how education, awareness, community partnerships, and early intervention can help improve the lives of women veterans.

Together, Eva Smith and Shari (Lisa) Turner presented complementary perspectives that moved the conversation from understanding the challenges to identifying practical actions that every community can take.

The Changing Face of Women Veterans

Eva Smith opened the discussion by highlighting the continued growth of the women veteran population in the United States.

As one of the fastest-growing veteran populations, women veterans represent diverse generations of military service, occupations, and life experiences. Their increasing numbers require continued attention to health care delivery, behavioral health services, community support, and policies that recognize their unique experiences.

Although significant progress has been made, women veterans continue to experience barriers that differ in important ways from those affecting many of their male counterparts.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Understanding the Challenges

Drawing upon research from the Disabled American Veterans and other national organizations, Ms. Smith discussed factors that may contribute to behavioral health concerns among women veterans.

These may include:

- Military Sexual Trauma (MST).
- Post-traumatic stress.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Intimate partner violence.
- Substance use disorders.
- Pregnancy and postpartum mental health concerns.
- Menopause and aging-related transitions.
- Social isolation.
- Difficulties accessing gender-specific health care.
- Limited awareness of available resources.

The discussion emphasized that these issues rarely exist in isolation. Instead, they often interact with family responsibilities, employment, financial concerns, caregiving, and the transition from military to civilian life.

Understanding these interconnected challenges is essential for developing effective support systems.



Moving Beyond Awareness

A recurring message throughout the presentation was that identifying problems is only the first step.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Over the past decade, the Department of Veterans Affairs, veteran service organizations, researchers, and advocacy groups have produced extensive research documenting the needs of women veterans and recommending improvements in health care delivery.

The Women Veterans Health Care Summit was designed to complement this work by asking an additional question:

How can communities translate research into meaningful local action?

Throughout the panel discussion, participants explored ways local organizations, community leaders, health care providers, and fellow veterans can work together to reduce barriers and strengthen support networks.

Suicide Prevention: Every Conversation Matters

Building upon this discussion, Shari (Lisa) Turner introduced participants to the Department of Veterans Affairs' suicide prevention initiatives and the nationally recognized **VA S.A.V.E.** program.

Rather than focusing solely on clinical treatment, VA S.A.V.E. equips family members, friends, coworkers, volunteers, and community members with practical skills to recognize when a veteran may be in crisis and respond appropriately.

The program emphasizes that suicide prevention is everyone's responsibility.

Participants learned the four components of the VA S.A.V.E. model:

- **S — Signs:** Learn to recognize warning signs that may indicate a veteran is considering suicide.
- **A — Ask:** Ask directly and compassionately if the individual is thinking about suicide.
- **V — Validate:** Listen without judgment and acknowledge the person's feelings and experiences.
- **E — Encourage and Expedite:** Help connect the individual with professional support and immediate resources.

The panel emphasized that asking someone directly about suicide does not increase risk. Instead, it creates an opportunity for intervention and support.

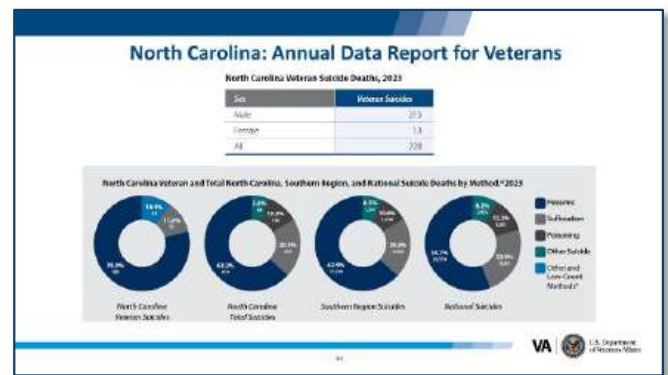


Building a Community of Support

The panel concluded by emphasizing that supporting women veterans extends beyond hospitals and counseling offices.

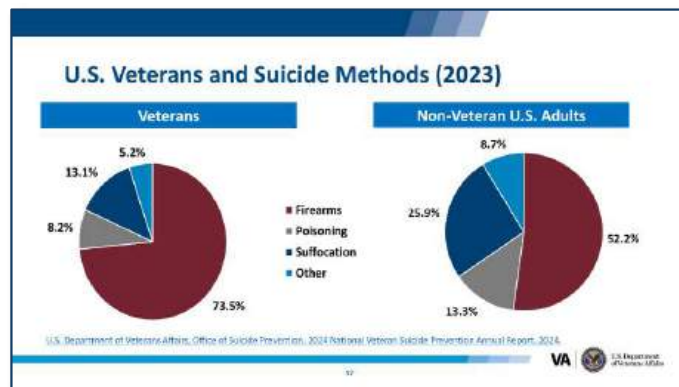
Communities play an essential role.

Family members, neighbors, employers, veteran organizations, faith communities, public health agencies, and volunteers all contribute to



creating environments in which veterans feel connected, supported, and valued.

The strongest communities are those in which people recognize warning signs, know available resources, and are willing to reach out when someone may be struggling.



Key Takeaways

The panel discussion highlighted several enduring themes:

- Behavioral health is an essential component of overall wellness.
- Women veterans may experience unique behavioral health challenges.
- Research provides valuable guidance for improving care.
- Early recognition and intervention save lives.
- Suicide prevention is a shared community responsibility.
- Collaboration strengthens support systems for women veterans.

Why This Matters

The Women Veterans Health Care Summit consistently emphasized that improving health outcomes requires partnerships extending beyond traditional health care settings.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

This panel demonstrated that behavioral health is strengthened not only through clinical services, but also through informed communities, supportive relationships, and individuals willing to recognize when someone may need help.

By combining national research, evidence-based education, and practical community action, the discussion reflected one of the Summit's central goals:

Transforming knowledge into meaningful local implementation.

Every Life Matters

Every participant left the Summit with an important reminder:

No veteran should face life's challenges alone.

If you are concerned that a veteran may be experiencing emotional distress or thoughts of suicide, reach out immediately.

Immediate Resources

Veterans Crisis Line

- Dial **988**, then **Press 1**
- Text **838255**
- Chat online through the Veterans Crisis Line

Additional Resources

- VA Suicide Prevention Coordinators
- VA S.A.V.E. Program
- Disabled American Veterans (DAV)
- Trillium Health Resources
- Brunswick County behavioral health services
- Local Veteran Service Officers
- Community mental health providers

One conversation can save a life.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Chapter 11 Breakout Session I

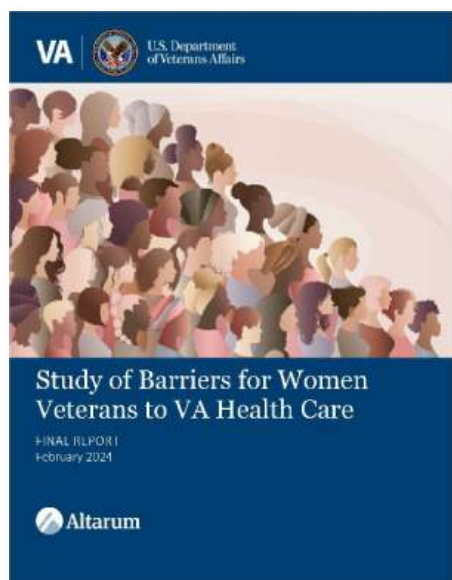
Barriers to Effective Health Care for Women Veterans

Introduction

Following the educational presentations, Summit participants divided into facilitated breakout groups to examine issues affecting women veterans in greater depth. These sessions were designed to encourage discussion, identify common concerns, and develop practical recommendations that could improve health care delivery and access to services at the local level.

Breakout Session I focused on identifying barriers that continue to affect women veterans as they seek health care, information, benefits, and community support.

Participants represented diverse military backgrounds, health professions, veteran service organizations, and community agencies. Their discussions combined professional expertise with the lived experiences of women veterans, producing recommendations grounded in both research and practical experience.



Purpose of the Discussion

The group was asked to consider several guiding questions:

- What barriers continue to prevent women veterans from accessing available health care services?
- Which barriers can be addressed through local partnerships?
- What improvements would have the greatest impact within coastal North Carolina?
- How can community organizations work together more effectively?

Participants were encouraged to think beyond identifying problems and instead focus on realistic solutions that could be implemented within their own communities.



Major Themes Identified

Although participants represented different organizations and experiences, several themes emerged consistently throughout the discussion.

Awareness of Available Resources

Many women veterans remain unaware of health care services, benefits, and community programs available to them.

Participants observed that improving communication and outreach remains one of the greatest opportunities for increasing access to care.

Navigation of Health Care Systems

Understanding how to access services through the Department of Veterans Affairs and community providers can be challenging, particularly for women who have recently separated from military service or who have never enrolled in VA health care.

Participants emphasized the importance of helping women veterans navigate available systems through education, outreach, and peer support.

Coordination Among Organizations

The discussion highlighted the need for stronger coordination among:

- Department of Veterans Affairs
- County health agencies
- Veteran Service Organizations
- Community nonprofits
- Behavioral health providers
- Primary care providers
- American Legion Posts
- Local governments



Participants noted that many organizations provide valuable services but often work independently rather than collaboratively.

Strengthening communication among organizations was viewed as an important opportunity for improving services while reducing duplication of effort.

Rural Access

Women veterans residing in rural and coastal communities often face significant barriers to accessing health care, despite the availability of services within the Department of Veterans Affairs and the broader community. Participants identified transportation limitations, travel distance to specialty care, financial costs associated with repeated travel, work and family responsibilities, and limited awareness of available resources as factors that can delay or discourage women from seeking care.

Participants emphasized that improving access requires more than expanding available services. It also requires strengthening regional partnerships that bring information, outreach, enrollment assistance, and selected health care services closer to the communities where women veterans live. Collaborative outreach efforts involving the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Service Organizations, county agencies, health care providers, and community organizations were viewed as practical approaches for reducing barriers while improving access to care throughout the region.

Creating Welcoming Environments

Several participants discussed the importance of ensuring that women veterans feel welcomed, respected, and recognized when seeking services.

This includes not only physical environments but also communication, outreach, and organizational culture.

Creating spaces in which women veterans feel understood encourages greater participation in available programs and services.

Recommendations

Following discussion, participants identified several recommendations for future action.

Recommendation 1



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Strengthen community outreach efforts to increase awareness of available services for women veterans.

Recommendation 2

Improve collaboration among organizations serving women veterans through regular communication, shared planning, coordinated referral networks, and community-based outreach efforts designed to reduce barriers to care.

Recommendation 3

Develop local resource guides that simplify navigation of available health care, behavioral health, and community services.

Recommendation 4

Expand opportunities for women veterans to connect with one another through educational programs, peer support, and community events.

Recommendation 5

Continue the Women Veterans Health Care Summit as an annual forum for education, collaboration, and community problem-solving.

Why This Matters

The discussion reinforced one of the central themes of the Summit.

Many of the barriers affecting women veterans have already been documented through national research.

The challenge now is implementation.

Participants concluded that meaningful improvements often begin within local communities through partnerships, communication, and sustained commitment among organizations already serving women veterans.



Rather than waiting for solutions to emerge from outside the community, the breakout session demonstrated that local organizations possess both the knowledge and the willingness to begin addressing many of these challenges together.

Chapter 12 Breakout Session II

Behavioral Health and Mental Wellness

Introduction

Building upon the educational presentations addressing behavioral health, suicide prevention, and community support, participants in Breakout Session II examined the behavioral health challenges affecting women veterans and discussed opportunities to strengthen local systems of care.

The discussion recognized that behavioral health extends beyond the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. It includes emotional well-being, resilience, social connection, stress management, recovery, and access to supportive services throughout every stage of life.

Participants emphasized that improving behavioral health outcomes requires coordinated efforts among health care providers, veteran service organizations, community agencies, families, and women veterans themselves.

Focus of the Discussion

Participants explored several key questions:

- What behavioral health challenges most affect women veterans in our communities?
- What barriers discourage women from seeking care?
- How can organizations work together to improve access to behavioral health services?
- What practical actions can communities implement to strengthen support systems?

The discussion built upon the presentations by Trillium Health Resources, Disabled American Veterans, and the Department of Veterans Affairs while incorporating participants' own experiences and observations.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Major Themes Identified

Reducing Stigma



Participants agreed that stigma continues to discourage some women veterans from seeking behavioral health services.

Many veterans remain reluctant to discuss depression, anxiety, trauma, grief, or other mental health concerns because of misconceptions about treatment or concerns regarding how others may perceive them.

Creating supportive environments that encourage open conversation was viewed as an essential component of improving behavioral health.

Increasing Awareness

Participants noted that many women veterans remain unaware of available behavioral health resources, crisis services, and community support programs.

Improved outreach, education, and communication were identified as opportunities to increase access to existing services.

Peer Support

Women veterans often benefit from connecting with others who understand military service and its long-term effects.

Participants encouraged expanding opportunities for peer support groups, mentoring relationships, and community activities that foster connection while reducing isolation.

Coordinated Care

Behavioral health needs frequently intersect with physical health, housing, employment, caregiving responsibilities, transportation, and financial stability.



Participants emphasized that coordinated care among organizations improves outcomes while reducing fragmentation of services.

Crisis Intervention

The group reinforced the importance of suicide prevention education, early recognition of warning signs, and community familiarity with available crisis resources.

Participants agreed that every organization serving veterans should understand how to respond when a veteran may be experiencing emotional distress or crisis.

Recommendations

The breakout group developed several recommendations for strengthening behavioral health support within local communities.

Recommendation 1

Expand community education regarding behavioral health resources available to women veterans.

Recommendation 2

Increase opportunities for peer support, mentoring, and networking among women veterans.

Recommendation 3

Strengthen collaboration among behavioral health providers, veteran organizations, and community agencies through coordinated referral networks.

Recommendation 4

Promote suicide prevention education and encourage widespread familiarity with the VA S.A.V.E. program and Veterans Crisis Line resources.

Recommendation 5



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Continue integrating behavioral health education into future Women Veterans Health Care Summits and related community programs.

Why This Matters

Throughout the Summit, behavioral health emerged as a recurring theme connecting nearly every presentation.

Participants recognized that mental wellness influences physical health, relationships, employment, family life, and overall quality of life.

The breakout discussion demonstrated that communities already possess many of the organizations and resources needed to improve behavioral health outcomes. Continued collaboration, education, and communication can strengthen those efforts while helping ensure that women veterans receive timely, compassionate, and coordinated support.



Chapter 13 Breakout Session III

Women's Health Across the Lifespan: Pre-, Peri-, and Post-Menopausal and Heart Health Care for Women Veterans

Introduction

The third breakout session focused on an aspect of women's health that has historically received limited attention within veteran health care discussions: the unique physical, emotional, and medical challenges associated with the

hormonal transitions that occur throughout adulthood.

Building upon earlier presentations addressing preventive health, behavioral health, healthy aging, and cardiovascular wellness, participants examined how pre-menopause, perimenopause, menopause, and post-menopausal health influence the overall well-being of women veterans.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

The discussion recognized that these life stages are natural transitions rather than medical conditions. However, they may significantly affect quality of life and often intersect with other physical and behavioral health concerns.

Focus of the Discussion

Participants were invited to explore several questions:

- What challenges do women veterans experience during hormonal transitions?
- Are sufficient educational resources available?
- How can health care providers better support women veterans during these stages of life?
- What role can community organizations play in promoting education, awareness, and support?

The discussion encouraged participants to consider women's health from a lifelong perspective, recognizing that health care needs continue to evolve throughout adulthood.

Major Themes Identified

Education and Awareness

Participants observed that many women receive limited education regarding menopause and other hormonal transitions.

Greater awareness of expected physical and emotional changes can help women make informed decisions, seek appropriate medical care, and reduce unnecessary anxiety.

Whole-Person Care

The group emphasized that hormonal changes often influence multiple aspects of health simultaneously.

Participants discussed the importance of addressing:



- Physical symptoms.
- Emotional well-being.
- Sleep quality.
- Cardiovascular health.
- Bone health.
- Nutrition.
- Physical activity.
- Mental wellness.

An integrated approach allows providers to better understand the full range of factors affecting women's health.



Communication with Health Care Providers

Participants encouraged women to actively discuss symptoms and concerns with their health care providers.

Open communication supports earlier recognition of health issues and enables individualized care plans that reflect each woman's unique medical history, lifestyle, and personal preferences.

Continuing Preventive Care

The discussion reinforced the importance of maintaining regular preventive care throughout every stage of life.

Participants emphasized:

- Routine physical examinations.
- Recommended cancer screenings.
- Bone health assessments.
- Cardiovascular risk evaluation.



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
 Homer E. Wright Event Center
 St James, North Carolina 28461

- Nutrition counseling.
- Physical activity.
- Preventive wellness visits.

Healthy aging begins with consistent preventive care rather than waiting until illness develops.

Community Support

Participants recognized that many women benefit from sharing experiences with others facing similar life transitions.

Support groups, educational programs, peer mentoring, and community events were identified as valuable opportunities to reduce isolation while promoting understanding and resilience.

Recommendations

The breakout group developed several recommendations for improving awareness and support.

Recommendation 1

Increase educational opportunities regarding menopause and women's health across the lifespan.

Recommendation 2

Encourage health care providers to discuss hormonal transitions as a routine component of women's preventive health care.

Recommendation 3

Promote integrated care addressing physical, behavioral, and emotional health simultaneously.

Recommendation 4

Expand community education programs supporting healthy aging and lifelong wellness.



Recommendation 5

Continue incorporating women's health topics into future Women Veterans Health Care Summits.

Why This Matters

Throughout the Summit, participants consistently emphasized that women veterans deserve health care recognizing their unique experiences across every stage of life.

This breakout session reinforced that commitment by encouraging broader conversations regarding preventive care, hormonal health, healthy aging, and lifelong wellness.

The discussion also demonstrated that many opportunities for improving women's health begin with education, communication, and community support rather than complex medical interventions.

By addressing these often-overlooked topics openly and collaboratively, participants contributed to one of the Summit's broader goals: ensuring that women veterans receive comprehensive, respectful, and informed care throughout their lives.

PART IV SUMMIT OUTCOMES AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Chapter 14: Strategic Action Plan for Improving the Health and Well-Being of our Local Women Veterans

Developed from the educational presentations, panel discussions, breakout sessions, participant evaluation, and collaborative discussions of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit.

Introduction

The educational presentations, panel discussions, breakout sessions, participant evaluations, and collaborative discussions documented throughout these Proceedings all lead to one central question:

How can we make things better for women veterans in our local communities?

This chapter answers that question.



The Strategic Action Plan presented in this chapter represents the collective knowledge, experience, and recommendations developed during the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. It provides a practical framework that communities may adapt to improve the health and well-being of women veterans through collaboration, education, and coordinated local action.

The Strategic Priorities presented in this chapter are intended to guide future planning while encouraging organizations to work together toward common goals. Rather than serving as a conclusion to the Summit, this Action Plan represents the beginning of a continuing commitment to improving the lives of women veterans throughout coastal North Carolina and beyond.

Developing the Strategic Action Plan

The Planning Committee developed the Strategic Action Plan by reviewing information generated throughout the two-day Summit. Educational presentations, panel discussions, facilitated breakout sessions, participant evaluations, and informal discussions were examined to identify recurring themes and priorities that consistently emerged across multiple activities.

Rather than relying upon a single presentation or recommendation, the Planning Committee synthesized these recurring themes into six Strategic Priorities designed to address the most significant opportunities for improving the health and well-being of women veterans. Each Strategic Priority was subsequently translated into Recommended Community Actions and Suggested Tactics intended to support practical implementation at the local level.

The resulting Action Plan is not intended to prescribe responsibilities for individual organizations. Instead, it provides a flexible framework that communities may adapt according to their own resources, partnerships, and priorities.

Evidence Supporting the Strategic Action Plan

The Strategic Action Plan was developed through analysis of the recurring themes identified throughout the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit. Rather than relying upon a single source of information, each Strategic Priority reflects multiple forms of evidence collected during the Summit.

These sources included educational presentations delivered by subject matter experts, panel discussions, facilitated breakout sessions, participant evaluation findings, and observations documented by the Planning Committee. The convergence of these independent sources strengthened confidence that the priorities identified in this Action Plan represent issues of broad importance to women veterans and the organizations that serve them.



Strategic Priorities and Strategic Action Plan

The Strategic Priorities presented in this chapter are supported by multiple independent sources of information collected throughout the Summit. Educational presentations provided evidence-based research and professional expertise. Panel discussions contributed multidisciplinary perspectives. Breakout sessions identified community priorities and practical recommendations. Participant evaluations confirmed recurring concerns and opportunities for improvement. Observations documented by the Planning Committee provided an additional layer of analysis.

The convergence of these independent sources strengthens confidence that the Strategic Priorities represent issues of broad importance to women veterans and the organizations that serve them. The following crosswalk illustrates how each Strategic Priority emerged from multiple components of the Summit.

Strategic Priority 1 - Prepare Today for Current and Future Health Care Needs of Women Veterans

The women veteran population continues to grow throughout North Carolina, bringing with it an increasing need for coordinated, accessible, and responsive health care services. Preparing today for tomorrow's women veterans requires more than expanding health care capacity—it requires ensuring that women veterans are aware of, connected to, and able to navigate the network of services, benefits, and community resources available to support their health and well-being.

Throughout the Summit, participants consistently emphasized that many women veterans remain unaware of the benefits and services for which they may be eligible or are uncertain how to access them. In particular, enrollment in the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system is an essential first step toward receiving VA health care services, yet many eligible women veterans remain unenrolled. Likewise, many community organizations offer valuable health, wellness, and support services that complement VA care but are not widely known within the women veteran community.

Meaningful improvements in the health and well-being of women veterans begin by ensuring they know about, can access, and are connected to the health care services, benefits, and community resources available to them. Achieving this goal requires a coordinated strategy that combines effective communication, outreach, education, and collaboration among the Department of Veterans Affairs, local health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, nonprofit organizations, and community partners. By strengthening these connections today, communities can improve access to care, encourage early



engagement with health services, and help ensure that women veterans thrive throughout every stage of life.

The following recommended community actions provide practical opportunities for organizations to work collaboratively toward achieving Strategic Priority 1.

Recommended Community Action	*Suggested Lead Organizations	Performance Measure	Suggested Timeline
1.1 Develop and implement a regional Strategic Communication and Outreach Plan that informs women veterans about VA enrollment, health care services, benefits, and available community resources.	American Legion Post 543 (or future host organization), VA Women's Health Program, county veteran service offices, local public health agencies, Veteran Service Organizations, and community partners.	Strategic communication plan developed and implemented; number of outreach initiatives completed annually.	Within 12 months; reviewed annually.
1.2 Increase enrollment of eligible women veterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system through coordinated education, community outreach events, enrollment assistance, and partnerships that connect women veterans with VA services closer to where they live .	VA Women's Health Program, county veteran service offices, American Legion, DAV, VFW, and community partners.	Number of enrollment assistance events conducted; number of women veterans assisted with enrollment (where data are available).	Initiate within 30–90 days; continue as an ongoing regional outreach effort.
1.3 Develop and maintain a Regional Women Veterans Resource Network that connects women veterans with VA services, community health providers, behavioral health resources, Veteran Service Organizations, and other local support services.	American Legion Post 543 (or future coordinating organization), county veteran service offices, public health agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community partners.	Resource network established; resource directory published and updated annually; participating organizations actively engaged.	Initial implementation within 12 months; updated annually.

**The organizations listed are intended as examples of potential leaders and collaborators. Local communities should adapt implementation responsibilities based on available resources, organizational capacity, and regional partnerships.*

Suggested Priority 1 Tactics

Communities should adapt these tactics to reflect local needs, available resources, and existing partnerships. The following examples illustrate practical approaches that may be used to implement the recommended community actions.



- Conduct VA enrollment assistance events.
- Develop printed and online Women Veterans Resource Directories.
- Coordinate strategic communication through newsletters, websites, and social media.
- Participate in community health fairs, VA outreach events, and community-based enrollment activities.
- Distribute educational materials through partner organizations.
- Strengthen referral relationships among VA facilities, local health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, and community agencies.
- Promote women veterans programs through civic organizations, faith-based organizations, libraries, and local media.

Strategic Priority 2 - Improve Access to Comprehensive and Coordinated Health Care

Access to quality health care extends beyond the availability of medical services. It requires a coordinated system that enables women veterans to obtain timely, appropriate, and comprehensive care while navigating both Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and community health care resources. Throughout the Summit, presenters, participants, and breakout groups consistently emphasized that improving access to care remains one of the most significant opportunities for strengthening the health and well-being of women veterans.

Educational presentations highlighted the importance of preventive care, women's health services, behavioral health, cardiovascular health, healthy aging, and coordinated referrals among providers. Participants also discussed challenges related to awareness of available services, transportation, provider availability, continuity of care, and navigating multiple health care systems. These discussions reinforced that access to care is influenced not only by the availability of services, but also by the ability of women veterans to successfully connect with and move between those services.

Improving access requires strong collaboration among the Department of Veterans Affairs, local health care providers, public health agencies, Veteran Service Organizations, nonprofit organizations, and community partners. By strengthening coordination, improving referral pathways, and promoting communication among organizations, communities can reduce barriers, improve continuity of care, and help ensure that women veterans receive comprehensive, person-centered care throughout every stage of life.

The following recommended community actions provide practical opportunities for organizations to work collaboratively toward achieving Strategic Priority 2.



Recommended Community Action	Suggested Lead Organizations	Performance Measure	Suggested Timeline
2.1 Strengthen coordination and referral pathways between VA health care and local community health care providers to improve continuity of care for women veterans.	VA Women's Health Program, local hospitals and health systems, county public health agencies, Veteran Service Organizations.	Referral partnerships established; participating organizations engaged; referral process documented.	Within 12 months; ongoing review.
2.2 Increase awareness and utilization of preventive health services, women's health programs, and specialty care available through both VA and community providers.	VA Women's Health Program, local health departments, health care providers, community organizations.	Educational initiatives conducted; participation in preventive health programs; community awareness activities completed annually.	Ongoing.
2.3 Promote collaboration among health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, and community agencies to improve coordination of services and reduce barriers to care.	VA, county veteran service offices, public health agencies, nonprofit organizations, American Legion Post 543 and partner organizations.	Number of collaborative initiatives implemented; participating organizations; annual review of partnerships.	Ongoing.

Suggested Priority 2 Tactics

- Communities should adapt these tactics to reflect local needs, available resources, and existing partnerships. The following examples illustrate practical approaches that may be used to implement the recommended community actions.
- Establish referral agreements between VA and community providers.
- Conduct educational programs highlighting available women's health services.
- Encourage coordinated case management for women veterans with complex health care needs.
- Promote preventive health screenings and annual wellness visits.
- Develop resource-sharing agreements among participating organizations.
- Host community forums where women veterans can meet health care providers and learn about available services.
- Evaluate barriers to care annually and identify opportunities for local improvement.



Strategic Priority 3 - Strengthen Community Partnerships

No single organization can meet the diverse health and wellness needs of women veterans. Throughout the Summit, participants repeatedly emphasized that meaningful improvements require sustained collaboration among the Department of Veterans Affairs, local health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, public health agencies, nonprofit organizations, elected officials, and community leaders. Each organization contributes unique expertise, services, and resources that, when coordinated, create a stronger network of support for women veterans.

The Summit demonstrated that community partnerships improve awareness of available resources, reduce duplication of effort, strengthen referral networks, and create opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. Maintaining these partnerships beyond the Summit will be essential to sustaining momentum and improving health outcomes for women veterans throughout coastal North Carolina.

The following recommended community actions provide practical opportunities for organizations to work collaboratively toward achieving Strategic Priority 3.

Recommended Community Action	Suggested Lead Organizations	Performance Measure	Suggested Timeline
3.1 Formalize a regional women veterans collaborative.	Veteran Service Organizations, VA, county agencies, nonprofit organizations	Collaborative network established; participating organizations identified.	Within 12 months
3.2 Expand partnerships among health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, and community organizations.	VA, public health, health systems, nonprofit organizations	Number of active partnerships and collaborative initiatives.	Ongoing
3.3 Conduct an annual community partnership review to identify new opportunities and strengthen existing relationships.	Planning Committee or future Summit Steering Committee	Annual assessment completed and recommendations published.	Annually

Suggested Priority 3 Tactics

- Quarterly partner meetings
- Shared resource calendar



- Joint outreach events
- Cross-referral agreements
- Shared educational programs

Strategic Priority 4 - Expand Behavioral Health and Whole-Person Wellness

Behavioral health emerged as one of the most consistent themes throughout the Summit. Presenters emphasized that mental health, emotional well-being, social connection, physical health, healthy aging, cardiovascular wellness, and suicide prevention are interconnected components of whole-person wellness. Women veterans benefit most when health care addresses the whole individual rather than isolated medical conditions.

Reducing stigma, increasing awareness of available services, expanding access to behavioral health resources, and encouraging early intervention will strengthen long-term health outcomes while fostering resilience and quality of life.

The following recommended community actions provide practical opportunities for organizations to work collaboratively toward achieving Strategic Priority 4.

Recommended Community Action	Suggested Lead Organizations	Performance Measure	Suggested Timeline
4.1 Increase awareness and access to behavioral health resources.	VA, Trillium, behavioral health providers	Number of outreach and education initiatives completed.	Ongoing
4.2 Promote whole-person wellness through preventive health education.	Public health agencies, VA, nonprofit organizations	Wellness programs offered; participant engagement.	Ongoing
4.3 Strengthen community collaboration supporting suicide prevention and mental wellness.	VA Suicide Prevention, community organizations, Veteran Service Organizations	Number of collaborative behavioral health initiatives conducted annually.	Annual Review

Suggested Priority 4 Tactics

- Mental health awareness campaigns
- Suicide prevention training
- Peer support groups
- Wellness education



- Physical activity programs

Strategic Priority 5 - Ensure Women Veterans' Voices Inform Future Planning

The Summit demonstrated that women veterans themselves are the most valuable source of information for improving services. Their lived experiences provide insight that cannot be obtained solely through research or organizational planning. Continued engagement with women veterans is essential to ensuring that future initiatives remain responsive to evolving needs.

Future planning should continue to create meaningful opportunities for women veterans to share experiences, evaluate services, identify emerging concerns, and participate in developing community solutions.

The following recommended community actions provide practical opportunities for organizations to work collaboratively toward achieving Strategic Priority 5.

Recommended Community Action	Suggested Lead Organizations	Performance Measure	Suggested Timeline
5.1 Continue annual participant evaluations and needs assessments.	Summit Planning Committee	Annual evaluation completed.	After each Summit
5.2 Include women veterans in planning committees and advisory groups.	Planning Committee, Veteran organizations	Women veterans represented in leadership positions.	Ongoing
5.3 Establish ongoing opportunities for community feedback.	Community Partners	Number of listening sessions, forums, or advisory meetings held annually.	Ongoing

Suggested Priority 5 Tactics

- Annual surveys
- Focus groups
- Listening sessions
- Advisory councils
- Community forums



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Strategic Priority 6 - Sustain the Women Veterans Health Care Summit

The inaugural Summit demonstrated the value of bringing together women veterans, health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, public health agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders to learn from one another and develop practical community solutions. Sustaining the Summit will preserve these partnerships while providing a continuing forum for education, collaboration, innovation, and action.

Future Summits should build upon the accomplishments of the inaugural event by evaluating progress, identifying new priorities, expanding partnerships, and celebrating successes achieved through collaborative community action.

The following recommended community actions provide practical opportunities for organizations to work collaboratively toward achieving Strategic Priority 6.

Recommended Community Action	Suggested Lead Organizations	Performance Measure	Suggested Timeline
6.1 Conduct future Women Veterans Health Care Summits on a regular basis	Host organization and future Planning Committees	Future Summits successfully conducted.	Biennially (or as determined by organizers)
6.2 Monitor progress on Strategic Priorities established in these Proceedings.	Summit Steering Committee	Progress report prepared prior to each future Summit.	Before each summit
6.3 Expand participation and partnerships to strengthen regional impact.	Planning Committee and community partners	Growth in participating organizations, attendees, and sponsors.	Ongoing

Suggested Priority 6 Tactics

- Annual planning meetings
- Progress reports
- Updated Proceedings
- Recognition of community achievements
- Expanded sponsorships



2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit
June 18-19, 2026
Homer E. Wright Event Center
St James, North Carolina 28461

Chapter 15 Looking Forward

Looking Forward... the journey continues.

The Summit Was Only the Beginning

The 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit represented far more than a two-day educational conference. It marked the beginning of a community-wide commitment to improving the health and well-being of women veterans through education, collaboration, and coordinated action. By bringing together women veterans, health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, community leaders, and elected officials, the Summit created an environment where diverse perspectives could be shared, common challenges identified, and practical solutions developed.

Throughout the Summit, participants demonstrated a shared commitment to ensuring that women veterans feel seen, heard, and supported. Educational presentations increased awareness of emerging health issues affecting women veterans, while panel discussions and breakout sessions encouraged meaningful dialogue regarding barriers to care, opportunities for collaboration, and strategies for strengthening local resources. Most importantly, the Summit reinforced that improving the lives of women veterans is a responsibility shared by the entire community.

From Conversation to Action

One of the most significant accomplishments of the inaugural Summit was the transition from identifying challenges to developing practical solutions. Rather than concluding with a list of recommendations, Summit participants worked collaboratively to identify strategic priorities that communities can begin implementing immediately. Those priorities, presented in Chapter 14, provide a practical roadmap for improving access to health care, strengthening partnerships, expanding wellness initiatives, increasing community awareness, and sustaining long-term collaboration.

Meaningful change rarely occurs through the efforts of a single organization. Lasting improvements are achieved when health care providers, Veteran Service Organizations, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, businesses, community leaders, and women veterans themselves work together toward common goals. The Strategic Action Plan recognizes this shared responsibility by providing a flexible framework that communities may adapt according to their unique resources, partnerships, and priorities.



Building on the Momentum

One of the most encouraging outcomes of the Summit was that progress began immediately. Ideas generated during educational presentations and breakout discussions quickly evolved into new partnerships and collaborative initiatives designed to strengthen support for women veterans throughout coastal North Carolina.

Among those initiatives was the development of BEACON, a regional network established to strengthen communication, increase awareness of available resources, promote collaboration among organizations, and create opportunities for women veterans to remain connected beyond the Summit. BEACON reflects the spirit of collaboration that defined the inaugural Summit and demonstrates that meaningful progress begins when communities choose to work together toward common goals.

The Planning Committee hopes that additional initiatives will continue to emerge as organizations build upon relationships established during the Summit. Every partnership formed, every resource shared, and every woman veteran connected to needed services represents meaningful progress toward improving health and well-being throughout the region.

A Model for Other Communities

Although the Summit was developed to address the needs of women veterans living in coastal North Carolina, many of the lessons documented throughout these Proceedings have broader application. Communities across the nation face similar challenges related to awareness of available services, coordination among organizations, access to health care, behavioral health, and community engagement.

The Strategic Priorities presented in Chapter 14 are intentionally designed as a flexible framework rather than a prescriptive plan. Communities are encouraged to adapt the recommended actions and suggested tactics to reflect their own needs, available resources, organizational capacity, and local partnerships. By sharing both the Summit's successes and lessons learned, these Proceedings are intended to encourage similar collaborative efforts wherever women veterans live and receive care.

Continuing the Journey

The inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit established a strong foundation, but meaningful progress will require sustained commitment. Continued collaboration among community partners, regular evaluation of progress, ongoing communication with women veterans, and future educational opportunities will be essential to maintaining momentum.



Future Summits should build upon the accomplishments documented in these Proceedings by evaluating implementation of the Strategic Action Plan, identifying emerging issues affecting women veterans, expanding community partnerships, and celebrating measurable progress. Each Summit should serve not only as an educational forum but also as an opportunity to assess how communities are translating knowledge into meaningful local action.

Closing Reflection

The success of the 2026 Inaugural Women Veterans Health Care Summit will ultimately be measured not by the quality of these Proceedings, but by the lives improved through the partnerships, actions, and commitments they inspire. Every organization that chooses to collaborate, every community that strengthens support for women veterans, and every woman veteran who gains access to the care, benefits, and resources she has earned represents another step toward fulfilling the vision that brought participants together in June 2026.

These Proceedings document what was accomplished during the inaugural Summit, but they also challenge each reader to consider what comes next. The responsibility for improving the health and well-being of women veterans belongs to all of us. Working together, communities can create lasting change that honors the service and sacrifice of women veterans while ensuring they receive the care, respect, and opportunities they have earned.

The inaugural Summit may have concluded, but its work continues. The conversations have begun. The partnerships have been established. The roadmap has been created. The opportunity now rests with each of us to transform knowledge into action and continue building communities where current and future women veterans can thrive.

*The question before us is no longer whether we can
make things better for women veterans in our community....*

*The question is what each of us will do to help make that
vision a reality.*

