

SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENT: VETERAN STATUS

Sometimes significant life events or situations influence our health status. Examples include being married, divorced, or single; experiencing the death of a loved one; working in an occupation associated with some health issues; being homeless; being imprisoned; immigrating to a new country; being an abused or neglected child; or being the victim of violence. Since there are so many life situations that could be examined to discern their impact on health, and since some are covered to an extent in other chapters (victim violence in the Injury chapter of *Healthy Maine 2010: Longer and Healthier Lives*), limited resources make it necessary to focus on only one life situation as an example.

Veteran status is chosen as the focus for this chapter. Since September 11 2001, we are more aware of the sacrifice military men and women have played in defending the freedom we enjoy. With increasing numbers of our armed services working in war-torn areas of the world and expected to return someday to our communities, it appears timely to look at the health issues they may face. Especially since they may be witnessing tremendous violence, being under attack themselves, and possibly being exposed to biological or chemical weapons with long-term effects, assuring their overall health status is addressed when they return is important. Additionally, with veterans from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam becoming older, the overall health status of veterans living among us appears to be a growing issue.

Larry Dearborn, Past State Commander of the American Legion and State Director of the Uniformed Services Disabled Retirees, and Member and a Past Post Director of Post 9 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Vietnam Veteran

“Getting to see a doctor is one of the biggest health challenges for veterans in Maine. I have a 100% disability due to my military service, so I have a priority in the VA Health System. I’m also hard of hearing, yet it still takes me 8–12 months to get my hearing re-checked for a new hearing aid. And, the appointment is for a place one and one-half hours from where I live. The people who work in the VA System, such as at Togus, are wonderful people, but they are woefully under-funded.”

“Transportation is a big barrier, especially among the elder veterans. Services, especially specialty services, are only available in certain areas of the State or in Boston. Although there are some limited transportation services available, you can’t ask an elderly veteran to hop from their home to the town’s bus stop to their appointment and back again.”

“I would recommend that if community-based public health organizations want to become involved in working with veterans, that they contact their local American Legion or VFW post. I think they will find a very willing group of hardworking people.”



Significant Life Status – Veterans

NATIONALLY WE KNOW:

- There are about 25 million veterans.
- Two-thirds of the male population over age 65 are veterans.
- The veteran population is aging, with an expected increase in their median age from 57 years in 1995 to 63 years in 2010.
- The median age of women veterans is younger, 45 years versus 58 years for men. While the total numbers of veterans are declining, the numbers of women veterans are increasing.
- Nearly 25% of homeless people are veterans and many veterans who live in poverty are at risk of becoming homeless.
- Smoking rates appear to be higher, about 30% compared to about 25% in the overall population nationally (<http://www.va.gov>).
- The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers the VA Health Administration throughout the US that provides some health services to those who served in the military and left with an honorable discharge. However, benefits are limited and co-payments can be considerable, depending on a veteran's income, disability status, and place of residence.
- A recent interim report by the President's Task Force To Improve Health Care Delivery For Our Nation's Veterans sets a course of collaboration between two parallel but related health care systems – health care systems run separately by the Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DOD).
(Interim Report, July 31, 2002, available at www.presidentshealthcare.org)
- For example, despite known occupational hazards our military personnel face such as chemical exposures and psychological trauma, this report states: "Occupational health information is not collected in a formal or structured way across the Services; the DOD does not currently view collection of this information as a defined requirement."



**Jerry O'Neill, Commander of Deering Memorial Post
No. 6859, Portland Maine**

IN MAINE WE KNOW:

- According to the 2000 Census, there are approximately 154,000 civilian veterans in Maine, which is an estimated 16% or one in six of the adult civilian population.
- Maine has the highest concentration of veterans in the United States. Other states with high percentages of veterans in its adult civilian populations include Nevada, Florida, Montana, and Oklahoma.
(Bureau of Veterans' Services.)
- Of Maine's 154,000 veterans, approximately 5.8% of them are women, but this percentage is increasing as the total numbers of women veterans increases in Maine.
- As of 2000, there are an estimated 2,300 residents in Maine serving currently in the armed forces.



COUNTY	NUMBERS OF VETERANS	VA ENROLLEES	% OF VETERANS ENROLLED
Androscoggin	13,168	3,330	25%
Aroostook	9,960	3,331	33%
Cumberland	29,929	5,057	17%
Franklin	3,482	1,018	29%
Hancock	6,203	1,219	20%
Kennebec	14,390	4,736	33%
Knox	4,880	1,126	23%
Lincoln	3,960	1,152	29%
Oxford	6,800	2,149	32%
Penobscot	18,009	3,989	22%
Piscataquis	2,365	786	33%
Sagadahoc	4,609	1,063	23%
Somerset	6,244	1,914	31%
Waldo	4,137	1,063	26%
Washington	4,721	1,496	32%
York	21,154	4,267	20%
Maine Total	154,013	37,696	24%

VA Enrollees are those enrolled in the VA Health System.

Source: Department of Veterans' Affairs.

- Approximately 24% of Maine's veterans are enrolled in the US Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) health care services in Maine (see the county enrollment table).
- The VA operates a medical center in Togus, near Augusta. Established by President Lincoln in 1865 and opened in 1866, Togus was the *first* national home for disabled volunteer soldiers. At one time it housed about 3,000 veterans, though the hospital part of it was much smaller. In 2001, inpatient admissions at Togus were 2,147, while outpatient visits reached over 222,000. Community-based outpatient clinics are operated in Caribou, Bangor, Calais, Machias, Rumford, and Saco.
- Veteran centers that provide counseling are located in Bangor, Caribou, Lewiston, Portland, and Springvale.
- Veterans' homes that operate as long-term care facilities are located in Augusta, Bangor, Caribou, Scarborough, and South Paris.
- Various estimates place the numbers of homeless veterans in Maine at 500–1,000 or even higher. Local veteran groups periodically hold "stand-downs" in urban area homeless shelters in Maine to provide assistance to homeless veterans. However, there are no facilities specially designated for homeless veterans.

Robert Owen, Department Service Officer of the American Legion of Maine, Member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Korean War Veteran

"Lack of funding for health care for vets is the biggest health issue veterans face. Congress has continued to not fund the VA at the level needed and, meanwhile, the population the VA serves has grown. As a result, in Maine it takes about one year for a newly eligible veteran to even see a primary care physician. Just because there is a veterans' health care system and just because a veteran may be a member of it, doesn't mean they are served by it."



Significant Life Status – Veterans

- The Bureau of Veterans' Services in the Maine Department of Defense, Veterans, and Emergency Management provides informational services to veterans and their dependents across Maine regarding Federal, State, and local assistance.
- The American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 to serve members of the US armed forces who served during a time of national crisis, regardless of place of service. It is also a community service organization with auxiliary organizations. The American Legion in Maine has over 26,000 veteran members, 13,000 auxiliary members, and about 3,000 members of the Sons of the American Legion with a total approaching 50,000. One hundred sixty-six (166) posts are located throughout the State.
- The Veterans of Foreign Wars, or VFW, traces its roots to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection founded local organizations to address their needs. Membership includes veterans from four wars and active-duty service members who have earned an overseas campaign. The VFW is also a community service organization with auxiliary organizations. The VFW in Maine has about 82 posts with 16,000 members and 54 auxiliary units with 5,500 auxiliary members located throughout the State.



CHALLENGES

- Veteran status in Maine is collected by a few health data systems: the Census, BRFSS, death certificates, and the substance abuse Treatment Data System (see the appendix). The VA has information on the utilization of its health care system by its enrollees, but has a limited amount of population-based data that tracks overall health status. However, it appears that a more comprehensive analysis of Maine veterans' health as a population is possible, given the several data sets that collect information on veteran status. The Bureau of Health hopes to work with others to identify resources for such an analysis.
- There are many Statewide infrastructure components that can be used to reach out to veteran populations. Many communities have an American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars post, the Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services has some local offices, and the VA Health Administration has facilities in several towns. Therefore, it should be relatively easy for local public health initiatives to include veterans in their outreach.