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# SENATE COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Bob Archuleta, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

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<b>Bill No:</b>	AB 81	<b>Hearing Date:</b>	7/14/2025
<b>Author:</b>	Ta		
<b>Version:</b>	12/19/24 Introduced		
<b>Urgency:</b>	No	<b>Fiscal:</b>	Yes
<b>Consultant:</b>	Jenny Callison		

**Subject:** Veterans: mental health

## **DESCRIPTION**

### **Summary:**

Requires the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) to establish a program to fund, upon appropriation by the Legislature, an academic study of mental health among women veterans in California, and requires CalVet to submit a report that summarizes the findings and recommendations of the study to the Legislature no later than June 30, 2029.

### **Existing law:**

Establishes CalVet to, among other services, provide veterans and their dependents and survivors with assistance in processing service-related disability claims, assistance in obtaining affordable housing, and information about health ailments associated with military service.

## **BACKGROUND**

Women who served in the United States Armed Forces have unique needs. They are more likely to be primary caregivers for spouses, children, and parents and more likely to have gender specific health needs. They are younger and more diverse than their male counterparts. Women veterans experience unique barriers to receiving and utilizing benefits and services. Women veterans have higher rates of physical/mental health problems, such as Military Sexual Trauma (MST), alcohol abuse, and drug abuse, than male veterans.

On January 23, 2024, CalVet, the California Research Bureau, and the VetFund Foundation launched women veterans' survey. The survey closed on June 11, 2024, with 3,822 individuals responding, of which 2,716 were qualified responses after removing those who did not identify as women or had no branch of service. Over one-third of respondents reported mixed experiences with specific Veterans Health Administration (VHA) hospitals or clinics, vet centers, and overall medical care. The second most common theme, mentioned by roughly a quarter of respondents, was the support they received or the ongoing need for assistance securing specific benefits. Respondents reported challenges navigating the VA system, including difficulties in filing disability claims, finding competent mental health providers, or locating knowledgeable advocates.

Among the women veterans surveyed, more than 50% reported having mental and physical service-connected disabling conditions that affect their quality of life, increased reporting of

adverse health conditions across the board, and 10% of respondents self-reported experiencing suicidal ideation. In California, many women do not self-identify as veterans and thus do not utilize benefits, participate in veterans events, or fill out surveys to help complete this data.

The suicide rate among women veterans in 2015 was 2.0 times higher than the rate among non-veteran women, after adjusting for age differences. According to the 2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, in 2022, there were 271 suicides among female Veterans (80 fewer than in 2021). From 2001 to 2022, age-adjusted suicide rates rose 24% for female veterans with recent VHA use and 55.2% for female veterans without recent VHA use.

The suicide rate is higher among women who reported having experienced MST, sexual assault, or sexual harassment during military service than among those who did not report experiencing MST. Among female recent veteran VHA users in 2022, the suicide rate was 75% higher for those with positive screens for MST than for those with negative screens.

### **COMMENT**

Women comprise the fastest-growing population in both the military and the veteran community. Women veterans experience unique challenges and gaps in transition, care, and employment, particularly during their transition to civilian life and employment.

According to the author: AB 81 would provide a much-needed picture of the mental health challenges facing California's women veterans. This important and uncontroversial legislation would direct the California Department of Veterans Affairs to conduct an academic study of mental health among women veterans in California. This study would include an analysis of mental health stressors, risk factors, suicide rates, treatment modalities, barriers to care, and other relevant information. Given California's rapidly growing population of women veterans, this legislation would ensure that, instead of only identifying concerning statistics, the state is researching and remedying the root causes driving mental health challenges facing women veterans.

### **POSITIONS**

**Sponsor:** Author.

**Support:** American Legion, Department of California  
AMVETs, Department of California  
California Association of County Veterans Service Officers  
California State Commanders Veterans Council  
County of Orange  
Military Officers Association of America, California Council of Chapters  
San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce  
Vietnam Veterans of America, California State Council

**Oppose:** None on File.

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