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Women Veterans Needs Assessment

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Abstract

The Military & Veterans Affairs Office in Monterey County stated 20,674 veterans. They provide advocacy, assistance, and services designed to enhance the lives of the county's veterans who served their country in the Armed Forces, their families, and their survivors. While this purpose is both efficient and admirable, there are still unmet needs in the veteran community. Increasing the support for women veterans within the veteran community requires further effort to address adequately. They are addressing this by understanding the contributing factors, several of which are related to stigma, lack of understanding services, and trauma. This survey took a closer look at women veterans' needs and their association with services. The results and recommendations shown from the study are positive, indicating a potential solution to a large part of this problem. It is recommended that changes occur to increase awareness of women veterans' needs. Where possible, have women veterans representatives. It is recommended that efforts be made to allow women veterans to feel comfortable and reach out for support through the veterans' services. Also, do more outreach to women veterans to get them more involved and connected to services.

Keywords: Monterey, women veterans, military services, surveys

Agency & Communities Served

In Monterey County, there is a high rate in the population of veterans. In 2020 the Military & Veterans Affairs Office in Monterey County stated that there were 20,674 veterans. This is about half of the military veteran population services-connected in the area. The veteran would need to have an incurred or aggravated injury or illness caused during their military service to qualify for services. The veterans can get connected to many different services. Some of the services they provide include health care, public assistance, service treatment records, discharge papers. The spouses and dependents can help with college tuition fees and survivors and widow benefits.

The Military & Veterans Affairs Office provides services to all races, ages, gender of any veteran or veterans' spouses and dependents. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS) 2020, male veterans used the VA in 2017 was 47%. The higher utilization rate of the VA benefits than any other racial group is Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic (NCVAS, 2020). The Monterey County Military & Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) provides advocacy, assistance, and services designed to enhance the lives of the County's veterans who served their country in the Armed Forces, their families, and their survivors. They assist in obtaining entitlements and services from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), U.S. Department of Defense, California Department of Veterans Affairs (CDVA), and local programs for eligible veterans and their families. Monterey County Military & Veterans Affairs employees are dedicated to providing these services in a customer-friendly environment with quality second to none (Military & Veterans Affairs, n.d).

Problem Description

There are 32% of veterans accessing their benefits (2020). Female veterans are not utilizing services at the same rate as male veterans. Less than 200 women veterans have looked in the VA offices or have come in to get benefits (Military & Veterans Affairs, n.d). Most of these women are not service-connected and were just looking to get information. There are 91% male and 9% female veterans in Monterey County. (U.S Census Bureau, 2019). Addressing Systematic Inequalities Facing Female Veterans states that women veterans are confused about getting services connected. There are 23% of female veterans who are not receiving benefits because of the unsureness of eligibility. There are also 29% of female veterans who have reported having a hard time finding employment (n.d.). There is a lack of awareness for women veterans of services they are entitled to. By improving the awareness of what is available to women veterans can help increase women veterans to come to the agency for services.

Contributing Factors

One of the key problems in the military for being a female is the stigma that they face before, during, and after they have served. As there are many factors to this from mental health, sexual harassment, and the different barriers women have to faces once they return home. When women return home they have to deal with what a veteran is defined as, which is meant for males, meaning that there are no proper resources that are addressed for women veterans (Cruz, n.d). Women veterans have to deal with the fact that they will never be looked at as anything else but a woman regardless if they served or not. The males seem to always have a higher advantage over the women. Veteran women are looked at with no authority and what they say seems to get

dismissed. The women's needs do not get met when they return home, such as examining their trauma. Everything that the women veterans seem to want to get helped always seems dismissed. For example, when women ask for therapy to get some trauma address, they get sent home with a prescription instead (Cruz, n.d.). What they went through has no value or meaning and instead can just be taken care of by giving them some pills, which will do the trick.

According to the International Peace Institute quoted a military woman that states, “The community sees us as masculine, angry, and more aggressive than normal civilian women as we are trying to fit in with a male-dominated culture. At the same time, single women may be seen as promiscuous, while mothers are often perceived as neglecting their families”(2020). Veteran women who have children, husbands, and families are looked at so severely. As for a male with children and a family is looked at more positively.

Lack of understanding of benefits available for veterans

Women veterans have said that some trauma related to military services keeps them from returning to any VA setting. This can bring back unwanted memories, and find it better to stay away from these places. When women try to seek the VA for their treatments related to their services, they always get dismissed. This is one of the reasons why women chose to go to a civilian doctor that will not deny them. They seem to get more out of a civilian doctor and get treatment rather than the VA.

A Journal of Humanistic Psychology states the different factors that prevent women veterans from using VA services. Some of these factors are VA environments triggering women's memories of combat experiences that have “ limited knowledge and inaccurate beliefs among women about eligibility for VA services and poor connections during and after military service

and bureaucratic hurdles that prevent women vets from receiving care” (Evans, 2019). Not only having to deal with this but also when going to a VA healthcare facility, all the doctors are males. This makes it even harder for veteran women to want to be seen by male doctors.

Trauma-Related to Military Services

While women are serving in the military, they go through a lot and see a lot that causes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A survey indicated in 2017 “that female veterans have higher rates of depression and PTSD than civilian women” (Great Valley Publishing Company, n.d., para. 4). There are many different factors for PTSD to come up on veteran women; this can happen any time of their time serving from before, during, and after. “About one in five women seen in VA report some form of military sexual trauma Military sexual trauma (MST)...” (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013, para. 9). This is an ongoing battle for the women who survived and making it hard for them to avoid these issues. When women tend to speak up believing that they will get the support they need and are encouraged to do it because many other women have gone through the same thing. Unfortunately, the outcome in this always seems to get dismissed and the women look like the liars and the bad ones in the picture after that. When veteran women go seeking help regarding their trauma during the services they have to deal with, “male-dominated culture in VA facilities makes it doubly hard for women who have been traumatized to feel comfortable seeking treatment” (ABCNews, n.d., para. 29). Not being able to go to a VA and being seen with other women makes it hard for a veteran woman to get the proper treatment for their trauma.

Consequences

There is a growing population of females in the military that will continue to grow more over time. As there have been more women in the military, there are still not too many changes to help support the women who have to serve among the males. Many women in the military have had to encounter sexual assault during their time served. As many of them have spoken up thinking that something would be done and help put a stop to these assaults; they then realize that everything they say gets dismissed and things keep going as is. Due to many female veterans who tried to get help while serving were turned down and felt like the military failed them they chose to leave that chapter behind and never look back. As many women leave the service with many untreated trauma, they are less likely to seek help once they leave the service. Most of them will choose to hit the lowest they have ever been before having to choose to go to a VA for assistance.

When female veterans have tried to seek help within the veterans' psychiatrist, they are treated and looked at differently. According to Berry, when she went in for the first time, "...I kind of rolled their eyes at me, and said, "You know, I really don't know why you're wasting my time, because there's nothing wrong with you,..."(Denkmann, 2017). Instead of women veterans feeling like they are able to get the services they are entitled to it seems more as they are being pushed away from it. The article, Building Trust with Women Veterans states that "Women Veterans want to know that VA is taking action. They are motivated to be part of the solution and want to work with VA and other women Veterans towards a common goal. They want to be included and given the same considerations and priority as their male peers"(n.d.). Female veterans have resentment toward the military because of how many times they failed them when they went for help. Due to this, they chose to "... not identify themselves as being veterans. They

tend to stay away from the organizations wishing to help them because they feel they were betrayed by that organization in the past...”(Absher, 2018, para.4) as the female veterans stay away from the organization where they can get treatment for their trauma, mental health and get the help they may need. This leads them to become homeless, unable to keep a job or create relationships. The female veteran will also isolate themselves and feel hopeless, causing them to take their lives away.

Women who use the VA health care

Many female veterans have differences among those using the VA health and those who are not. It may seem that the younger female veterans are less likely to use the VA than the older ones. A study states, “...those who do not use VA health care, compared with those who do, are older, more educated, more likely to be unmarried, have lower rates of insurance coverage, poorer general health and mental health, and greater incidence of military sexual trauma”(Tsai, 2015, para. 5). Even though the older women veterans go to the VA, they are still not seeing as many women veterans as they would hope to. There is still a higher percentage of unseen veteran women who chose not to seek any military-related services and rather go to a nonmilitary doctor instead.

Homelessness

There are many challenges that female veterans face by the time they return home—a higher percentage of women who live in poverty or are close to becoming homeless than males. A study done by the VA states that they have “estimated that between 13 and 15 percent of women veterans who are living in poverty are also likely to be homeless” (Casura, 2018, para.8). Female veterans seem to have a more challenging time than males when returning home. They

are less likely to find a job right away, have no income, and have nowhere to live. Veteran women are less likely to get hired even if their resumes are the same as male veterans. A male veteran is less likely to become homeless than a female veteran. The male veterans looked more like heroes in the civilian world and did well for their country. As for the female veterans, they looked like unfit female mothers who had abandoned their children. The female veterans do not look like a hero type like the males; they are looked down upon even if they did the same thing a male veteran did.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
The stigma around women who have served in the military	Female veterans are not utilizing services at the same rates as male veterans	Health issues being left unaddressed (mental and physical)
Lack of understanding of benefits available for veterans		Women who use the VA healthcare
Trauma-related to military service		Homelessness

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

The capstone project is to create a survey sent out through email to female veterans. There will be questions regarding the different available services in the survey and only going out to female veterans in the area. Also, this survey will help the veteran females learn about services that are available for them. The goal is to get at least 15 to 25 women to come into the office, speak with a veteran representative and see what they can help them out with.

Project Purpose

This project will be surveying veterans to reach the female population. The purpose of the survey is to provide female veterans access to resources that are currently not being used or taken advantage of. The resources available provide the opportunity to address and support the healing of trauma related to females who served in the military.

Many have not had access to these resources and may not know their availability or qualification to access them. The population of women who serve in the military is integrating themselves back into the world as a civilian after having many different experiences and possibly not having the tools needed to be successful people in society. This population needs better access and information on their resources for a smooth transition when leaving the service.

Project Justification

The project justification is figuring out why female veterans are not seeking services. This project is to help get more female veterans involved and get their voices heard to understand better what they need. In a 2014 article, Brooks states that “Women Veterans have unique needs,

particularly, for some, about military sexual trauma.” A female veteran, Ms. Watson, speaks about issues that are not being addressed for the women; as she states, “Information to help friends struggling with TBI, PTSD, depression, and addiction...”(Brooks, 2014). Providing more resources and information to female veterans can go a long way. In this survey, they can answer the question in the comfort of their own home and not feel judged or pressured by anyone. This survey will also help out in the area where the female veterans are asking in. It is essential to reach out to these women in order to serve them better. If they can get “connection between military and civilian culture, and financial support for education”(Brooks, 2014). Having them connect would bring more female veterans into the agency and get them what they need.

Building trust among the female veterans is a good way to start as they want to feel that they are in the right hands from the very beginning. Building Trust with Women Veterans states that “I want you to treat me like a whole person, not just someone assigned to you. I want you to care about me and not just your numbers.”(n.d.). Women veterans have thought that other veterans have it worse, so why should they even help or reach out. In a 2017 article, Berry stated that "How could I possibly receive benefits when this person over here is dealing with the ramifications of Agent Orange or lost a leg?" (Denkmann, 2017). Berry also stated that "The resources did not come to you. So if you were not a very proactive person, you were not going to get any help..." Therefore, if female veterans are not being reached out to, there is less likelihood of coming to the agency for services. Sending out surveys to the veteran women will help address the women more personally and help them feel as if they are not just another person coming into this agency.

Assessment Plan

The effectiveness of the planning measure is by keeping track of how many veterans have responded to the survey. The survey will be done through Survey Monkey to help track how many were filled out and if more time is needed to complete. This will also help to know who wished to get more information on services and be able to reach out to them. This could also help send the same survey to other agencies or schools to reach out to more female veterans. By sending surveys among other agencies can help spread the word which can potentially bring in more female veterans.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcome with this project is to reach out to females to let them know what is available for them. The hope with this project is that the survey could bring more women into the office. This could help to have more female veterans with getting services and anything else they may need. The hope is to be able to reach 25 female veterans. By reaching as many female veterans can also help impact their lives in a positive way. If they may be struggling with homelessness, or mental health issues, the agency can help support them in bettering their lives by getting service-connected.

Project Implementation

The project implementation plan for the survey is to help bring in more female veterans into the agency by sending out a survey. The survey will contain nine questions to get information on the veteran and connect them to The Military & Veterans Affairs Office. The

female veterans receiving the survey are from the agency's ones in the data system. The survey will be emailed directly to the female veterans, asking a few questions. This will help to guide the female veterans in the right direction.

Through this whole process, there has been training with the Veteran Representative to understand better how to help clients. The training was held from November 2020 through December 2020. There was also a veterans community meeting held in November 2020, where there was the chance to explore the different services in the area available for the veterans. These training and community meetings developed the idea that there was a need for more female veterans into the agency.

In December 2020, the research started on female veterans, looking into ways to engage the women to seek services. In June 2021, a draft was created of questions on the survey and was reviewed by Jack the Management Analyst III. In September 2021, the final revised survey was ready to go and sent out to all the female veterans in the databases. By the end of September 2021, the participants have already taken the survey. The month of October 2021 is when the survey results will be analyzed and closed. By the end of October 2021, based on the survey information, female veterans will be provided with assistance to get an appointment and meet with a veteran representative. After the survey, there will be analysis to discuss whether the project was successful or not. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Project Results

The survey questionnaire was a success; the Management Analyst III at the Military & Veterans Affairs office County of Monterey reported that out of 262 women veterans emails that

were sent the survey, 35 participated. Many participants responded that they wanted to get more information and help file a claim. Another result from the survey that was received from Management Analyst III was that there was a specific interest. According to the survey that was provided, fifteen of those women veterans stated that they were interested in specialized women's healthcare. The project results in Appendix B show detailed project results on the survey questionnaire plan.

Conclusion & Recommendations

During the process of the project, the goal was to increase awareness of women veterans' participation as the number of respondents to the survey has shown that there is a lack of awareness and knowledge for women veterans in the community.

One recommendation to the military & Affairs office of Monterey would be to start an outreach program that targets women veterans. If this was to take into place it would reach out to younger and older generations of women veterans. This could also help with all the stigma among these women heroes. Another recommendation for the agency is to continue to do the needs assessment survey every so often in order to make sure women veterans' needs are being addressed and they are aware of where these women can go to get the help they need.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Training with the vet. Rep. shadowing what their tasks	Getting a better understanding in how to help clients and how they go about intakes	November 4, 2020	Jorge
Attending Veterans Community Meeting	Understanding how they help out their clients learn what papers are needed	November 10, 2020	Joe
Shadowing a Vet. Rep.	Understanding how they work with clients	November 24, 2020	Adam
Shadowing a Vet. Rep.	Getting a better understanding in how to help clients	December 1, 2020	Anita
Research on Female Veterans Military		December 16, 2020	Yezenia
Receive Feedback on survey	Draft survey for review	June 15, 2021	Jack
Final survey for participant use		August 17, 2021	
The survey was revived and ready to go		September 7, 2021	Jack
Email setup before sending out		September 14, 2021	Jack
Participant take survey available for a month		September 17, 2021	Jack
The survey closes		October 26, 2021	Jack
Analyze survey results		October 28, 2021	Jack
Provide assistance to Veterans on making appointments with a Veteran Representative		October 31, 2021	Jack

Appendix B***Women Veteran Need Survey***

Please help the Monterey County Military and Veterans Affairs Office connect our Women Veterans to the benefits you earned and are entitled to!

1. What is your current age?
 - 18-24, 24-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+
2. In which Military Branch did you serve?
 - Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Space Force, Coast Guard
3. What was your time served on Active Duty?
 - Less than 6 months, 6 months to 1 year, 1 to 2 years, 2 to 4 years, More than 4 years, Still on Active Duty
4. Did you deploy in support of Global War on Terror operations?(Operation Enduring Freedom/Iraqi Freedom/ New Dawn/ Inherent Resolve or other)
 - Yes/ No /Unsure
5. Have you previously applied for a VA service-connected disability benefit?
 - Yes/ No / In progress
6. What specific Veteran's benefits are you interested in?
 - General Healthcare, Specialized Women Health Care, Vocational Readiness and/ or Employment Assistance, Housing Assistance, Home Loan Eligibility, Insurance, Woman-owned Veterans Small Business, Educational Benefits, California Driver's License, Veterans Parks Pass and/ or Gaming Licenses, Other (please specify)
7. Would you like assistance filing for Veterans Claims or benefits?

- Yes/No/ Maybe
8. Would you prefer working with a Women Veteran Service Representative?
 - Yes/No/ No Preference
 9. Optional- Please enter your contact information
 10. Optional- Do you know of another Women Veteran who could benefit from our services?
 11. Optional Comments or Feedback?

Appendix C

Project Results

Figure 1: What is your current age?

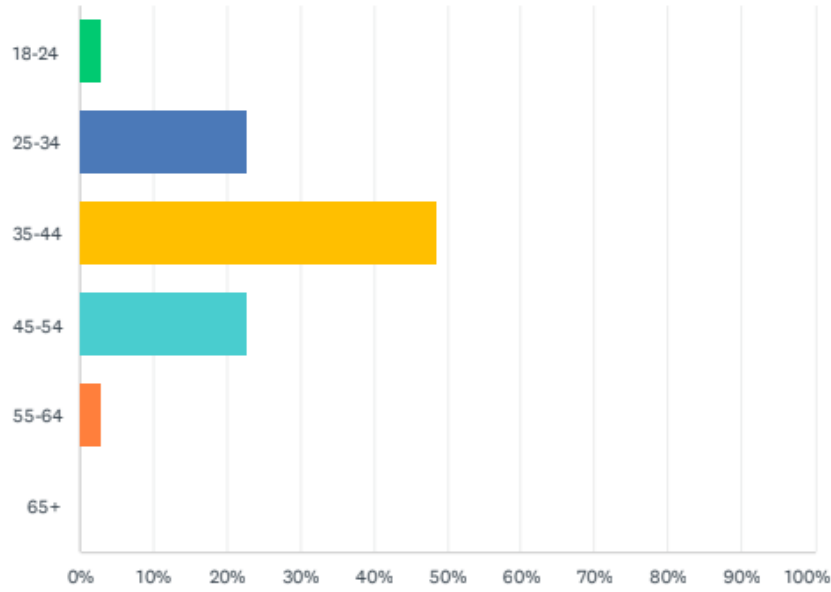


Figure 2: In which Military Branch did you serve?

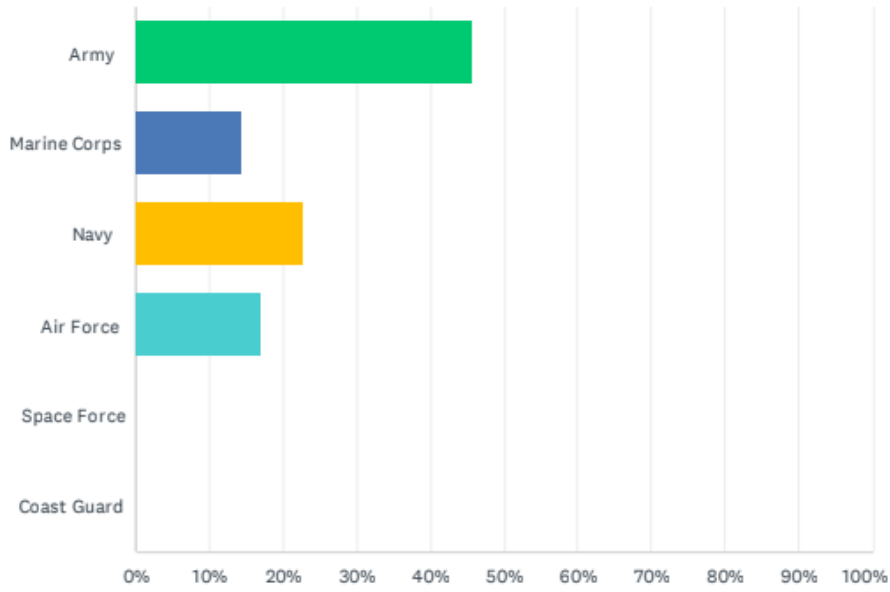


Figure 3: What was your total time served on Active Duty?

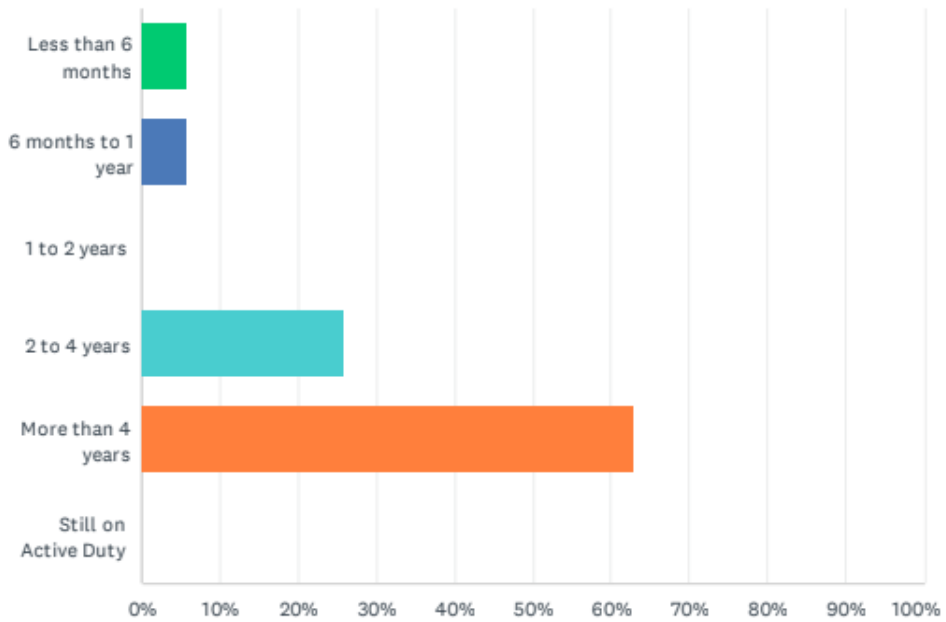


Figure 4: Did you deploy in support of Global War on Terror operations? (Operation Enduring Freedom/ Iraqi Freedom/ New Dawn/ Inherent Resolve or other)

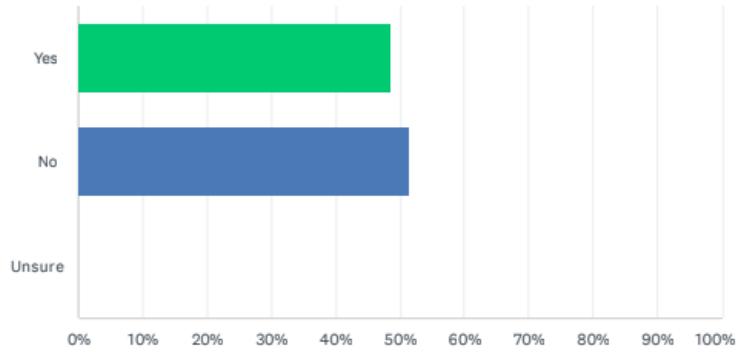


Figure 5: Have you previously applied for a VA service-connected disability benefit?

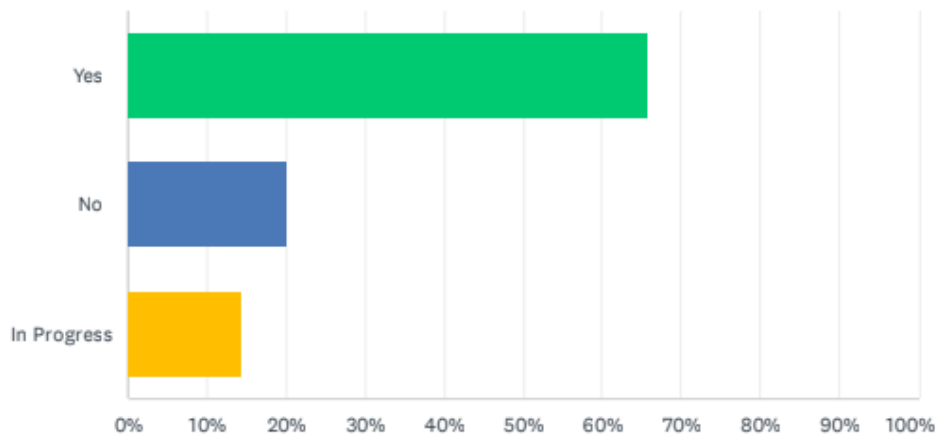


Figure 6: What specific Veteran's benefits are you interested in?

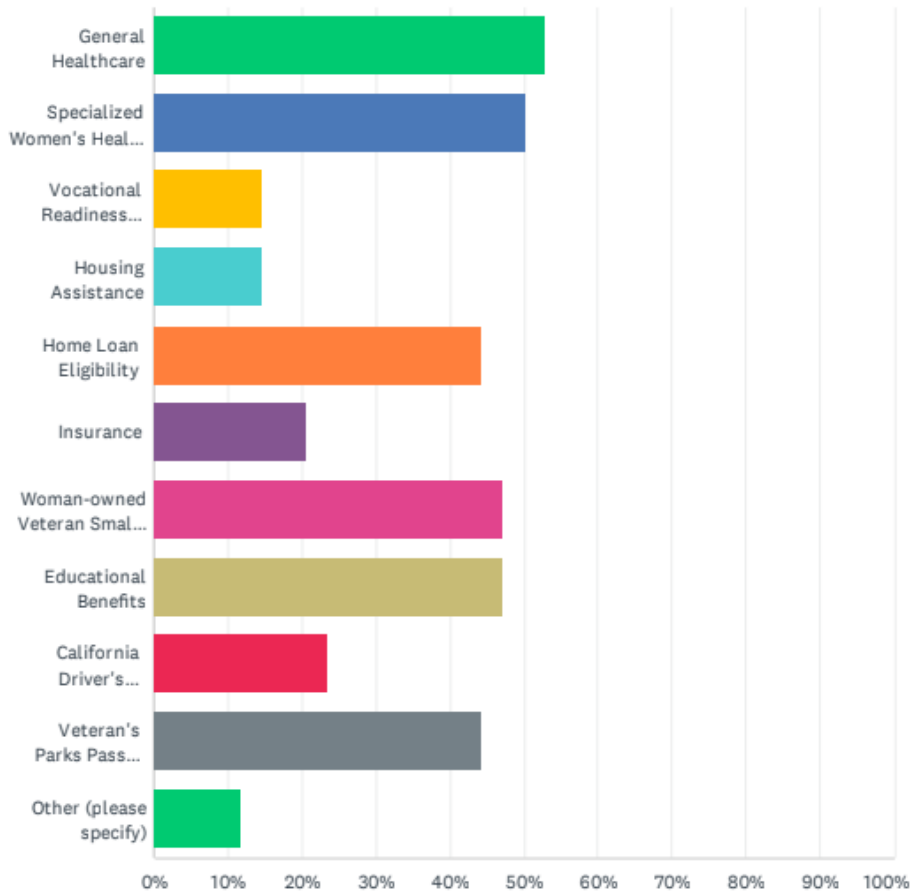


Figure 7: Would you like assistance filing for Veterans claims or benefits?

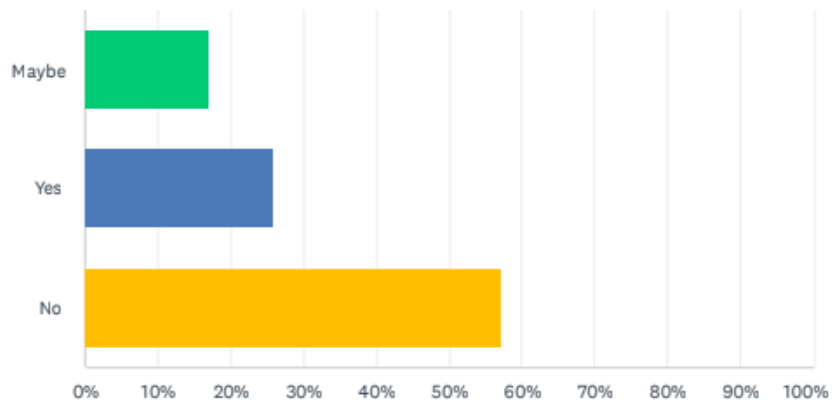


Figure 8: Would you prefer working with a Women Veteran Service Representative?

