

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Communication Between VA Providers and Sexual and Gender Minority Veterans: A Pilot Study

Sherman, M. D., Kauth, M. K., Shipherd, J. C., & Street, R. L. (2014). Communication between VA providers and sexual and gender minority veterans: A pilot study. *Psychological Services, 11*(2), 235-242. doi:10.1037/a0035840

SUMMARY: Lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) Veterans participated in a focus group or individual interview and completed self-report measures about their experiences, beliefs and preferences in communicating with VA healthcare providers. Results indicate that participants reported experiencing the VA as welcoming to sexual minority Veterans, although the majority of providers did not assess their sexual orientation. Veterans reported a variety of fears related to disclosing their sexual orientation.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Twenty-four percent of Veterans indicated they have not disclosed their sexual orientation to any VA provider; 62% of Veterans reported that none of their VA providers had asked about sexual orientation.
- Veterans described numerous fears surrounding disclosure of their sexual orientation to VA providers (e.g., fear of judgment or disparate treatment, fear loss of benefits, fear denial of healthcare, worry about implications of documentation in healthcare record).
- Only 28% of Veterans experience VA as welcoming to sexual minority individuals; male Veterans reported finding VA centers more welcoming than female Veterans and no difference were reported between transgender and non-transgender Veterans.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Create workshops that include sexual-minority affirming materials in their program (e.g., rainbow), thereby sending the message that their staff are welcoming to all people
- Offer classes that use a mindful curricula regarding language (e.g., referring to partners rather than husbands or wives)
- Offer support groups for Service members struggling with sexual identity issues or relationship issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development about respectful communication with sexual and gender minority Service members and health disparities faced by these individuals
- Continue to support programs that work with LGBT Service members
- Continue to support efforts that aim to reduce discrimination in the military based on sexual orientation

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METHODS

- Sexual and gender minority Veterans were recruited through hospital providers, community organizations, and word of mouth.
- Veterans participated in a two-hour focus group or individual interview; sessions were held at a VA hospital (either Oklahoma City, OK, or Houston, TX).
- Questions explored positive and negative experiences in VA, beliefs about deterrents to VA healthcare, and ideas about how VA can be more welcoming to sexual and gender minority Veterans.

PARTICIPANTS

- Fifty-eight Veterans participated in the study; 55% identified as female, 33% as male, and 12% as transgender.
- The majority of participants were White (84%), female (55%), and between 40-50 years old (55%).
- Eighty-one percent identified as gay or lesbian and 12% as bisexual.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants in this study were from a limited geographic region (two southern VA hospitals); the extent to which sexual and gender minority Veterans' experiences differ across the country is not known.
- The numbers of some groups of participants (e.g., transgender individuals, bisexual individuals) were rather small, precluding the researchers from specifically analyzing their unique experiences.
- Service branch data were not provided, reducing the generalizability of the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the current study with a sample of Service members still serving in the military and among providers within different branches of the military
- Examine further the difference of experiences between LGBT Service members based on sexual orientation utilizing a qualitative research approach
- Explore how the military can better support LGBT Service members and reduce fears regarding disclosure of their sexual orientation

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