

# Veterans Affairs Canada Women Veterans Forum

## Discussion and Actions

March 7-8, 2024  
Le Westin, Montreal, QC



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## Report Introduction

Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) would like to start by acknowledging and thanking all Veterans and their families, across Canada, for their service to this country.

From coast to coast to coast, we acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations people that call this land home.

We acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past. We all have a responsibility to consider how we can, in our own way, move forward in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration. We reaffirm our commitment to improving relationships between nations and improving our own understanding of Indigenous peoples and their cultures.

VAC acknowledges the adversity that women Veterans have faced, and continue to face, in their service and would like to reaffirm its commitment to listen and enact change. Hosting an annual Women Veterans Forum is of the utmost importance for VAC to move forward in addressing the adversity, inequities, and challenges that servicewomen and their families face.

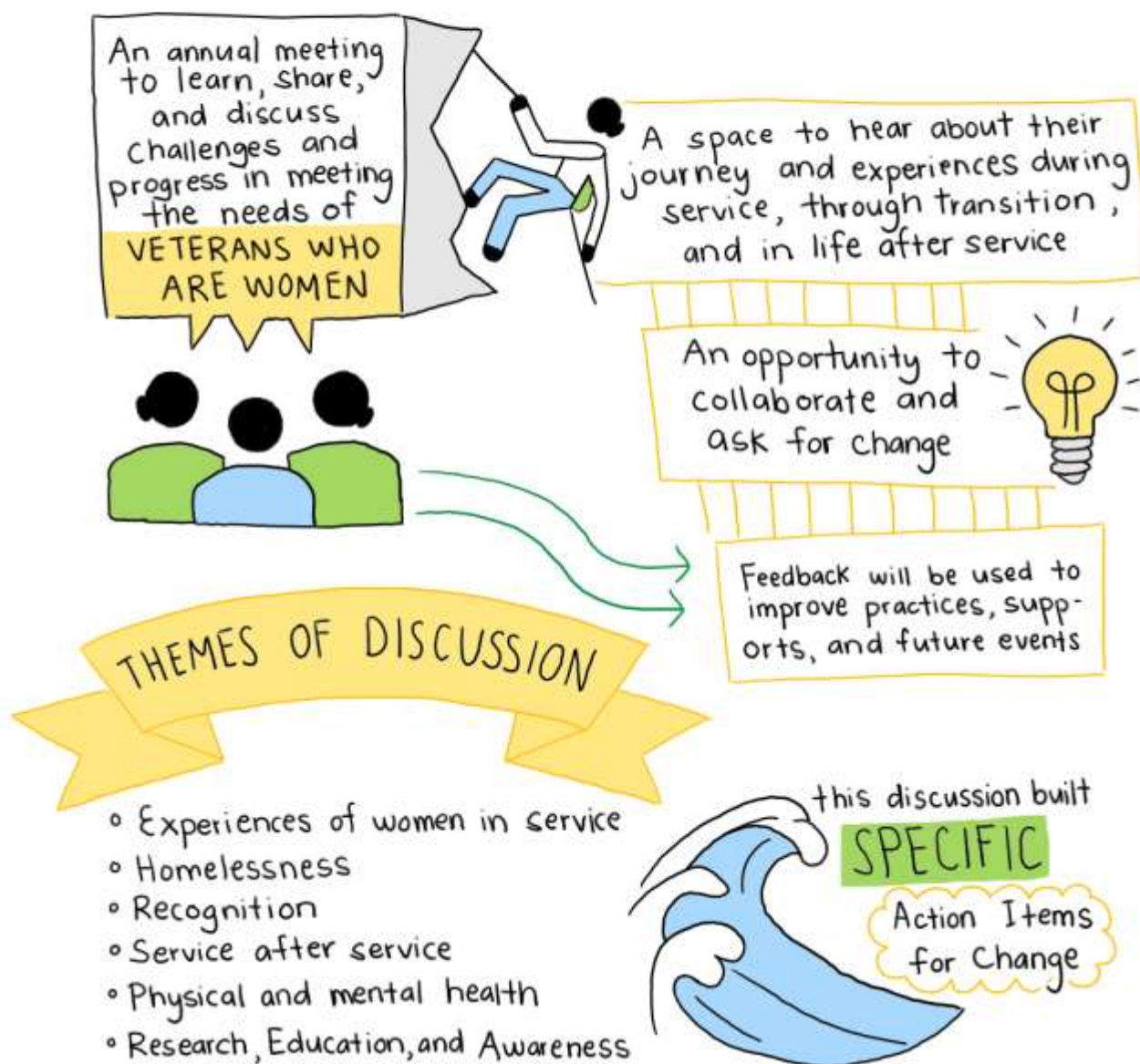
Quotes featured throughout this report highlight anonymous and open discussion that occurred throughout the event, not to be attributed to individuals in the photos included.

Digital artwork was created by an artist/analyst in real time during the event, and refined for presentation in the report.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Forum 2024



Graphic visualization providing an executive summary of the VAC Women Veterans Forum 2024

## Forum Objectives



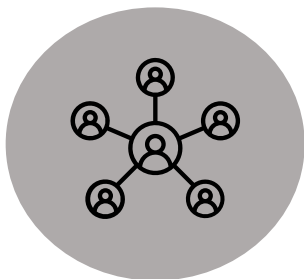
### Objective 1

Meaningful engagement with women Veterans and the stakeholder community



### Objective 2

Learn, share, and discuss challenges and progress in meeting the individual needs of women Veterans



### Objective 3

Develop community-based solutions to drive change and achieve equity

## Forum Participants

VAC extended invitations to a diverse group of Veterans and community partners, with the majority of participants being women. All but one panelist were women. In total, 99 individuals attended the Forum in-person, and of those 88 were women Veterans. Another 70 individuals participated online.

## Event Structure

There were multiple sessions throughout the Forum where facilitators posed questions and moderated discussion between expert panelists and the audience. The sessions focused on specific topics, either in smaller groups happening concurrently (breakout sessions), or as a full group (group discussions).

## Discussion Topics

- Hearing the experiences of women in service today;
- Hearing from community partners about the existing supports (as well as gaps) for women Veterans experiencing homelessness;
- Discussing the role that “service after service” can play in finding purpose and fulfillment after release;
- Discussing the strengths and challenges in recognition of women Veterans;
- Discussing the connection between mental and physical health;
- Generating awareness about the updates made to VAC’s Table of Disabilities and Entitlement Eligibility Guidelines; and,
- Discussing the specific ways in which the female body must be considered in injury and care.



## Minister's Welcome

The Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence opened the Forum. The Minister expressed gratitude to participants and emphasized the importance of open and frank discussions to address tough issues and improve support for women Veterans. The Minister encouraged collaboration and input from participants and expressed eagerness to hear their perspectives over the following days.



New initiatives were announced like the creation of a Women's Health inbox – an additional communication channel for the women Veteran community to communicate with VAC on issues matter to them with respect to women's health.

The creation of the Women Veterans Council was also announced by the Minister – a platform for women Veterans to offer VAC lived experience and expertise in achieving equity for women in the areas of health, research, access, practice, and policy to support the betterment of all women (still serving and Veterans).



Graphic visualization of the opening remarks at the VAC Women Veterans Forum 2024

## Group Discussion: Experiences of Women in Service Today

The first group discussion was a keynote panel, comprised of women currently serving in the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They shared their lived experiences in service today. They thanked all of the women who came before them, paving the way for a better service experience and openly shared the challenges still faced by women in service.



Panelists called for continued progress in creating a supportive and respectful environment for all members within the military and the RCMP. The specific need for VAC to strengthen its collaboration with the CAF on the experience of women in service was often highlighted. Participants also called for increased participation from the CAF at the next Forum.



Discussion emphasized that collaboration with Veteran-specific government and community-based organizations is necessary to better support women Veterans. This included mention of building trust and helping Veterans navigate VAC benefits and services to meet individual needs.

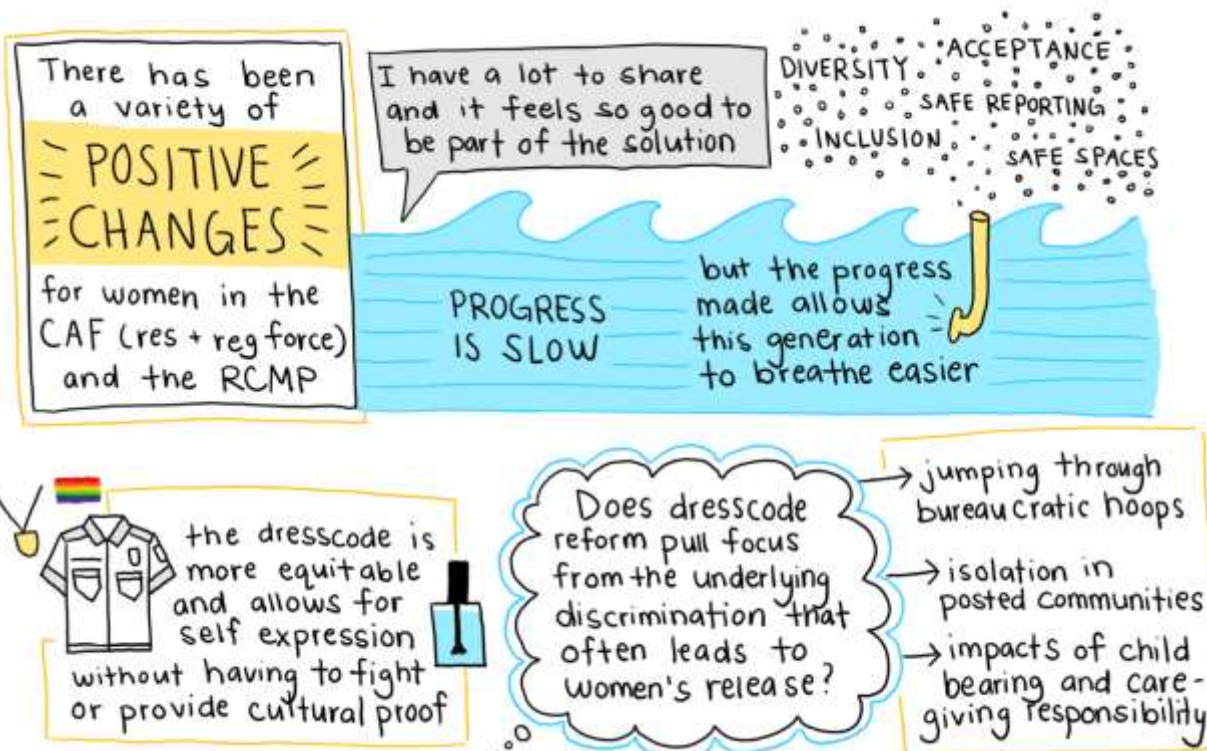
“I think that VAC can develop and adapt existing tools to make it easier and help set us up for greater success”

Participants suggested the creation of programs that partner with stakeholder organizations in supporting Veterans to navigate the complexities of the resource landscape.



Participants expressed mixed reactions to the updates shared about increased inclusivity in dress code in the CAF. While many felt positively, many also highlighted that the core reasons behind the CAF's recruitment and retention challenges are factors like discrimination, military sexual trauma (and lack of a safe reporting mechanism), and insufficient access to childcare.

“The reasons that women are leaving is because of reasons like... we don't have fair and equal access to childcare... and [we don't have] a safe space or a proper, method to report sexual harassment, sexual assault, things like that”



Graphic visualization of the Experiences of Women in Service Today Group Discussion (Women Veterans Forum 2024)

## Breakout Session 1: Women Veteran Homelessness

This breakout session focused discussion around supports for women Veterans experiencing homelessness. Systemic gaps in accessing immediate, suitable housing were identified by participants and panelists.

“When we look at housing and homelessness, we do know that these are shared jurisdiction issues in Canada, and that we require strong partnerships between government departments and different orders of government”



“How do you get that buy in at the shelter level?... I worked with it firsthand and the buy in needs to come from education. There needs to be education to the shelter workers.”

This spotlighted the need for collaboration among community partners and various levels of government, to remove barriers that prevent women Veterans from falling into homelessness. Participants spoke about how this collaboration can only come from building trust, providing system navigation, and meeting individual needs.

Participants emphasized that women Veterans experiencing homelessness have difficulties coming forward, and investing in research and education is needed to improve identification and support.

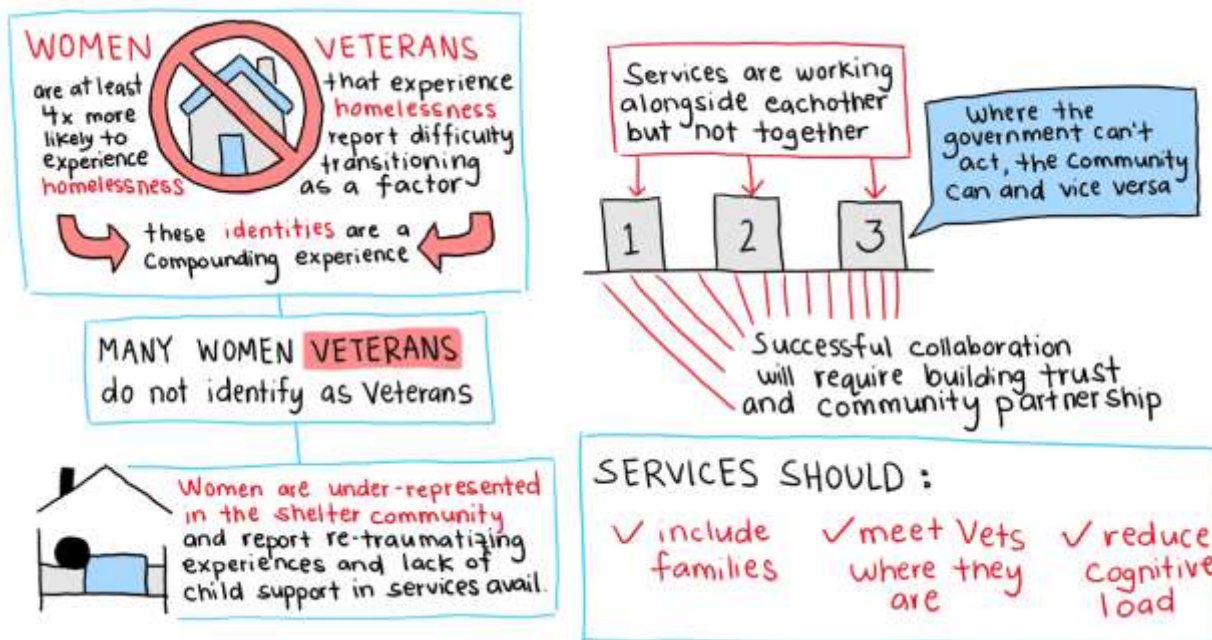
“We know that Veterans don't always identify themselves as such, which could also explain why the shelters don't really reflect the true number of Veterans who are homeless in Canada”

Educating the public and raising awareness about the challenges faced by women Veterans experiencing homelessness can also reduce stigma and facilitate community support.

Participants emphasized how peer support workers with shared lived experience can effectively assist homeless Veterans in navigating support systems.

As well, participants cited gender-specific programs that address trauma and take holistic approaches as being essential, encompassing mental health, substance abuse treatment, job training, and childcare.





Graphic visualization of the Women Veteran Homelessness Breakout Session  
(Women Veterans Forum 2024)

## Breakout Session 2: Recognition

This breakout session focused on recognition and commemoration of women Veterans. Also at the Forum, participants co-created a piece of pottery curated by artist Lynette Peters. Each individual piece was a unique expression of the woman Veteran who created it. Many chose to symbolize their heritage, culture, service experience, or powerful words to describe the strength of a woman. These individual pieces will be brought together, and the finished pottery will be donated to the National War Museum of Canada to honour and celebrate women Veterans.



The importance of collaboration between Veterans, artists, policymakers, and community organizations to amplify women's voices was clearly stated by participants. Highlighted in discussion was how art can play an important role in bridging understanding between military and civilian worlds and giving voice to women's narratives of war.



Participants discussed preference for initiatives like art installations, public education campaigns, and platforms for storytelling to highlight the diverse roles and sacrifices made by women Veterans.

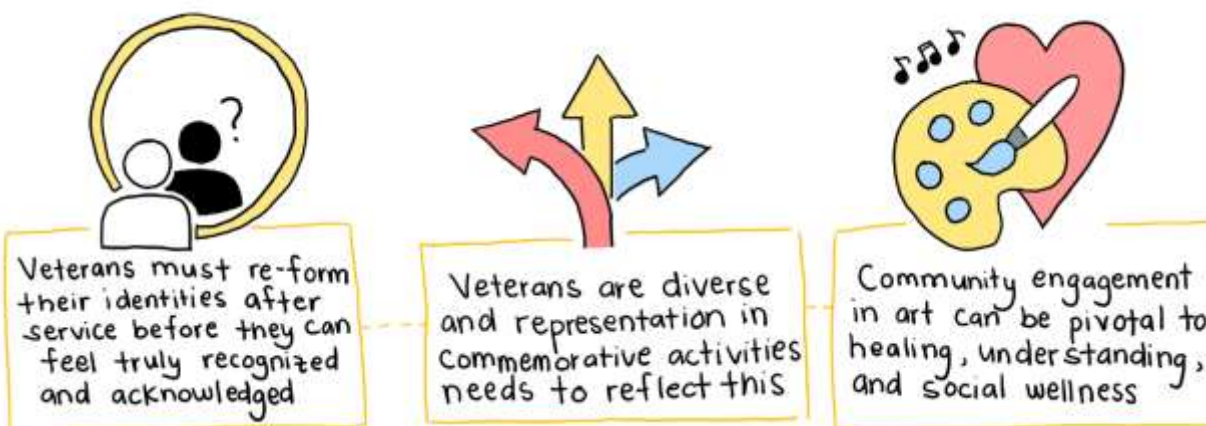
Panelists expressed difficulties in identifying with the Veteran label, despite their service, due to factors such as not having combat experience, assumptions about their roles, difficulties in being acknowledged for their service, and the need for more representation of women in military history.

“I really feel like one of the first stages of recognition is allowing us to have our own voice, make our own choices, and decide how we want to give back, not just [to] the women Veterans community, but to Canadian society”

Panelists also emphasized the importance of recognizing further diversity within the women Veteran community, including First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and women of colour. Veterans called for more inclusive commemorative efforts that reflect the full spectrum of Veterans' backgrounds and experiences.

“When it comes to memorial space, there's no acknowledgment of the Métis soldiers [at] the monument. I think that with all monuments....there's a lot of voices that are not included”

Crucially, panelists also touched on the impacts of discrimination and societal barriers faced by women in their adjustment to life after service. They shared how this profoundly affects their experience of recognition – most women don't see themselves as Veterans after they leave service. To strengthen resources for women Veterans, panelists called for stronger emphasis on self-care, self-worth, and empowering oneself and others to overcome obstacles and claim recognition.



*Graphic visualization of the Recognition Breakout Session  
(Women Veterans Forum 2024)*



## Breakout Session 3: Service After Service

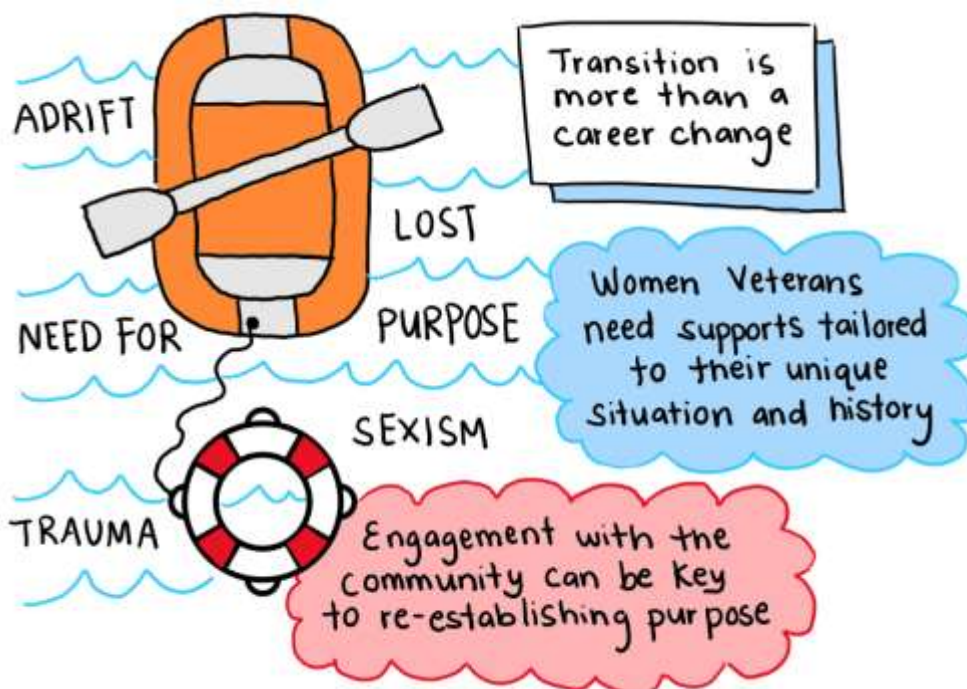
This breakout session focused on adjusting to life after service. Leaving military service often leads to a feeling of isolation and loss of identity. Women Veterans shared challenges transitioning out of a highly structured career in the military and finding a new path that values their past contributions.

Panelists voiced difficulties with program navigation, managing physical and psychological injuries, and facing pressures to quickly reintegrate into the workforce.



Participants highlighted the need for support from VAC and other third-party service providers, particularly around health concerns that may affect employability. They suggested the development of programs to support creative endeavours and entrepreneurship.

Lastly, it was emphasized that Veterans value volunteerism and community engagement for re-establishing their sense of purpose after service, and their well-being.



*Graphic visualization of the Service After Service Breakout Session  
(Women Veterans Forum 2024)*

## Group Discussion: Physical and Mental Health

There were two group discussions with different panelists that focused on the health of women Veterans – injury, physical health, and mental health were discussed. Research has demonstrated the interconnectedness between physical health and mental health and the need to address both.

“We need a lot more research about the interconnectedness of physical and mental health, what some of the impacts of different conditions are across [these aspects], and how we can have more holistic assessment and treatment of those conditions”

Participants highlighted a range of health issues faced by women Veterans, including musculoskeletal injuries, and the impacts of ill-fitting military equipment. Emphasis was also placed on reproductive health factors like conditions associated with the uterus and ovaries, childbearing, the menstrual cycle, and menopause.

“Women Veterans require tailored services to address their concerns”

“It's difficult to articulate a need for help while you are clearly on the outside functioning”

Participants discussed specific research gaps and barriers in mental health care for women Veterans, stressing the stigma associated with seeking help and the importance of tailored resources and interventions to meet their needs.

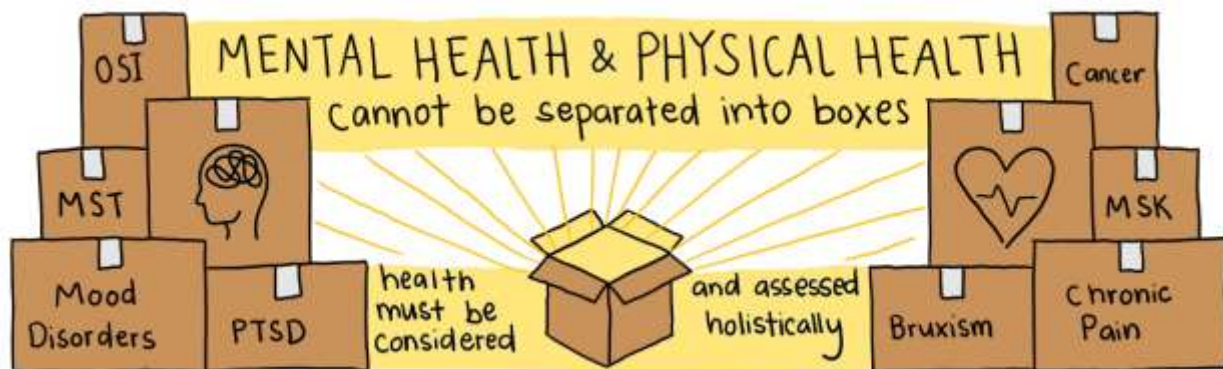


Participants discussed concerns around conscious and unconscious bias and discrimination against servicewomen that have led to care avoidance, adverse health outcomes, and misdiagnosis or dismissal of serious health concerns. They advocated for enhanced support to understand the linkages between their complex health conditions and their service.

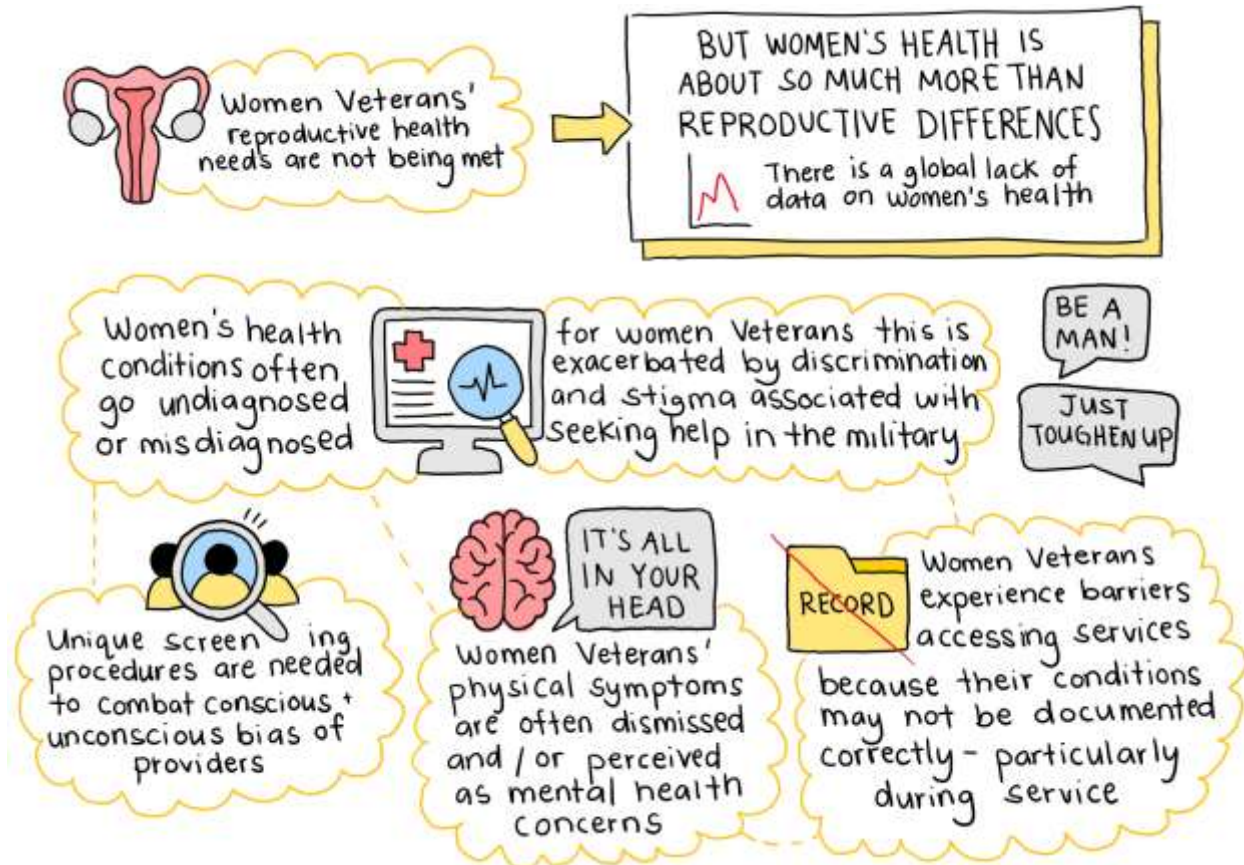


Panelists also highlighted the need for support services for women Veterans who are single mothers or caregivers, as women disproportionately perform the caregiver role.

“Survivors describe reactions to military sexual misconduct as having physical health reactions like headaches, fatigue, chronic pain, sexual difficulties, digestive problems, sleep disturbances, and reproductive health and MSK problems”



*Graphic visualization from the Connection Between Physical and Mental Health and the Female Body: Injury and Care Breakout Sessions (Women Veterans Forum 2024)*



*A second graphic visualization from the Connection Between Physical and Mental Health and the Female Body: Injury and Care Breakout Sessions (Women Veterans Forum 2024)*

## Group Discussion: Research, Education, and Awareness

While there was not an explicit group discussion or breakout session associated with this topic, the topics of research, education and awareness came up frequently across each session.

Participants expressed a desire for VAC to provide greater transparency on challenges and changes made to programs, benefits, and services that affect women Veterans. This included mention of promptly communicating research findings and changes to policy and practice because of advocacy such as the Forum.

Participants also asked for a mechanism whereby women can provide input and advice to VAC on their research priorities.

“I have heard the word research so many times, and I understand the importance of research... What I would like to ask is if some of the research that you do could be shared with us, so we know what is happening”



Participants stressed the importance of training community members to provide support to Veterans. They mentioned that this training must include military culture, trauma-informed approaches, and cultural sensitivity.

Participants urged healthcare providers to ask the right questions and develop better relationships with Veterans, to understand their needs beyond surface appearances.

Women Veterans shared that they are generally more truthful in discussing their injuries and challenges with their healthcare providers in a safe and trusted space.

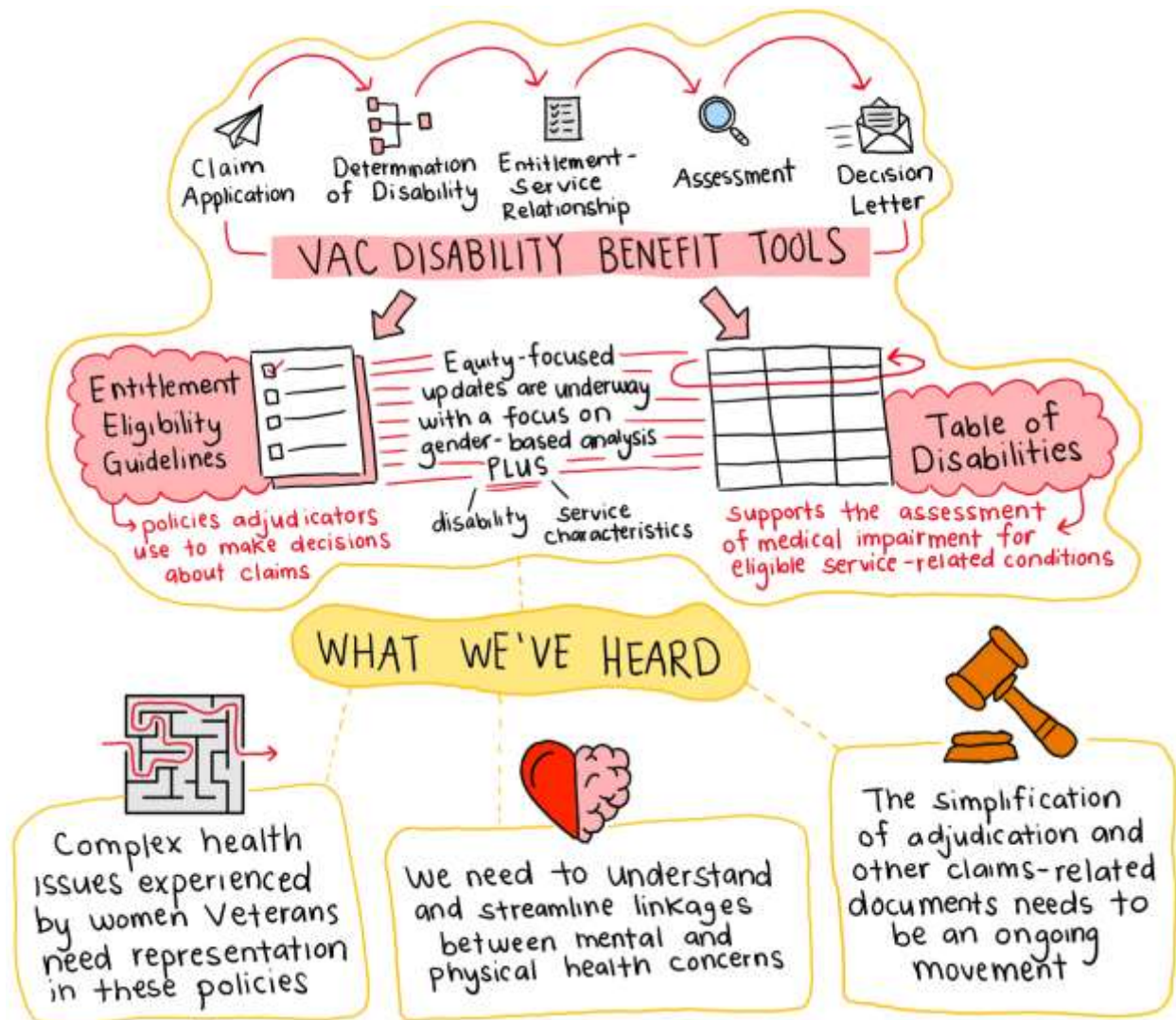
“I would like to know what the Canadian Forces Health Services and VAC are doing to combat conscious and unconscious bias”

Feedback from participants at the Forum made it clear that more clarity on VAC’s program eligibility criteria and the Table of Disabilities was needed among the community. An ad hoc session was added to the agenda to discuss the Entitlement Eligibility Guidelines and changes underway at VAC.

VAC has a team of specialists to review and update the Guidelines and Table. Examples of progress made at the time included: new entitlement eligibility guidelines on sexual dysfunction and an updated version of the table of disabilities on urinary and sexual and reproductive health.



A commitment was made at the Forum to deliver a dedicated virtual session on this topic for all Forum participants. That session subsequently occurred on April 3, 2024.



Graphic visualization from an ad hoc session  
 (Women Veterans Forum 2024)



## Action Items for Change

While we were able to address some concerns and answer questions at the Forum, VAC is committed to taking action for long term impact.

Organized by topic, the following commitments are being addressed by VAC in the specified timeline.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive, and changes are ongoing. Its purpose is to set goals and promote transparency and accountability.

Approximate timeline from March 2024:

- Short term <6 months
- Medium term 6-12 months



Some action items were asked as part of the National Stakeholder Summit, those action items are reflected in the National Stakeholder Summit 2024 Report.

## Research

ACTION ITEMS	Short Term	Medium Term
Create a Women Veterans Council to advise VAC on key issues	☆	
Create an online hub for research about women Veterans	☆	
Support research efforts around Veteran homelessness, moral injury, and a longitudinal health study		☆

## Recognition

ACTION ITEMS	Short Term	Medium Term
Share diverse narratives of women Veterans' experiences	☆	
Collaborate with educational institutions to develop programming on women Veterans' service experiences	☆	

## Education and Awareness (Veteran Community)

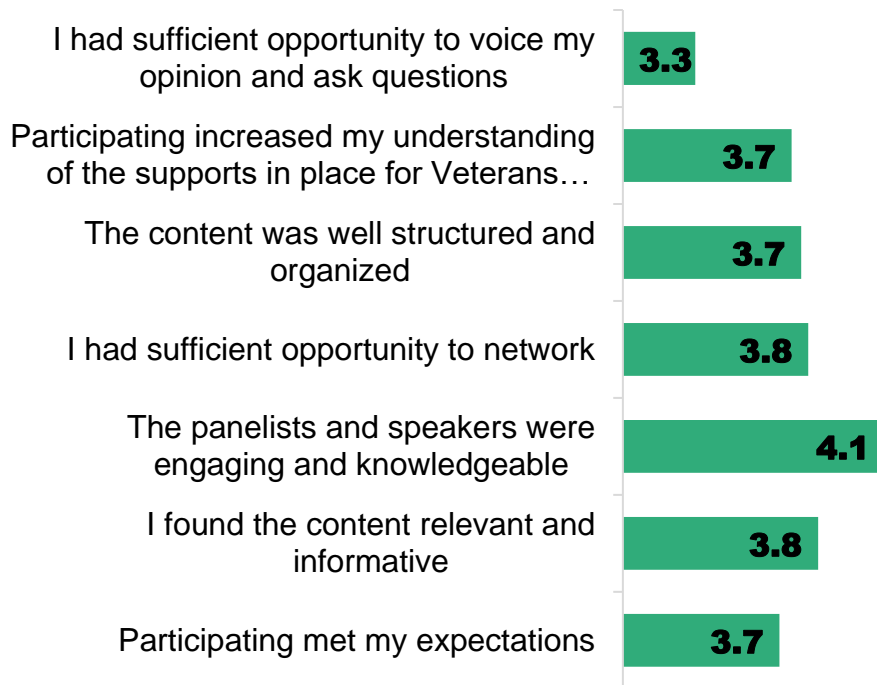
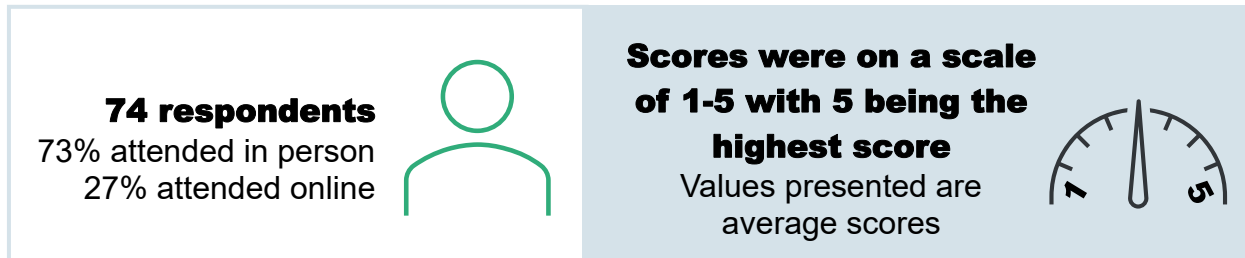
ACTION ITEMS	Short Term	Medium Term
Devote funding to women-specific programs and initiatives with community partners	☆	
Promote women Veteran storytelling platforms	☆	
Consult women broadly on topics for the next Women Veterans Forum		☆
Expand the number of exhibitors at the next Women Veterans Forum		☆

## Training and Competency Development (VAC Staff)

ACTION ITEMS	Short Term	Medium Term
Train frontline staff on conscious and unconscious bias	☆	
Customize service approaches to be specific to women Veterans		☆

## Appendix A: Forum Feedback

As is standard procedure after an event, VAC sent attendees an electronic evaluation to provide feedback about the event. Key results are reviewed in this section, and all responses have been retained.



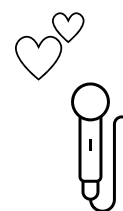
Survey respondents gave the highest average score to the engagement and knowledge of the panelists and speakers. Respondents also rated the content relevance, clarity, and organization highly, though they shared that they felt there were stakeholders missing from the conversation.

Survey respondents provided additional insight into their feedback through written responses.

“Having the VAC Minister there for the full 4 days, showed dedication and interest in Veterans and their families - this makes me optimistic that she is listening. All of the VAC staff was very welcoming and open to listening and taking feedback. I do hope that the appropriate changes can be made to the system for more ease of navigation and access to benefits in a timely manner.”

While respondents acknowledged the need for individuals to have a safe space to share their trauma and “feel heard”, many voiced that frequent focus on individual challenges, rather than systemic issues, was upsetting to others in the room.

Respondents suggested that VAC incorporate more trauma-informed approaches in their event planning to ensure conversations are conducted sensitively, with a focus on promoting wellness and minimizing potential triggers for participants. Related, respondents also asked to establish rules of conduct for the event and implement effective time management strategies – this approach will be used for future forums.



Respondents asked for fewer panelists during the breakout sessions and for the opportunity to repeat breakout sessions to maximize participation and so more meaningful and in-depth conversation can occur.



Respondents made many suggestions for future topics of focus, among them:

- Sessions where individuals can meet with VAC staff on how to access VAC programs, benefits, and services
- Sessions that include success stories of transition, employment, inspiration, and finding new purpose



This detailed feedback provided by respondents will be incorporated in the planning of the next Forum in 2025, including the valuable recommendations for future events that were outlined.

## Appendix B: Forum Agenda

DAY 1			
Time	Item	Description	Lead
9:00 – 9:30	<b>Coffee</b>	Coffee is served with time for members to arrive and informally meet.	All
9:30 – 9:45	<b>Indigenous Blessing</b>	Indigenous Blessing	Sedalia Fazio, Mohawk Indigenous Elder
9:45 – 9:55	<b>Introduction</b>	Set the table for the Forum, share objectives and introduces the Parliamentary Secretary.	Paul Ledwell, Deputy Minister
9:55 – 10:00	<b>Parliamentary Secretary Welcome</b>	Parliamentary Secretary Randeep Sarai welcomes participants and introduces the Minister.	Parliamentary Secretary Sarai
10:00 – 10:15	<b>Welcome</b>	Welcome remarks by the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada and Associate Minister of National Defence.	Minister Petitpas Taylor
10:15 – 11:30	<b>Panel Experience of Women in Service Today</b>	Minister Petitpas Taylor to introduce panel session.  <b>Panelists:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sergeant Laurence Séguin (Reservist)</li> <li>• Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Arsenault, Squadron 36 (Reservist)</li> <li>• Warrant Officer Valérie Fournier (Reg Force)</li> <li>• Sergeant Jillian Boutilier, Royal Canadian Mounted Police</li> <li>• Constable Sandra Morse, Royal Canadian Mounted Police</li> </ul>	<b>Facilitator:</b> Tanya Wiltshire, Manager Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans Team

11:30 – 13:00	<b>Lunch</b>		
13:00 – 14:15	<b>Concurrent Breakout sessions</b>	Participant-led presentations followed by community-driven discussion on improvements. Participants can choose which presentation to attend.	
	<b>Option 1 - Women Veterans Homelessness Services</b>  Montreal (11th floor)	<b>Women Veterans Homelessness Services</b>  Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor to introduce panel.  <b>Panelists:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr. Cheryl Forchuk, Lawson Health Research Institute</li> <li>• Abigail Sheppard, End Homelessness St. John's</li> <li>• Samantha Lowe, Mustard Seed</li> <li>• Jaëlle Bégarin, President and General Director Maison du Père et Duane Mansveld, Homelessness Prevention Network Coordinator</li> </ul>	<b>Facilitator:</b> Lisa Garland Baird, A/Director
	<b>Option 2 - Service After Service</b>  Palais (8 <sup>th</sup> floor)	<b>Service After Service</b>  <b>Panelists:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sergeant (Retired) Jessica Miller, Veteran Farm Project Society</li> <li>• Lila Duffy, Team Rubicon</li> <li>• Tabitha Beynen, The Atlas Institute</li> </ul> Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Eleanor Taylor, True Patriot Love	<b>Facilitator:</b> Pamela Harrison, Director General Community Engagement

	<b>Option 3 – Recognition</b>  Viger (8 <sup>th</sup> floor)	<b>Recognition</b>  <b>Panelists:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jessica Wiebe, Artist</li> <li>• Sergeant (Retired) Joan Buchanan, Veteran, Co-Chair Defence Visible Minority Advisory Group with the Department of National Defence</li> <li>• Lieutenant-Commander (retired) Dr. Karen Davis, Department of History and Heritage</li> </ul>	<b>Facilitator:</b> Tanya Wiltshire, Veteran, Manager Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans Team
14:15 – 14:45	<b>Break</b>		
14:45 – 15:30	<b>Plenary discussion</b>	Participants share the highlights from breakout sessions.	All
15:30 – 15:45	<b>Wrap up</b>	Reflection on Day 1.	Paul Ledwell, Deputy Minister
18:00 – 20:00	<b>Networking Event</b>  St-Antoine (9 <sup>th</sup> floor)	Opportunity for all to gather and make connections.	Minister Petitpas Taylor and All

DAY 2			
Time	Description	Intent	Lead
9:00 – 10:30	<b>Pottery Workshop</b>	Minister Petitpas Taylor to welcome everyone back and introduce Lynette Peters.  Pottery workshop to commemorate Veterans.	<b>Facilitator:</b> Lynette Peters, Cerberus Pottery
10:30 – 11:00	<b>Break</b>		
11:00 – 12:00	<b>Panel Connection Between Mental and Physical Health</b>	Dr. Cyd Courchesne, Champion for Women Veterans' Health to introduce session.  <b>Participants:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deborah Da Costa, Research Institute McGill Health Centre Women</li> <li>• Dawn Chony LeBlanc, Department of National Defence-Canadian Armed Forces, Women's Health</li> <li>• Lieutenant Colonel Audrey Hudon, Social Work, Directorate of Mental Health, Canadian Forces Health Services</li> <li>• Dr. Heidi Cramm, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research</li> </ul>	<b>Facilitator:</b> Margaret (Peggy) Fry, National Nursing Officer
12:00 – 13:30	<b>Lunch</b>		



13:30 – 14:30	<p><b>Panel</b></p> <p><b>The Female Body: Injury and Care</b></p>	<p>Dr. Cyd Courchesne, Champion for Women Veterans' Health to introduce session.</p> <p><b>Participants:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tara Reilly, Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, Canadian Armed Forces</li> <li>• Dr Joy MacDermid, Chronic Pain Centre of Excellence for Canadian Veterans</li> <li>• Dr. Sara Rodrigues, Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families</li> <li>• Chris M. Edwards, University of Ottawa</li> <li>• Anna Smyth, Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services</li> </ul>	<p><b>Facilitator:</b> Margaret (Peggy) Fry, National Nursing Officer</p>
14:30 – 14:45	<b>Break</b>		
14:45 – 15:15	<b>Plenary discussion</b>	Participants share additional feedback on the day's sessions.	<p><b>Facilitator:</b> Pamela Harrison, Director General of Community Engagement</p>
15:15 – 15:45	<b>Wrap up fireside chat</b>	<p>Intimate dialogue with facilitators and Minister on key takeaways from past two days.</p> <p>Peggy Fry, Pamela Harrison, Tanya Wiltshire, Lisa Garland Baird.</p>	<p><b>Facilitator:</b> Amy Meunier, Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs</p>