

Office of Health Equity

Veterans Health Administration

Department of Veterans Affairs



DIFFERENCES IN DISABILITY RATES AND RECREATION THERAPY USE

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INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves a Veteran population that is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Equitable access to high-quality care for all Veterans is a major tenet of the VA healthcare mission. The Office of Health Equity (OHE) champions treating Veterans with different therapy needs to achieve health equity.

HEALTH DISPARITIES

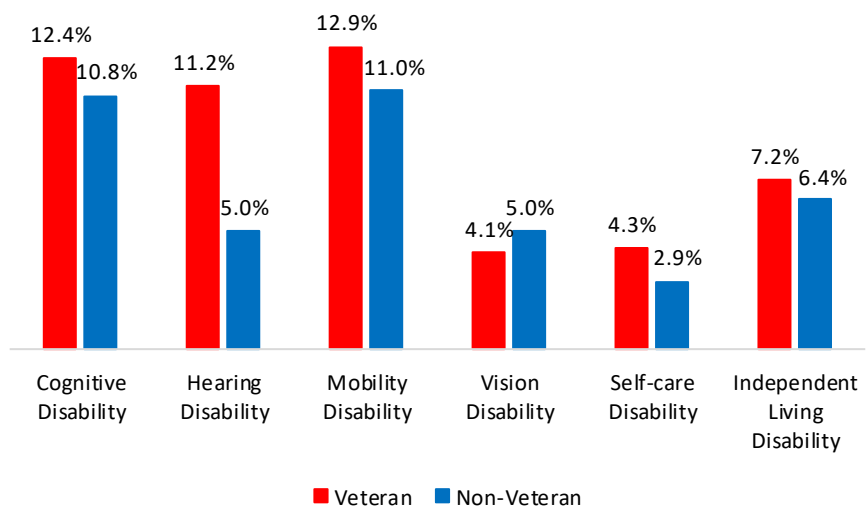
Compared to non-Veterans, Veterans are more likely to live with a disability. The most common causes of disability in Veterans are injuries they received during combat, although Veterans can incur injuries throughout their military training and service, these disabilities are considered service-connected disabilities. Black, Hispanic, and other race Veterans are more likely than White Veterans to have a disability connected to their military service.

Veterans are more likely than non-Veterans who live with a functional disability or limitation. Veterans with a functional disability are also more likely to have a service-connected disability.

There are six different types of functional disabilities:

1. Cognitive, where someone has serious difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions;
2. Hearing disabilities resulting in serious difficulty hearing or has deafness;
3. Mobility disabilities resulting in serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs;
4. Vision disabilities resulting in serious difficulty seeing or blindness;
5. Difficulties in performing self-care activities like dressing or bathing; and
6. Difficulties living independently.

Age-Adjusted Rates of Disabilities by Veteran Status, 2020



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Division of Human Development and Disability. Disability and Health Data System (DHDS) Data [online]. [accessed Jul 5, 2022]. URL: <https://dhds.cdc.gov>



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RECREATION THERAPY FOR SPECIFIC DISABILITIES TO REDUCE HEALTH DISPARITIES

Living with functional disabilities can negatively impact Veterans' ability to pursue meaningful art, recreation, sports activities, and other hobbies, which can negatively affect Veterans' well-being. Engagement in recreational and leisure activities and the strong social ties that develop through engagement in these activities can help reduce isolation and loneliness.

The use of recreation, leisure, sports, and arts activities as a tool to help Veterans improve their health has been a part of VA health care since its very beginnings. VA Recreation Therapists have a long history of prescribing interventions that are individually tailored to be enjoyable, culturally relevant, and immediately transferrable to Veterans' lives.

Cognitive

Increased mental stimulation can improve Veterans' cognitive functioning. Recreation therapists may prescribe word games, brain teasers, or purposeful problem solving while engaging in recreational activities to help improve Veterans' cognitive function.

Hearing and Vision Disabilities

Veterans living with hearing loss and with low vision or are blind can work with recreation



therapists and other rehabilitation specialists to learn how to integrate their adaptive equipment into recreational activities they enjoy and connect with other Veterans engaged in the same activities in their communities.

Mobility

At VA, many Veterans engage in various adaptive sports and therapeutic arts through local, regional, and national events. Recreation therapists prescribe specialized adaptive sports and arts equipment, provide specialized sport and arts training, and connect Veterans with community resources like adaptive gyms, community partners and VA-sponsored and non-VA community events.

Self-care and Independent Living

Engagement in meaningful recreation and leisure activities serve as a conduit for promoting independence, identify formation, social connection and promotes autonomy. Recreation therapists are skilled in promoting the psychosocial needs of Veterans to ensure their maximal independence and autonomy is preserved.

To learn more about VA's Recreation Therapy Service, visit <https://www.rehab.va.gov/rectherapy/index.asp>.

For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit: <https://www.va.gov/healthequity/>

Reference

Vespa, Jonathan E., "Those Who Served: America's Veterans From World War II to the War on Terror," ACS-43, American Community Survey Reports, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2020 (<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-43.pdf>).