

# Office of Health Equity

## Veterans Health Administration

### Department of Veterans Affairs



## MENTAL HEALTH DISPARITIES AMONG LGBT VETERANS

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*OHE would like to extend a special thanks to the LGBT Health Program, Patient Care Services, Department of Veterans Affairs for their input and guidance.*

### INTRODUCTION

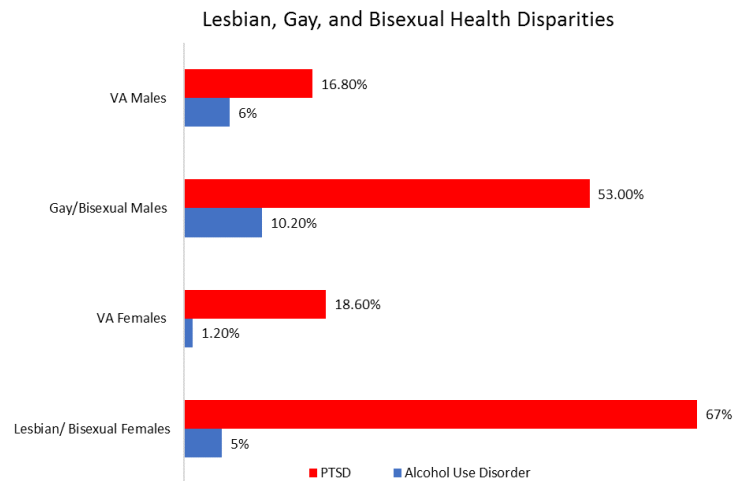
The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves a Veteran population that is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Equitable access to high-quality care for all Veterans is a major tenet of the VA healthcare mission. The Office of Health Equity (OHE) champions the elimination of health disparities and achieving health equity for all Veterans, including LGBT Veterans.

LGBT stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.” There are many terms associated with sexual orientation identity and gender identity and these are just a few. It is up to the Veteran to decide upon the term that best suits them, they may also have other ways of describing themselves. “LGBT and related identities” is an inclusive term for sexual and gender minorities to inclusively to recognize the full range of sexual orientation and gender identity minorities.

### HEALTH DISPARITIES

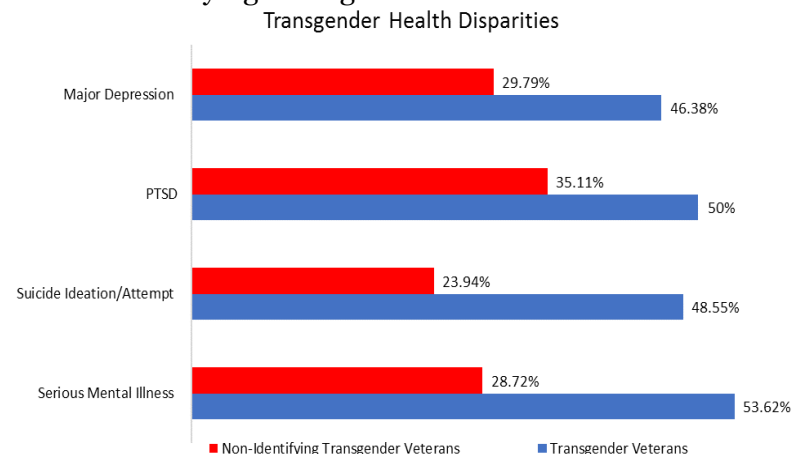
Sexual and gender minority Veterans have faced stigma and discrimination, which can affect their mental health. LGB, or Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual, Veterans are two times as likely to receive a diagnosis of an alcohol use disorder and are five

times as likely to receive a diagnosis for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).



From Cochran, B., et al. (2013).

Additionally, Transgender Veterans have significantly higher rates of serious mental illness, suicidal ideation, PTSD, and major depression than non-identifying Transgender Veterans.



From Ramirez, Heliana. 17 May 2019, VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

## REDUCING DISPARITIES AND IMPROVING ACCESS

As a healthcare institution, the VA is working to make sure that Veterans with LGBT and related identities know that they are welcome and cared for at the VA. The Office of Health Equity supports national efforts to reduce health disparities, such as the 2018 Healthcare Equality Index (HEI), a tool put forth by the Human Rights Campaign.

The purpose of the HEI is to promote an equitable and inclusive care environment for LGBT patients and their families at all medical facilities. The HEI evaluates healthcare facilities' policies and practices about providing optimal care to LGBT patients through an annual online survey. Participating in the HEI enables facilities to learn best practices for LGBTQ equity and inclusion in medical care, and provide non-discriminative patient centered care, regardless of LGBT or related identities.

Each facility that chooses to participate is scored on the following criteria: non-discrimination and staff



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

### References

Cochran, B., Balsam, K., Flentje, A., Malte, C., & Simpson, T. (2013). Mental Health Characteristics of Sexual Minority Veterans. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60: 419-435.

Human Rights Campaign. (2018). Healthcare Equality Index 2018. Retrieved, on May 29, 2019, from [https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/HEI-2018-FinalReport.pdf?\\_ga=2.98457245.329407626.1559143222-872024863.1559143222](https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/HEI-2018-FinalReport.pdf?_ga=2.98457245.329407626.1559143222-872024863.1559143222).

Ramirez, Heliana. "LGBT Military and Veteran 101: Queer(y)ing Strength-based Clinical Practice." VAPAHCS Psychology Practicum Orientation, 17 May 2019, VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

training; patient services and support; employee benefits and policies; and patient and community engagement. About 67% of participants in the 2018 HEI were considered "LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leaders", as they received a score of 100 points or more based on the criteria. Some VA facilities that ranked as LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leaders include VA Birmingham Medical Center, VA Palo Alto Health Care System, and VA Pittsburgh Health Care System.

In Birmingham, Michelle McHugh, a LGBT provider at the Huntsville Community Based Outpatient Clinic that is part of the Birmingham VA Medical Center, explained her role in providing equitable health care for all LGBT Veterans: "I have a great deal of experience and passion for working with the LGBTQ community and I work to ensure that they have a positive experience as much as I possibly can. I have knowledge and understanding of the VA policies and procedures in place for the LGBTQ population and I can help advocate for patients and help them advocate for themselves."

The Office of Health Equity would like to extend our congratulations and thanks to the 97 VA Medical Centers who participated in the 2018 HEI. The Veteran Health Administration ranks as the number one health care system and has the most medical facilities participating in the program.