

# KEYNOTE



Plain language summary

Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2022: Keynote address

## WOMEN IN THE MILITARY: TOWARDS GREATER HEALTH EQUITY

### OVERVIEW

Military medicine can improve health equity for women and make significant contributions to the global medical community. Seileen Mullen, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs at the U.S. Department of Defense, delivered this message at the Military and Veteran Health Research Forum in October 2022. Health equity is when “everyone has a fair opportunity to achieve and maintain their highest level of health, without regard to gender or race or socioeconomic status.”

This summary highlights Mullen’s insights and perspective: Health equity is a basic human right and it is essential within a military context, directly impacting military readiness and capability.

### WHY IT MATTERS

The United States and Canada share collective defence commitments both within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). They also share many similarities. Both countries have nearly equal representation of women in the armed forces, with 16% in Canada and 18% in the U.S. Both recognize the value of diversity in the military and have committed to increasing the number of women. Both agree they need to optimize the health of women in their ranks.

As more women enter the armed forces, it is critical to ensure their specific healthcare needs are met through health policies and delivery. Women need access to health resources and tools to fully realize their contributions to national security.

Health equity contributes to individual and unit readiness, retention, and the overall wellbeing of women who serve. Achieving health equity requires an understanding of historical and current barriers, and processes to overcome these barriers to eliminate preventable health disparities.

**The Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) works to engage academic and government researchers, facilitate new research, increase research capacity, and foster knowledge translation. CIMVHR hosts an annual Forum that brings together thought leaders to present new research, exchange ideas, share insights, learn, and collaborate with the shared objective of serving military and veteran health needs.**

## HEALTH EQUITY INITIATIVES

The U.S. military has multiple initiatives underway that provide examples of good practice to support the advancement of health equity in the armed forces.

### Women's working groups and health research

- **Women in Service Working Group:** Formed to address key issues facing women in the armed forces, the group reports directly to senior U.S. Defense Department leaders. This direct access to senior leaders puts them in a position to influence real change.
- **Military Women's Health Research Consortium:** Develops and guides best practices for clinical care of women in the military healthcare system. Recent efforts include studying interventions for physical and emotional pain from uterine fibroids, evaluating disparities in treatment for low back pain, and assessing the effects of prenatal mental health support.
- **Veterans Administration Department of Defense Women's Health Working Group:** Supports continued care through the entire military life cycle. Ensures that women leaving active service know the full range of health services available to them as veterans.

### Reproductive healthcare surveys and services

Contraceptive health care has been a long-term focus within the U.S. Defense Department. It's important for both family planning and military readiness.

- **Women's Reproductive Health Survey:** This first-of-its-kind survey asked active-duty servicewomen about their reproductive healthcare preferences, opinions, needs, and experiences getting access to care. The findings will identify successes and opportunities for improvement.
- **Healthcare Professionals Follow-up Survey:** This survey is collecting insights, opportunities, and challenges from healthcare professionals about their experiences providing reproductive healthcare in a military context.
- **Walk-in Contraceptive Care Clinics:** The U.S. Defense Department is expanding walk-in contraceptive clinics to U.S. military treatment facilities around the world. Women will be able to access contraceptive counselling and non-surgical contraceptive methods in one visit without an appointment or referral.

### Mobile health applications (apps) to support women's health

The U.S. military has rolled out two mobile apps to help servicewomen make informed health decisions:

- A **contraceptive choices** app takes the user through a series of questions to help instantly compare contraceptive options.
- An app focused on **health during deployment** addresses questions and concerns women may have about deployment. Topics range from menstrual management to injury prevention, intimate partner violence, and more.

### Specialized healthcare training

The U.S. Defense Department offers training to strengthen the proficiencies of healthcare providers to offer gender-specific healthcare. The programs include mini residencies in musculoskeletal injuries and mental health care.

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## KEY MESSAGES FOR LEADERS AND RESEARCHERS

- **Provide pre-deployment contraceptive counselling to women.** A 2020 study of women's healthcare in deployed settings found that pre-deployment contraceptive counselling influenced the amount and types of gynecological and obstetric care that women needed during deployment.
- **Share military medical research with the entire medical community.** The research serves the greater good. Example: Decades of military research enabled the fast development and rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines.
- **Reinvest in research focused on women.** There is a need for research and programs that address gender differences in conditions like autoimmune diseases, cancer, infectious diseases, and obesity.
- **Fund research for a significant return on investment.** When research is focused on women, the return on investment includes a healthier, more ready force. It also has a positive impact on recruitment and retention.

## KNOWLEDGE SHARING FOR BROADER IMPACT

Women's health equity research efforts are informing military medicine and practice. The findings also have broader implications for the entire population.

- **Maternal morbidity is significantly lower in the military than in the general U.S. population.** Pregnant women in the military system receive:
  - Information and resources at all stages of pregnancy
  - Access to family-focused postpartum clinics
  - Practice guidelines for follow-up care
- **Certified nurse midwives can help address the severe national shortage of women's healthcare providers.** Military health researchers have identified positive outcomes for military women who had births attended by a midwife. This finding has significant implications for the civilian healthcare system.

This is a plain language summary of the plenary session, "Women in the Military: Equity and Health Equity," at the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) Forum on October 18, 2022 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

**Speaker: Seileen Mullen**, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, U.S. Department of Defense

See the video: **CIMVHR Forum 2022 Tuesday Morning Plenary**