



# Speaking Up, Moving Forward

## VA Supports Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma

Each April, Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) raises public awareness and understanding of sexual assault. In its annual SAAM campaign, VA focuses on sexual assault and sexual harassment that occur during military service — also known as “military sexual trauma,” or MST. This year, VA’s national theme for SAAM activities is: “Speaking up, moving forward: VA supports survivors of military sexual trauma.”

This theme has sparked comments from VA MST Coordinators, including Melica Wiley, a licensed clinical marriage and family therapist at the Texas Valley Coastal Bend Health Care System. She believes survivors of MST remain silent mainly “out of fear and/or stigmas associated with sexual assault. ... However, due to the recent media coverage and the #MeToo movement, many survivors for the first time in their lives felt safe enough to speak up.” Wiley adds: “I particularly think of our male and female MST survivors, who not only spoke up for the first time, but were supported completely by VA.”

Susan Thompson, a licensed independent clinical social worker at the Fargo (ND) VA Health Care System, says: “The best way we can support survivors of sexual trauma is by providing a safe place where they can talk. Speaking up is essential for moving forward.”

“Speaking up is essential for moving forward.”

Susan Thompson

“You get to write the rest of the story, and you decide where you go from here.”

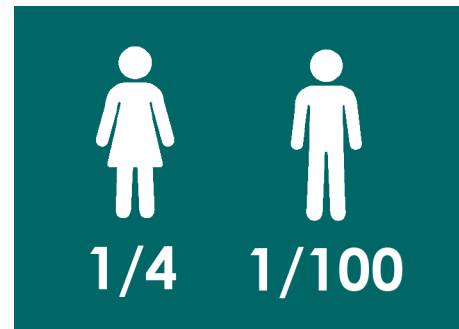
Kerry Makin-Byrd, Ph.D.

Kerry Makin-Byrd, Ph.D., a member of the national MST Support Team, discusses the healing process involved in therapy after sexual trauma. “There’s power in speaking up, in acknowledging not only what happened, but that what happened wasn’t the end of the story,” she says. “You get to write the rest of the story, and you decide where you go from here.”

“It’s constantly inspiring to see the way that speaking up can bring people together, inspire energy for change,” Makin-Byrd adds. “After trauma, so many people show exceptional strength and courage, saying this history will not define me, and making sense out of senselessness.”

At VA, Veterans who have experienced MST have access to a wide range of services to assist them in their recovery. MST-related treatment is available at all VA medical facilities, and all treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to MST is provided free of charge. Veterans may be eligible for free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA services, and service connection (VA disability compensation) is not required. No documentation of MST experiences is required. In addition, every VA health care system has an MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues and can help Veterans access relevant VA services and programs.

About one in four women and one in 100 men in the VA health care system have reported a history of MST when screened by a VA provider. Although the percentage of MST survivors is much higher among women than men, there are significant numbers of both men and women who have experienced MST, given the far greater number of men in military service. In fact, almost 40 percent of the Veterans seen in VA facilities who have reported MST are men.



MST Coordinators and other VA staff members make special efforts during SAAM to show support for all Veterans who have experienced MST — for example, by hosting events to raise awareness and educate Veterans and their supporters. In addition, VA's **Make the Connection** campaign (**MakeTheConnection.net**) website features video clips of Veterans sharing their stories of recovery, as a reminder that MST survivors are not alone and recovery is possible.

To learn more about MST and sources of support, Veterans can speak with a VA health care provider, contact the MST Coordinator at their nearest VA medical center, or contact their local Vet Center. A list of VA facilities and Vet Centers can be found at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

Veterans can also learn more about VA's MST-related services at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp).

VA staff can find information on the VA intranet at <http://vawww.mst.va.gov>.

