



## Tuscaloosa VA to open mental health unit to serve growing number of female veterans

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By

**TUSCALOOSA, Alabama** -- The Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center is set to open a new women's wing for its residential rehabilitation treatment program next week.

David Gay, homeless coordinator for the Tuscaloosa VA, said the \$300,000, eight-bed unit was created based on a need to expand mental health care services for female veterans, whose numbers are increasing.

"It was decided by this administration to look into that need and to put together a place where female veterans could come back and rely on a residential program," Gay said.



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Building No. 137 at the Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Tuscaloosa, Ala. (Chris Pow / al.com)

Many of those women the unit will serve are homeless, Gay said. A December 2011 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that the number of female veterans who identified as homeless **more than doubled from 2006 to 2010**.

Veterans in the VA's residential rehabilitation treatment program are required to have a minimum of four hours of treatment a day, Gay said. The center offers services including job skills training and individual therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, depression and other diagnoses.

The new wing includes a living room/lounge area, laundry room and a spa that includes a whirlpool and a salon area.

According to the U.S. Department of Affairs, female veterans are **more than twice as likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder** as their male counterparts, and one in five women seen in VA centers experienced sexual trauma while serving in the military.

Gay said the new residential space gives women in the residential program an opportunity to feel safer and be closer to one another during their time in the program.

"One of the things it does is it puts them all together," Gay said. "It allows them to talk, share and visit with each other in a place that we consider the finest in the country."

Sen. Richard Shelby will be the guest speaker at an opening ceremony for the new wing on June 15 at the VA.

Women make up around 8 percent of the total number of veterans and **11.6 percent of veterans in the Afghanistan and Iraq military operations** and are the fastest growing group of veterans, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

In Alabama, more than 36,000 women are veterans, according to Department of Veterans Affairs projections.

The Tuscaloosa VA opened its first women's primary care unit in 2010. Damon Stevenson, spokesman for the Tuscaloosa VA, said the unit, called Patriot's Pavilion, has been a great success and showed that most women would be more comfortable in their own space for treatment.

"If women knew the VA was reaching out to them to address the increasing number of female veterans, we thought it would be more welcoming and more inviting for them to come for treatment," Stevenson said.

The VA continues to work with Birmingham-based MAP Development through an enhanced-use lease to renovate Building No. 33 on the VA grounds and turn it into a transitional housing development for veterans, especially for homeless female veterans with children.

Area agencies including Tuscaloosa's One Place would be involved in providing services to families at the complex, which has a targeted completion date of December 2013.

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