

Ending Veteran Homelessness

S1EP5: Supporting Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma

[00:00:00] **Shawn Liu:** Content warning at the start. This month, we're talking about military sexual trauma. It's an important, but sensitive and potentially intense topic. If you feel like this episode will be too much, go ahead and skip it. We'll be back next month, ready for you with new content. And if you need someone to talk to, call the Veterans Crisis Line. Just dial 988 on your phone and press 1 for Veterans. Take care of yourself.

[00:00:26] **Jessica Keith:** People don't often talk about sexual assault or sexual harassment. MST survivors may think that they're the only ones to have experienced it. To any MST survivor who may be listening, you are not alone. We know that people of all genders, ages, sexual orientations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, physical sizes and abilities, ranks, eras, and branches of service have experienced MST. To anyone who experienced MST during your service: I am so sorry that that happened to you while serving your country. I hope some of the resources we'll talk about today can help, [00:01:00] even if just a little bit.

[00:01:01] **Shawn Liu:** Welcome to Ending Veteran Homelessness. Your first-hand, look into our nation's efforts to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home. From the Department of Veterans Affairs, Homeless Programs Office, I'm your host, Shawn Liu.

[00:01:18] If you're a Veteran who is homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to help, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

[00:01:38] The other day I was reviewing an internal report created by our Business Intelligence Team. They're our data gurus here in the VA Homeless Programs Office. And you could probably surmise from the content warning at the top. This report was on a really important topic that I happen to know frustratingly little about.

[00:01:59] Military [00:02:00] sexual trauma.

[00:02:01] You see the report revealed that around 10% of the Veterans that we served in VA Homeless programs back in fiscal year 2021, think October of 2020 to September of 2021, 10% of those Veterans had a documented history of military sexual trauma.

[00:02:16] But among the women Veterans that we served? That statistic jumps to around 43%.

[00:02:22] 43% of the women that we served in VA homeless programs last fiscal year had a documented history of military sexual trauma.

[00:02:31] This feels staggering. This feels like a really big deal. Now, I'm an expert in a lot of things, but military sexual trauma, isn't one of them.

[00:02:40] But, I wanna learn more. And, I wanna do right by our Veterans who, with all their strength and resiliency, have been through enough.

[00:02:47] My impression is that we need to do two things. One - for Veterans who are survivors of military sexual trauma, or MST, and who may be experiencing homelessness or housing instability, it feels like we need to make sure [00:03:00] that they know what housing resources are available to help. And two - for Veterans who are survivors of MST, and who are currently being served by our VA homeless programs, it feels like we need to make sure that they know what counseling and advocacy services are there for them.

[00:03:15] Am I on the right track here? Am I missing something? How should we get started?

[00:03:21] As I sit here in my kitchen, talking to myself, I go, "Well, Shawn, those are really great questions." And to help me - and to be honest, all of us - learn more about how to better support our Veterans survivors of military sexual trauma. I can think of no one better to talk to than our next three guests.

[00:03:38] First up is Dr. Jessica Keith. Dr. Keith is a clinical psychologist and the Clinical Programs and Practices Lead for VA's Military Sexual Trauma Support Team. In this role, she helps to promote MST related best practices across VA to ensure that all MST survivors can access and receive outstanding care.

[00:03:57] She's joined by Dr. Ryan Holliday. Dr. [00:04:00] Holliday is a clinical research psychologist at the Rocky Mountain Mental Illness, Research, Education, and Clinical Center, or MIRECC for Suicide Prevention. He's also

an Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. His clinical and research interests focus upon understanding the intersection of trauma, psychological stressors, such as homelessness and justice involvement, and mental health.

[00:04:22] And rounding us out this month is Mrs. Adelaide Kahn-Fowler the Director of Programs and Policy at Protect Our Defenders, a nonprofit organization that provides legal and case work services as well as policy reform advocacy to better assist survivors.

[00:04:36] Jessica, Ryan, Adelaide, welcome to the show.

[00:04:39] **Jessica Keith:** Thanks, Shawn. Happy to be here.

[00:04:41] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah. We're really excited to have you three here, especially since September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. We're talking about a lot of things related to trauma and lowering risk and supporting our Veterans. So, really excited to take on this particular aspect of the mental health treatment world.

[00:04:58] Jessica, I wanna start with you [00:05:00] first and clarify some terms. When we hear the phrase "military sexual trauma," or the initialism "MST", what are we talking about there?

[00:05:08] How does VA define that? I think it's gonna be important to really set the stage and be clear on those terms, because it's gonna inform the rest of this show.

[00:05:15] **Jessica Keith:** That's a great place to start. So, military sexual trauma is the term that VA uses to refer to sexual assault or threatening sexual harassment that occurred during a person's military service.

[00:05:28] And this includes any sexual activity during military service in which a person is involved against their will or when unable to say no. For example, being pressured or coerced into sexual activities. Being physically forced to have sex. Or sexual contact without consent, like if you're asleep or intoxicated. MST also includes things like being touched in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable, or comments about your body, or sexual activities, or unwanted sexual advances that you found threatening.

[00:05:59] It's [00:06:00] also important to know that MST can occur on or off base or while a person is on or off duty. And no matter who the perpetrator is, a

fellow service member, a civilian, a stranger, or romantic partner, a spouse, it's still MST. Also, regardless of why the sexual assault or harassment occurred, like if it was part of a hazing or initiation ritual, it's still MST.

[00:06:22] I wanna take a moment to say to anyone who experienced MST during your service: I am so sorry that that happened to you while serving your country. I hope some of the resources we'll talk about today can help, even if just a little bit.

[00:06:36] **Shawn Liu:** I really appreciate that and want to echo that same sentiment. My comfort to everybody who's experienced that trauma. I view this particular conversation that we're having as one small step toward providing more support and essentially making it right. Both from, we're gonna talk a little bit about advocacy, but also from a position of healing as well. And Jessica, you mentioned when, what I heard from that definition of military sexual [00:07:00] trauma, MST, it's pretty broad and pretty inclusive to provide a wide open door for people to get support from these traumatic experiences.

[00:07:09] When you think about who experiences MST, what do those Veterans look like? What are the demographics like?

[00:07:16] **Jessica Keith:** The short answer, Shawn, is that any military service member can experience MST. People don't often talk about sexual assault or sexual harassment. MST survivors may think that they're the only ones to have experienced it. So, first I wanna emphasize to any MST survivor who may be listening, you are not alone. We know that people of all genders, ages, sexual orientations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, physical sizes and abilities, ranks, eras, and branches of service have experienced MST.

[00:07:46] In fact, VA's universal MST screening program finds that about one in three women and one in 50 men respond, "yes," that they experienced MST when they're asked about it by their VA healthcare [00:08:00] provider. And this means that there are really significant numbers of both women and men who have experienced MST.

[00:08:05] **Shawn Liu:** That's pretty staggering. And I know for many folks listening in on this particular episode, they probably associate military sexual trauma primarily as something that impacts women. But that statistic that it impacts men as well, male-identified Veterans, is also really important.

[00:08:21] I wanna keep diving in on this topic a little bit more and want to talk about what the experience does to Veterans. How are Veterans impacted when they experience this particular trauma?

[00:08:31] **Jessica Keith:** I like to highlight, there is no one way that individuals respond to MST. As you said, Veterans are diverse and their responses to MST are too. For some people, experiences of MST do continue to affect their health even many years later. So some might be diagnosed with PTSD or other mental health difficulties. Things like depression, anxiety, or substance use disorders related to their MST experience.

[00:08:55] They also may have physical issues related to the experience like chronic pain, [00:09:00] gastrointestinal distress, or sexual health concerns to name just a few. Many MST survivors struggle with readjustment issues and disruptions in core areas of functioning and wellbeing, including difficulties like homelessness, as you mentioned. Experiencing MST is also associated with an increased risk of suicide. That's very important to keep in mind.

[00:09:17] I also wanna emphasize that people are remarkably resilient after experiencing trauma in general, and this holds for MST too. I think it's important to honor MST survivors' resilience.

[00:09:27] **Shawn Liu:** That's a really good point. I think, especially for lay people like me who are so nervous about approaching the topic, we kind of think, "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, support, support, support." And you're bringing up a fantastic point that individual Veterans can have such resiliency to guide and shape their own healing.

[00:09:44] Adelaide, I wanna stay on this topic, but get your take as well. As the Director of Programs for Protect Our Defenders, and I just wanna acknowledge you're actually one of VA's formal partners in this particular work, what are you seeing out in the field about how MST impacts Veterans [00:10:00] that your organization serves?

[00:10:01] **Adelaide KahnFowler:** Beyond the mental health, medical, and housing challenges that Veterans who've experienced military sexual trauma may face, there are other challenges that they may have to overcome. That could include, military records reflecting some type of misconduct following an incident of sexual assault or harassment, added trauma from reprisal experience during service, and in the case of male-identifying survivors, an overwhelming stigma that precludes them from reporting or seeking treatment.

[00:10:26] The statistic you mentioned at the top is shocking as it is. Just based on the experience of us in this space, it is likely to be under representative of the true number of individuals who have experienced military sexual trauma in the course of their service.

[00:10:40] **Shawn Liu:** Those are really great points. And I appreciate a couple threads that you're bringing up. The general idea that the data that we have is likely an undercount.

[00:10:48] But also because of the impact that stigma has on access to care.

[00:10:53] I wanna stay on this stigma idea for a little bit. And Ryan, I want to come to you next regarding this.

[00:10:58] A lot of times, [00:11:00] stigma is perpetuated by myths and misconceptions about a thing. And as a researcher, I want to get your take. What do you think are some misconceptions about MST that are out there that may be contributing to stigma that are really important for us to clarify today?

[00:11:15] **Ryan Holliday:** I think I'm gonna be echoing some of the things we've already heard in the last few minutes. In general, the public carries with it so many perceptions and stigmatizations for survivors of interpersonal violence, including sexual harassment and assault. Sometimes we're aware of those things and sometimes we're not. These can even bleed into some of the clinical care we provide.

[00:11:35] One of the most common things we hear, even amongst some of the providers, as well as the survivors of MST when we talk to them, is military sexual trauma, or MST, is this "women's health issue." However, MST is not specific to a sex nor a gender. It impacts people across that gender spectrum.

[00:11:54] Another really common thing we hear is this making MST synonymous to [00:12:00] PTSD. And we've already heard, a lot of individuals who experience military sexual assault can go on to be diagnosed with PTSD at a later date.

[00:12:09] However, the impact of MST is so much larger than that. One of the things that I would hate to see happen is a survivor not matched to the best treatment for what they're experiencing. If a person comes in and they have PTSD due to their experience of MST, we have great treatments like cognitive processing therapy and prolonged exposure therapy. However, if this individual has another diagnosis, we might wanna consider a different treatment approach

that would help them to get to a stage of recovery and increased functioning at a faster pace.

[00:12:39] **Shawn Liu:** Full disclosure to everybody, Ryan and I are good buds. We do a lot of presentations on the intersections of homelessness and a lot of different topics.

[00:12:48] And Ryan, one of the things I've always appreciated and taken away when we get to collaborate together, is the idea that there is no one reason for a thing. There's no one magic diagnosis that explains everything. That a [00:13:00] lot of the issues that the services that we provide are trying to address are essentially these confluence, this mix, of different risk factors, environmental circumstances, and individual factors. And oftentimes as you, Adelaide, and Jessica point out, protective factors as well. Strengths that may lead to different episodes of housing instability, or mental health diagnoses. That it's a really complex topic.

[00:13:22] I wanna lean in on some of your experience now, continuing more, especially as a research psychologist that looks at homelessness and housing instability from all of these different intersections, from all of these different angles, can you share a little bit about what research is telling us these days about how MST impacts things such as housing instability and essentially being homeless, and how that can impact or hamper recovery down the road?

[00:13:46] **Ryan Holliday:** When we look at the data, we have both a simple story and a really complex one. To talk about the simple aspect first, if you look at a survivor of military sexual trauma, we know that their experience of psychosocial [00:14:00] stressors, including housing instability and homelessness, is often elevated.

[00:14:04] And on the flip side, when we look at the general population of Veterans experiencing homelessness, we also see an overrepresentation of experience of interpersonal violence, including military sexual trauma. The complex story is how do we understand these factors to improve and enhance the care that these Veterans receive?

[00:14:24] This is where things become a little tricky. I wish there was a way to say, "oh, it's just one factor." But like you said, Shawn often, it's the confluence. Often it's an "and" rather than an "or." When we talk to these Veterans, what we're typically seeing is it's impacts of stressors and trauma over the life course.

[00:14:41] In addition to military sexual trauma, this population often has heightened rates of things like childhood abuse as well as intimate partner violence in adulthood. What the data is showing us more and more is that, in order for us to enhance the care and recovery for this population who needs it, we need to be thinking [00:15:00] about all of these factors together and providing targeted referrals and treatments.

[00:15:05] How do we ensure that when we have the patient in front of us? We are giving them a referral and a treatment plan that is holistic and considers these factors concurrently. Because what we see over and over again is, if we have someone in front of us and we target just one thing, often the fire moves to the other factors.

[00:15:23] **Shawn Liu:** I think you've just given our social workers who are listening in, a lot to think about. A lot of case plans being updated just from thinking about how all of the ripple effects of the different services that, when we connect Veterans to, how they have these essentially ripple effects to other parts of their care.

[00:15:39] Speaking of services, Jessica, I wanna come back to you. We talked about what military sexual trauma is, how Veterans are impacted, what the science and research tells us. What is VA doing about it? What type of services do we offer to survivors of MST?

[00:15:52] **Jessica Keith:** Yeah, I'm so glad you asked that Shawn. Because some MST survivors may not know what VA services are available or how to [00:16:00] access them.

[00:16:00] The first thing to really emphasize is that free confidential treatment for any condition related to experiences of MST is available at all VA healthcare systems.

[00:16:12] We support many paths to healing depending on someone's needs and preferences. Treatment can involve addressing immediate health and safety concerns, or learning more about how MST affects people, focusing on strategies for coping with distressing emotions, or for individuals who choose to do so, talking more about their memories of the MST experience with a compassionate professional.

[00:16:35] MST related services are available at every VA medical center, as well as VA's community based vet centers. And VA also offers treatment in

residential or inpatient settings for individuals who need more intensive treatment and support.

[00:16:49] For any of these treatments, MST survivors can also ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if it would help them feel more comfortable. We know that's important for many survivors.

[00:16:58] **Shawn Liu:** How do Veterans get [00:17:00] connected? And I'm wanting to get your feedback, both from Veterans who are listening in, but also maybe staff who are actually supporting Veterans, maybe in our homeless programs or other social workers in other aspects, how can both the Veterans get connected, but also the staff support those Veterans and get connected to services?

[00:17:16] **Jessica Keith:** There's a number of ways, but probably the most important to know about is that every VA healthcare system has an MST Coordinator. That's a point person whose main role is to assist individuals in accessing MST related services. Veterans can connect with them directly just by calling their closest VA medical center and asking to speak to the MST Coordinator.

[00:17:40] Staff can also do the same. Simply ask to speak to the MST Coordinator at their medical center for more information, or look up a list of them online.

[00:17:49] I also wanna emphasize that VA's MST related services are free, as we mentioned. And also that individuals may be able to receive this care even if they're not eligible for any other VA [00:18:00] services. Veterans don't need to have reported the MST when it happened or have any documentation of it to get this care.

[00:18:07] VA's really strongly committed to ensuring that all MST survivors have access to the help they need to heal from the impact of MST.

[00:18:14] **Shawn Liu:** I really appreciate you bringing that up. These Veterans are eligible for these resources, even if they're not eligible for other VHA healthcare or other benefits.

[00:18:23] We're gonna make sure we have hyperlinks to the VA locator so that you can find your local VA so that you can talk to your MST Coordinator and get started.

[00:18:31] Adelaide, I want to come back over to you again. Also full disclosure, Adelaide and I are friends as well. We have developed a kind of delightful little friendship as we have been developing a partnership focused on increasing awareness, both of services for military sexual trauma in VA homeless programs, but also raising awareness of VA homeless programs and services for survivors of military sexual trauma.

[00:18:54] And Adelaide, my understanding when we've been working together and talking about what Protect Our Defenders does, the big role is [00:19:00] advocacy, but also helping survivors seek justice. Can you talk a little bit about why that is important? What are the therapeutic benefits that seeking justice can play in a Veterans recovery?

[00:19:10] **Adelaide KahnFowler:** We consider advocacy to be something that looks very different to everyone, including ourselves. Starting at the individual level, self advocacy, knowing your rights, being informed, and feeling empowered to be able to seek out the appropriate resources and information that might just make a complete world of difference.

[00:19:31] It is important to emphasize the fact that anyone can visit a VA and seek out MST resources, regardless of what benefits they might have.

[00:19:40] We've helped so many survivors just even realize that because, when they may have tried in the past, in the 80's and the 90's that wasn't always the case. And so being able to inform them that they have resources at their disposal can be life changing.

[00:19:54] The last couple of years have seen this growing, #metoo military movement, that have really empowered a [00:20:00] lot of survivors to come forward and tell their stories. And in the process seek the treatment that they might desperately need. And that some cases that means escaping homelessness, or addressing the MST that they may not have been ready to approach in the past.

[00:20:14] Our organization's advocacy efforts also extend to the Hill and being able to empower survivor's voices, share them with their members of Congress in order to ensure that the systems that are there to help them are working for them.

[00:20:26] In terms of justice, justice and the work that we do with advocacy can go hand in hand. A number of things that we have been able to see accomplished, one being the 2020 Supreme Court decision where the statute of

limitations was overturned for rape cases committed between '86 and 2006. Meaning that survivors who may have fallen outside of that statute of limitations, when it was limited to five years, are able to seek justice for what happened to them.

[00:20:54] In some cases, it's a matter of being able to seek closure and just being able to go through the process of [00:21:00] reporting in an environment where there are a lot more resources available such as victim advocacy services, special victims council, and all these things that didn't exist even say 10-15 years ago.

[00:21:12] Those who are currently active duty service members who are going to become tomorrow's Veterans and seeking care at VA, empowering them to be able to seek justice for what happened to them and whatever that form of justice might look like.

[00:21:24] **Shawn Liu:** Seeking closure and utilizing their voice for good. That's fantastic stuff.

[00:21:29] As we start wrapping this episode up and bringing us to a close, I wanna do a little bit of a round Robin. Where should people go, Veterans or the public at large, if they wanna learn more about this particular topic and how to help Veterans? Jessica, I wanna start with you.

[00:21:42] **Jessica Keith:** One important resource is VA's MST website. The address is mentalhealth.va.gov/mst.

[00:21:51] I also wanna mention the MST Coordinator again. Contact your local MST Coordinator to learn more about VA services available.

[00:21:58] I also wanna highlight a [00:22:00] great new self-help resource available for anyone who wants to learn more about MST and access coping tools. And that's our mobile app, Beyond MST. It's a free, secure, private app created specifically to support the health and wellbeing of survivors of MST. I always mention that any personal information entered in it is not shared with anyone, including VA. And you can download beyond MST from any app store.

[00:22:23] **Shawn Liu:** Excellent. Ryan, what about you? If folks wanna learn more, especially from the research side, where should they go?

[00:22:29] **Ryan Holliday:** One thing I'm really passionate about is evidence-based care. And what I mean by that is that all of the treatments that our

providers are delivering, and our Veterans are receiving, have the best evidence that they're gonna meet the needs of whatever problem the individual is presenting with.

[00:22:47] We work so hard to not only conduct research on the treatments that we provide, but also to establish clinical practice guidelines to ensure that we are providing the best care possible.

[00:22:59] Detailing [00:23:00] to providers, as well as patients who are being advocates for their care, that VA has a number of clinical practice guidelines that are available, free of charge to really discuss what are the treatments we have, what do those entail, and what are they best for treating?

[00:23:16] **Shawn Liu:** Adelaide, you mentioned, Know Your Rights and a lot of the great work Protect Our Defenders is doing. Where should people go to learn more?

[00:23:22] **Adelaide KahnFowler:** Visiting our website is probably the best place to start. In particular, our Know Your Rights campaign is a project that we have been really excited to introduce to the public. While right now it focuses mostly on your rights as you're going through the investigative process and looking to an Article 32 or a Court Marshal involving the assailant, we are looking to expand in the next couple of months.

[00:23:44] It's at ProtectOurDefenders.com/RIGHTS.

[00:23:48] **Shawn Liu:** Excellent. And we're gonna put links to all of those in the description of this podcast episode today.

[00:23:53] Before we let you three go, I want to do our final closing tradition. On this show, we like to close with "why." I, [00:24:00] myself am not a Veteran. So a lot of times the Veterans, they want to know why are we so committed to this work? Is this just a job, or are we here for the mission? And I think from this last, I don't know, about 40 minutes or so listening to you as we're recording it, Jessica, I've just met you through this process, but Ryan and Adelaide, I know where your hearts are. But for the Veterans listening in, Jessica, I wanna start with you. What is your "why" for this work? Why are you so committed not only for Veterans survivors of military sexual trauma, but all of our Veterans.

[00:24:29] **Jessica Keith:** I love that question, Shawn. Like many here at VA, I come to this work with a commitment that does stem from my own life and experiences.

[00:24:36] And that includes the close relationship I had with my grandmother. She served in the Army during World War II, as a Morse code instructor. There weren't a lot of women doing this. I learned a great deal from her and I always admired her. Her strength to serve, even against some adversity.

[00:24:51] So I came to the VA to work with Veterans like her, and continue to be so honored to serve Veterans who experienced MST through my [00:25:00] work.

[00:25:00] **Shawn Liu:** Ryan, how about you?

[00:25:00] **Ryan Holliday:** When I reflect on it, it reminds me of a presentation. I went to a few years ago on something called invisible populations. Sometimes we have these populations of people experiencing life stressors or life events that are hard. And it makes us uncomfortable. Military sexual trauma is something that generally can make people uncomfortable to think about.

[00:25:20] And so is housing security and homelessness. And what's so very difficult is, it's one of those conversations and topics that, even though it is uncomfortable to discuss, it's something we also have to discuss as these are Veterans who are continuing to experience a lot of distress. It leads them to suffer in silence.

[00:25:39] Because of this, I'm very passionate. And I really implore anyone who's listening today to hopefully feel some passion or relate to the population who may be experiencing this at hand. If we all do this collectively, that's how we provide this invisible population of voice. And when we provide them a voice, we provide them a seat at the table to be active and engaged in the discussion for their [00:26:00] care.

[00:26:00] **Shawn Liu:** Well said, Adelaide, my friend, I'll give you the last word.

[00:26:02] **Adelaide KahnFowler:** We all come to this work for different reasons. It's not by accident. These issues are not easy to confront head on and to lead somebody to a place where they are better than they were when they first came to us.

[00:26:14] Although I also don't have a connection to the military, I did not serve, I'm not a Veteran, being able to provide access to information resources in some cases, closure to somebody, is an incredibly, incredibly, gratifying thing to do, particularly for a group of individuals who have given their lives to serve this country. They deserve all the help that they can get.

[00:26:34] **Shawn Liu:** Dr. Jessica Keith is the Clinical Programs and Practices Lead for VA's MST Support Team.

[00:26:39] Dr. Ryan Holliday is a Clinical Research Psychologist at the Rocky Mountain MIRECC for Suicide Prevention.

[00:26:45] And Mrs. Adelaide Kahn-Fowler is the Director of Programs and Policy at Protect Our Defenders.

[00:26:49] Jessica, Ryan, Adelaide, thank you so much for the gifts of your time.

[00:26:54] **Adelaide KahnFowler:** Thank you so much.

[00:26:55] **Ryan Holliday:** Thank you.

[00:26:56] **Shawn Liu:** If you wanna know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans [00:27:00] experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at www.va.gov/homeless.

[00:27:06] And if you're a Veteran who is homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to. 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

[00:27:28] That's all for this month. We've hoped that you found this time to be valuable and that you feel empowered in our collective work to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

[00:27:38] Take care.