

# CRB

## California's Women Veterans Response to the 2011 Survey: Preliminary Report

*By California Research Bureau*

*Requested by the California Commission  
on the Status of Women and the  
California Department of Veterans Affairs*



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Photo courtesy of CalVet.

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*The primary author of this report is Rebecca E. Blanton, Senior Policy Analyst at the California Research Bureau. For more information on this or other CRB reports, please call the CRB at 916-653-7843 or email [crb@library.ca.gov](mailto:crb@library.ca.gov).*

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## INTRODUCTION

California has both the greatest number – more than 167,000 – and the greatest proportion of female veterans in the country (9.5 percent). While the total number of veterans is projected to decrease over the next decade, the percentage of women veterans will increase to ten percent of all veterans in 2020 from 8.1 percent in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Information about who California women veterans are and what they need is not widely known. The California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) lacks a comprehensive list of women veterans. However, CalVet is currently working on collecting a current roster of women veterans. While some state and federal agencies gather information on veterans' needs and service utilization, breakouts about women veterans generally are not completed.

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*Civilian life was a strange new world.*  
~Woman veteran, open-ended response in 2011 Survey

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## BACKGROUND

This preliminary report provides an overview of the needs identified by California's women veterans drawn from a new statewide survey conducted by the California Research Bureau (CRB). The 2011 survey contains the responses of nearly 900 women veterans. It focuses on their needs, service utilization patterns and experiences with various service providers, including the federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and CalVet. This survey was a second iteration of the Women Veterans Survey, initially conducted in 2008.

In 2007, the Commission on the Status of Women (the Commission), under Assembly Member Lois Wolk (now Senator), along with CalVet, requested CRB assist them with assessing the needs of California's women veterans. The 2008 survey established a baseline for needs and service utilization.

In 2011, the Commission and CalVet asked CRB to assess the progress made in addressing the needs identified in 2008 and identify any new trends in needs that may have arisen.

This report describes the survey methodology, provides an overview of the sample's demographics, discusses the findings of the needs of women veterans, and provides an overview of the utilization of state and federal services.

### Related Resources

*California's Women Veterans: The Challenges and Needs of Those Who Served.* Lisa K. Foster and Scott Vince 2009. CRB-09-009.

<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/09/09-009.pdf>

*Briefly Stated: Women Veterans By the Numbers.*

<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/09/WomenVeteransBrieflyStated.pdf>

*Briefly Stated: California's Women Veterans: Challenges and Needs.*

<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/10/WomenVeteransBrieflyStated.pdf>

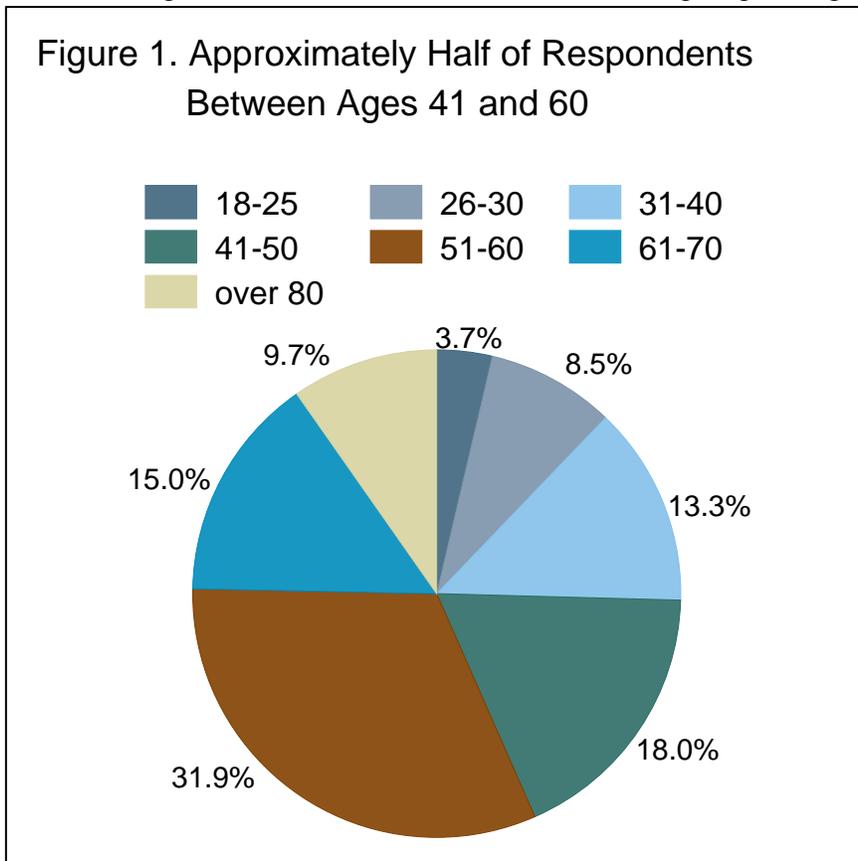
## THE SAMPLE

The survey was administered both as a hard-copy survey and online through SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). Because state agencies lack comprehensive lists of women veterans in the state, CalVet and CRB utilized social networking to create a snowball sample. The survey was initially distributed to participants at the annual statewide 2011 CalVet Women Veterans Conference – to federal, state, and county providers of veteran services, and private veteran organizations and groups. Women who took the survey recruited friends who are veterans to participate. Over 900 women responded to the survey; 74 were active duty; 843 were veterans and are included in the final sample.

Snowball sampling includes both methodological benefits and costs. This methodology is useful in increasing the number of participants for the survey in low-cost manner. However, it generally does not produce a random sample. Participants share the survey with their social and professional networks. This means the participants are likely to have similar demographics. Initial distribution of the survey included women who are already participating in veteran’s organizations, were at the 2011 CalVet Women Veterans Conference, and women residing at the Veterans Home at Yountville. Women veterans in these settings, arguably are more aware of services and benefits than other veterans.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

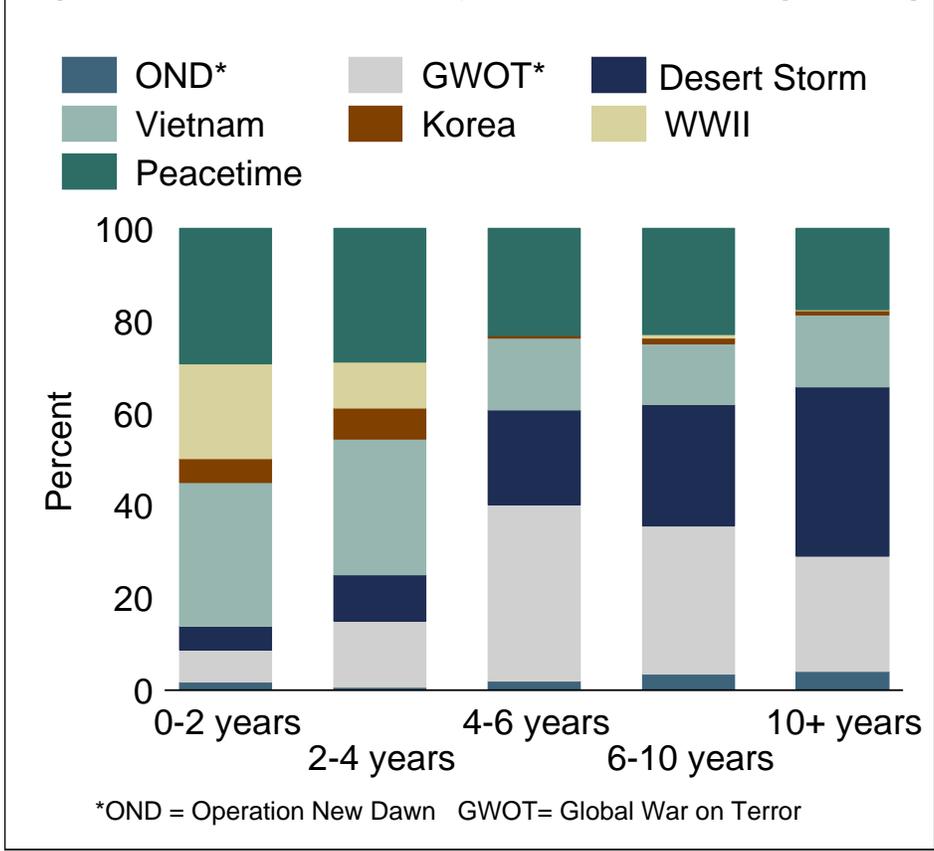
Nationally, the average age for women veterans is 48. For the 2011 Survey, we asked respondents to group themselves into one of seven age categories. Almost half (49.9 percent) of women were aged 41 to 60, see Figure 1. This is consistent with our finding of growing careerism amongst women in the



military; as women make their lifelong careers in the military, they separate at older ages.

Figure 2 shows length of service by era served. This figure demonstrates a growth in careerism for women from the Vietnam era forward. Beginning with the Vietnam era, the percentage of women serving six years or more in the military grows substantially. Women serving in either Desert Storm/Desert Shield or the Global War on Terror (GWOT) are much more likely to have served six or more years than they were to have served less than six years.

Figure 2. Women's Military Careers Are Lengthening



A majority of the sample for the 2011 survey ranked at the non-commissioned officer (NCO) level or higher at time of discharge: 18.8 percent officers, 41.8 percent NCOs and 39.3 percent lower enlisted. The population of the 2011 Women Veterans Survey is slightly older, more educated and more likely to have been an officer at the time of discharge than either a national sample or the 2008 Women Veterans Survey sample. This population may be more informed about veterans' services and more likely to utilize these services. Thus, when this population identifies a gap in knowledge about services or needs, we suspect that women veterans who are

less connected with the VA and CalVet may have even greater needs and more gaps in knowledge.

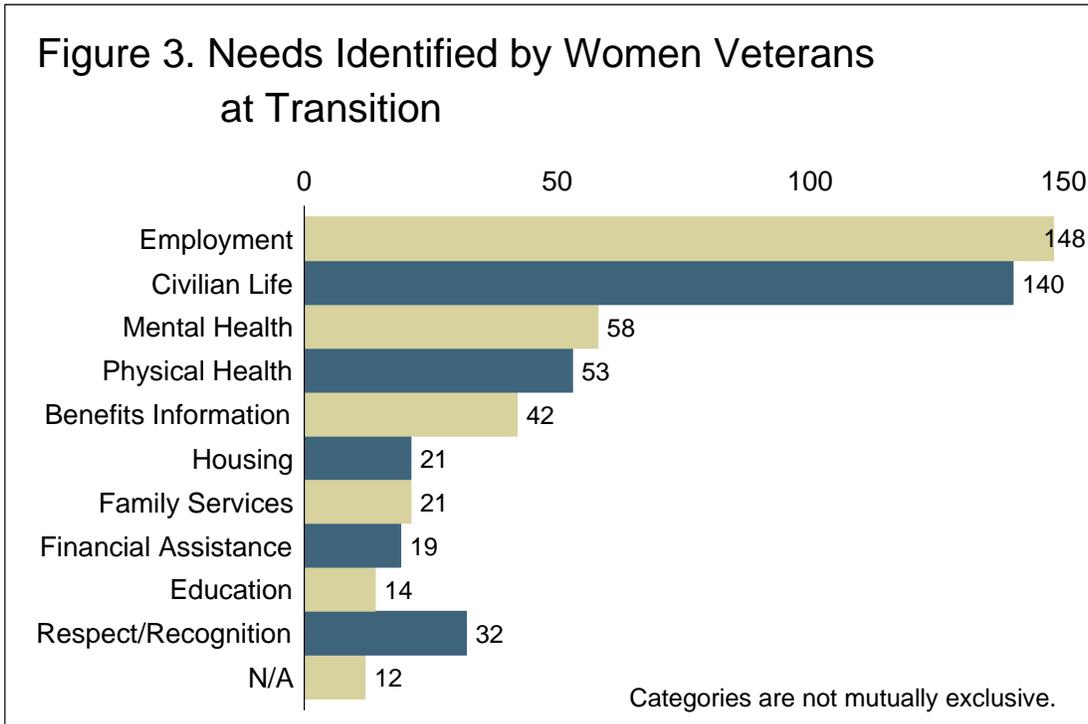
### NEEDS OF WOMEN VETERANS

Survey respondents were asked to identify their needs in a series of open-ended questions. We then organized their responses into categories of needs. We posed three needs questions to women: one about needs at transition, one about current needs and one about services they wished were available to them.

Many women veterans provided answers with more than a single need in a response. Not all women responded to the open-ended questions. Because some women opted not to respond to the needs questions, the "N" (total number of respondents) changes. In the graphics, the bars labeled "N/A" and "None" reflect responses from women where their written response was "N/A" or "None," or a related comment. We calculate the percentage of women with a given need as the number of women identifying a specific need divided by the total number of respondents for a question including women responding "None" or "N/A."

Many women veterans identified a need for help at the time of transition from military service. Among those who responded to the question about challenges transitioning to civilian life, the most frequently reported need related to specific difficulties with finding employment (25.3 percent)

followed closely by problems with adjusting to civilian life (23.9 percent). A large number reported challenges with mental health issues (9.9 percent), including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and military sexual trauma (MST) and with physical health (9.0 percent). While the need for recognition and respect does not correspond with a specific service, women identified it as a need at the time of transition. Figure 3 summarizes the percentage of respondents identifying specific needs at the time of transition.



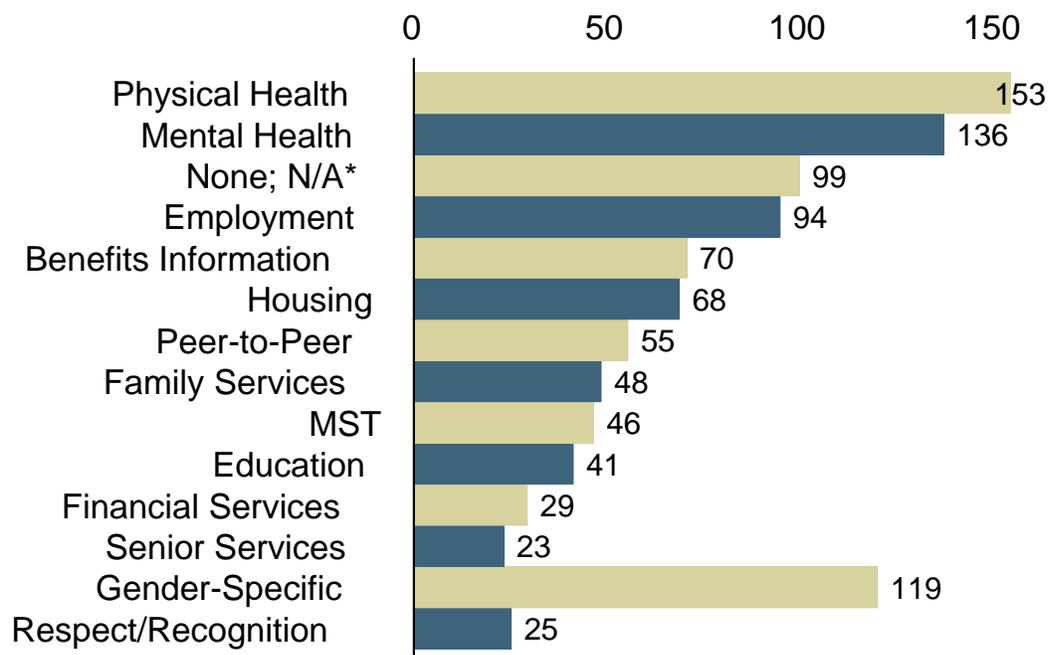
Many women veterans are doing well. Over 30 percent did not provide a response to the current needs question and nearly 20 percent provided written comments that they had none or the question was not applicable. One possible interpretation of a non-response is that the women did not have current needs they could identify. This interpretation would indicate that nearly 50 percent of respondents did not identify current needs.

Of the respondents identifying needs, current needs differ from needs at the time of transition (see Figure 4). Women veterans told us that post-transition they need help most often with physical and mental health issues (26.8 and 23.8 percent, respectively), including MST. Women also identify employment (16.5%), benefits information and outreach (12.3%) and housing (11.9%) as clear needs, but these are less prevalent than they were at the time of transition.



Photo courtesy of CalVet

Figure 4. Current Needs of Women Veterans



\*Includes only written responses of "None" or "N/A." Blank answers not included.

Categories not mutually exclusive. N=571

Gender-specific needs are a high priority (20.8%) for women veterans. These needs stretch across many service areas. Women veterans expressed the need for gender-specific care in health and mental health services, housing facilities, MST treatment and family services. For example, women expressed the need to be able to have a gynecological exam performed at their local VA health center and the need for women-specific emergency housing.

## UTILIZATION OF SERVICES

Survey respondents identified services they knew about and utilized; services they had challenges accessing; services they knew about but did not access; and services about which they did not know.

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*Better communications with Veterans would help. I did not know about these benefits.*

*Mostly I did not know I could use these. I thought the ones I knew about were only for the guys.*

~Women Veterans, open-ended responses, 2011  
Women Veterans Survey

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Courtesy of CalVet.

Women veterans access both federal and state services; however, they are more likely to access federal services. Almost half of the respondents (48.2 percent) reported using federal medical or dental benefits (see Figure 5). Nearly the same number reported using federal educational or vocational training services (47.0 percent) and disability compensation or pension benefits (42.5 percent).

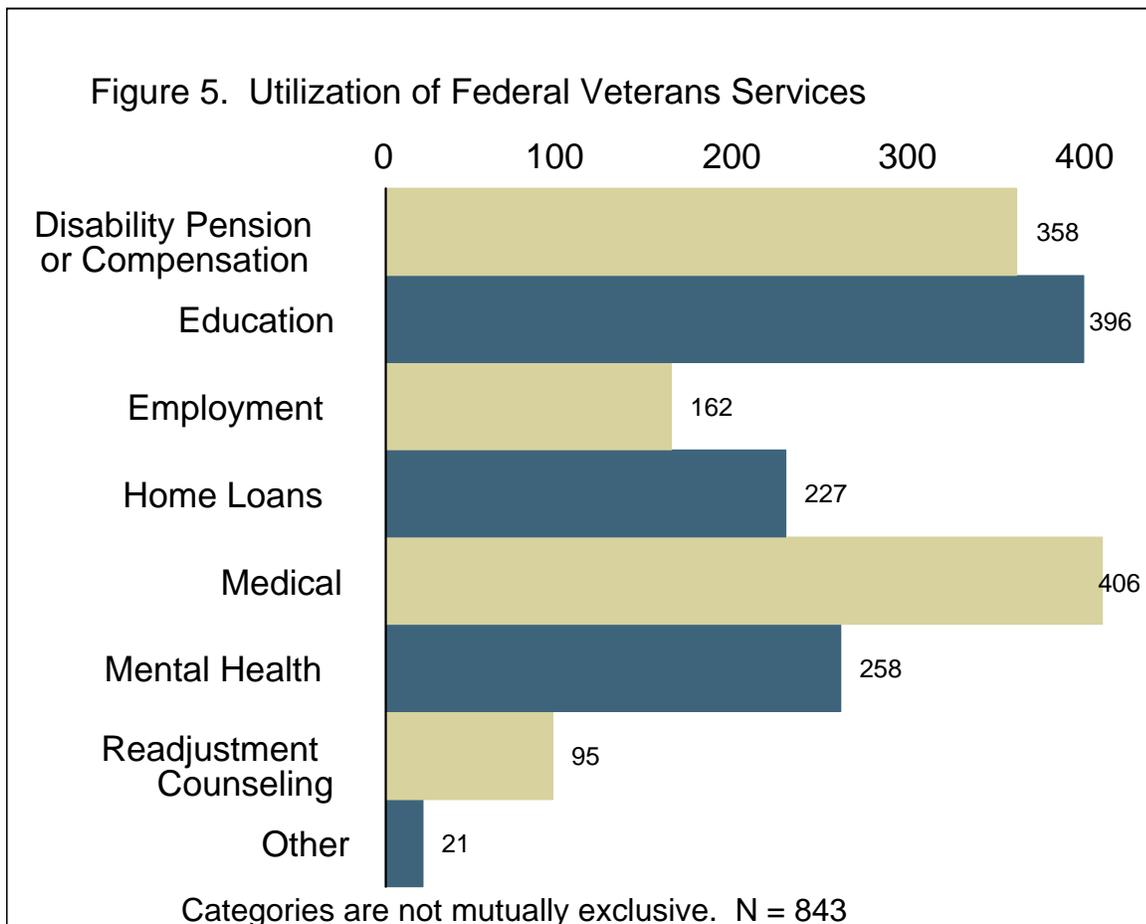
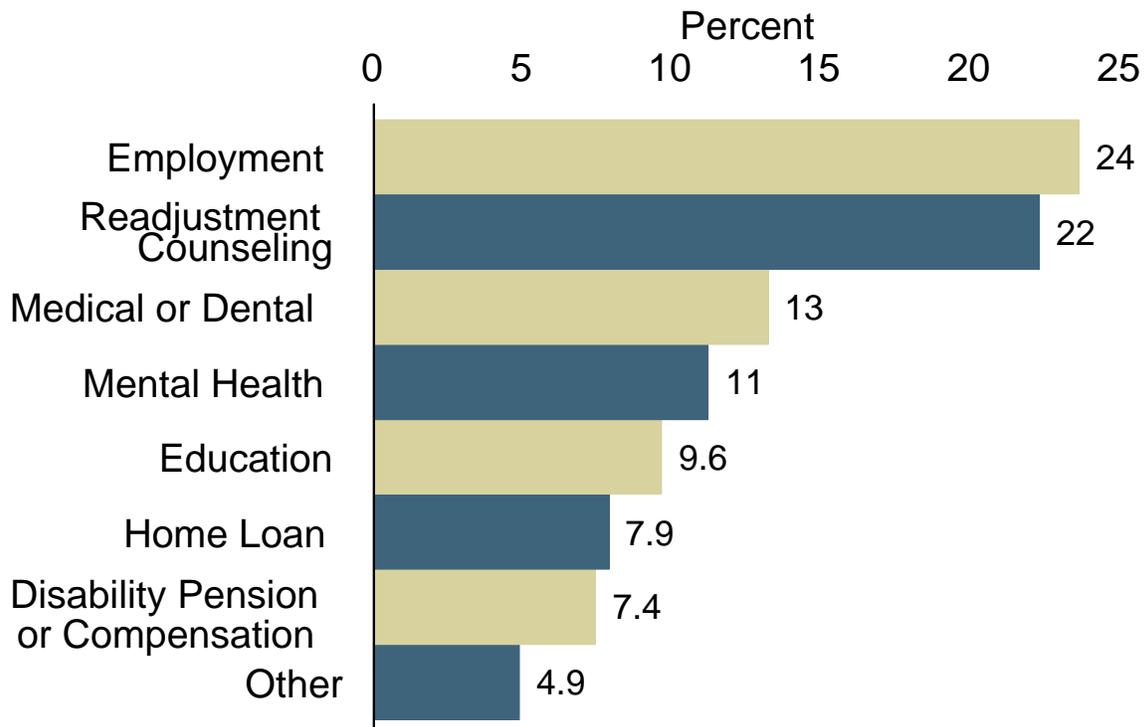


Figure 6. Percentage of Respondents Who Don't Know About Specific Federal Benefit



Categories are not mutually exclusive. N = 822

The frequent use of these benefits occurs even though more than a quarter of women veterans in the survey reported not knowing about federal employment benefits (24.0 percent) or readjustment counseling (22.0 percent), and approximately ten percent reported not knowing about medical or educational benefits (13 percent and 9.6 percent, respectively). Figure 6 reports the percentage of women veterans unaware of specific federal benefits.

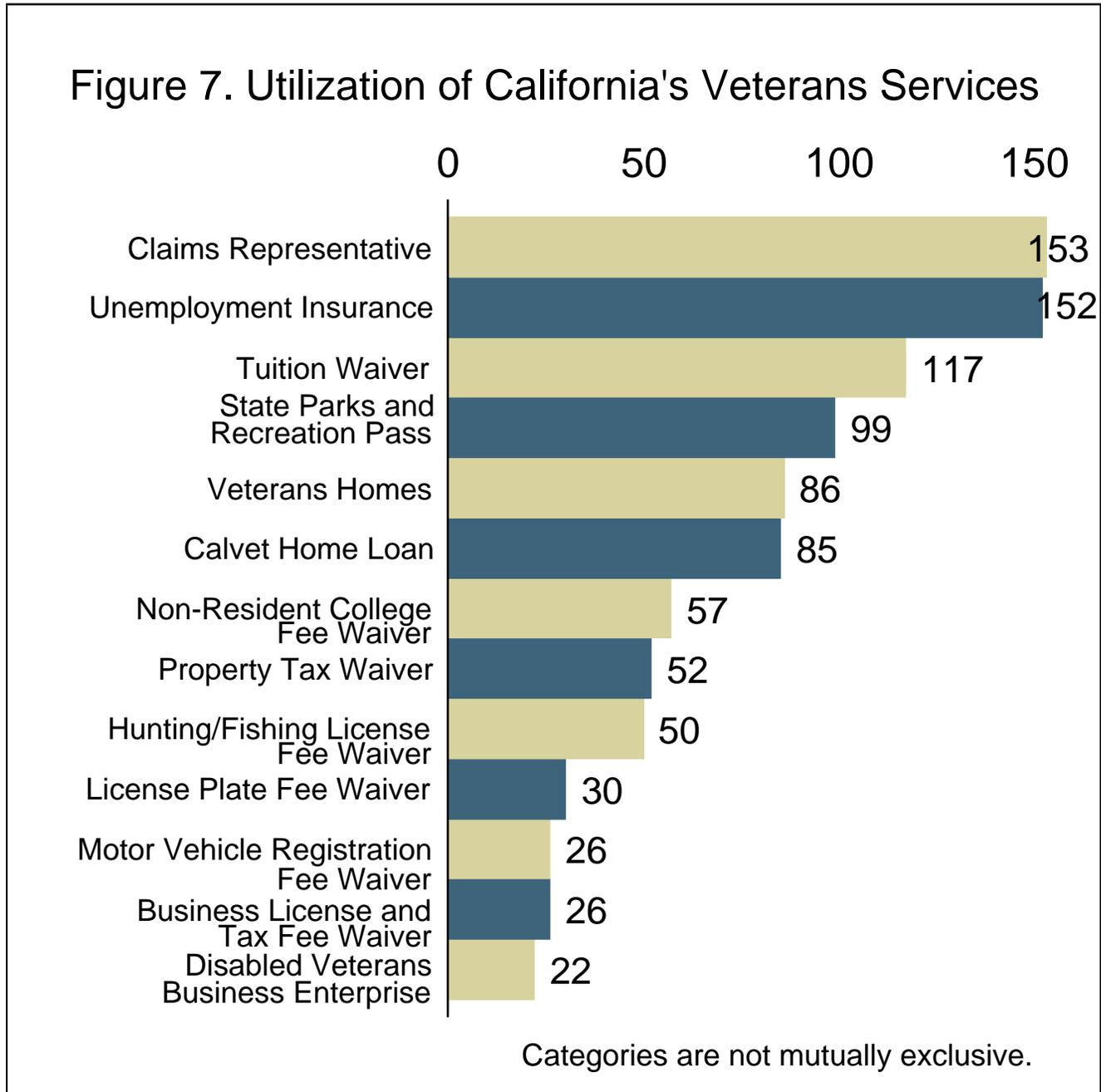
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*[W]omen veterans returning to the private sector are often hard to identify by physical appearance alone and subsequently may feel a sense of 'invisibility,' isolation or merely forgotten for our service to this country. If more veterans organizations both in California and nationally continue to reach out to women veterans to let us know that while we share similar challenges, needs and experiences as our fellow male servicemembers, women veterans also have unique issues that impact our lives that also need to be addressed.*

~Woman Veteran, open-ended response, 2011 Women Veterans Survey

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In California, women veterans are primarily using the benefits of a Claims Representative (16.0 percent) and Unemployment Insurance (16.0 percent). Women veterans access the Tuition Fee Waiver (12.0 percent), the state parks and recreation pass fee waiver (10.0 percent) and the CalVet home loan programs (9.0 percent). Figure 7 summarizes the use of California programs for veterans.



## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Women veterans in California face many of the same difficulties as their male counterparts. When they transition from military service to civilian life: they need to find a job that can support them and their families; find housing; get physical health and mental health care, and; access support services to help them readjust to civilian life. However, women also identify the need for gender-specific services in these areas. The growing number of women veterans in California increases the need to respond to women's health, mental health and employment needs as well as address specific issues such as MST.

The women responding to the 2011 Women Veterans Survey are more educated, a bit older and were discharged with a higher rank than the average woman veteran in comparison to national statistics. More educated and higher ranking veterans tend to be more connected to available benefits and services and more likely to access them than the average veteran. The sample population is accessing both federal and state benefits/services to meet some of their needs. However, many women veterans who are not connected – arguably those most in need and/or the least informed about benefits and services – are still unaware that they are available to them. The need to increase outreach and information to women veterans on the benefits and services available to them is an important conclusion.

Health and mental health concerns dominate the current needs of women veterans. Additionally, women veterans are also an aging population and the needs for services and resources for senior veterans are emerging. Finding a way to successfully address both gender-specific needs and older veterans will be a key challenge in the future.

In addition, while not discussed in this report, preliminary analysis of the data shows that the distinction among the roles, responsibilities and services provided by the federal, state and local entities that serve veterans remains unclear and needs to be addressed.

## FINAL REPORT AND BRIEFS

The California Research Bureau along with CalVet and the Commission will release a completed report about the survey later this year (2012). The final report will be an in-depth study of the needs and service utilization of women veterans in California. In addition to the report, CRB anticipates releasing a series of briefs on special issues such as military sexual trauma and the health needs of female veterans. A list of topics covered by the survey and upcoming report are listed in the box.

### Future Report Topics

- Demographics
- Employment Status
- Insurance Status
- Mental Health
- Military Sexual Trauma
- Perceptions of CalVet and the VA
- Physical Health
- PTSD
- Service Utilization

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3. National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. (2010). "Veterans Population Projections, 2000-2036." Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of the Actuary, Vet Population Projections Model. [www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran\\_Population.asp](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp).