



# Transition Services Utilization Among US Women Veterans: A Secondary Analysis of a National Survey

RESEARCH

KARI L. FLETCHER

JUSTIN T. MCDANIEL 

KATE HENDRICKS THOMAS

MAJORIE J. SCAFFA

DAVID L. ALBRIGHT

MOHAMMED ALSHERI

JENNIFER ANTHONY

*\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the military-to-civilian transition experiences among US women veterans. This study used a cross-sectional, mixed-methods survey research study to examine employment and personal well-being outcomes (sense of purpose) among a sample size of 822 women veterans. The survey instrument focused broadly on measuring different aspects of military transition. The quantitative analysis revealed, through the multivariable logistic regression models, a strong sense of purpose associated with belief in the helpfulness of transition services (aOR = 2.03, 95% CI = 1.06–3.90) and the use of a transition coach (3.43, 95% CI = 1.20–9.82). The qualitative analysis revealed, through manual content analysis, that 64% of women veterans used transition services. However, only 12% reported satisfaction with the available services. The study's findings present important feedback for organizations hoping to reach female veterans, such as many female veterans feel that the current efforts to assist with their transition are ineffective. For this study, women and female will be used interchangeably.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Kate Hendricks Thomas**

George Mason University, US

[katehendricksthomas@gmail.com](mailto:katehendricksthomas@gmail.com)

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During their post-military transition, women veterans are likely to confront a variety of challenges related to gender role and identity, societal expectations (Schivavone & Gentry, 2014), military sexual trauma (MST), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression (Lehavot et al., 2013), and physical and mental health (Thomas et al., 2016). Furthermore, financial insecurity, family caregiving responsibilities, and lack of social support contributed to stress injury, creating the possibility of depression being 2.3+ times higher in female veterans than male veterans (Thomas et al., 2015; Washington & Yano, 2013). Women leave the military for various reasons: (a) family (41%), (b) lost faith or trust in military or reporting structures (36%), (c) training or education opportunities (29%), (d) concerns or injustice from service experience (26%), and (e) military service obligation less than 20 years (26%; Maury et al., 2018).

While their transition experiences when leaving the military vary, a small body of research suggests that transitions among women veterans are often challenging (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Maury et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2018; Wounded Warrior Project, 2021). Additionally, the transition process for combat-occupation veterans may be more complicated than for non-combat veterans (Thomas, 2022). With growing numbers of women serving in combat-occupation roles across the US armed forces that have historically been reserved for men, these roles require all service members to engage in ongoing operational readiness training that can leave a lack of time to adequately prepare for leaving the military (Bullock et al., 2009). Unsurprising, women veterans report transition challenges, suggesting a need for increased, tailored support and outreach to ensure they are aware of and engaging with available programmatic support.

Today, women make up about 17% of the United States military, roughly 10% of the veteran population, and roughly 17% of the Post-9/11 veteran population (Maury et al., 2018). However, women veterans report difficulties finding their identity post-service (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). According to Demers (2013), these transition challenges are further exacerbated for women veterans who face additional challenges in negotiating gender normative identity expectations returning to a civilian society that is unprepared to receive combat-trained and women who have deployed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, most military and transition-related literature have focused on male veterans' experiences. However, a

small body of literature has begun to examine women in the military and their post-military transition needs. The past focus is limited to a few main areas, such as access to medical care (Weitlauf et al., 2016) and military sexual trauma prevalence (Bean-Mayberry et al., 2011). In an infographic compiled by the Institute for Military and Veteran Families, two-thirds (66%) of women veterans who responded reported having trouble transitioning out of the military (Maury et al., 2020). Their largest transition challenges included navigating the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs, services, and benefits. Also, finding employment, navigating financial stressors, managing depression, and becoming socialized to civilian culture (Blue Star Families, 2020). In addition, post-military servicewomen were concerned about facing discrimination, harassment, military sexual trauma (MST), cultural issues, reporting barriers, stigma, lack of social support, alienation, and reduced unit cohesion (Blue Star Families, 2020).

In one research study conducted by Burkhart and Hogan (2015) on post-Gulf War women veterans, 20 participants were interviewed about their post-military transition experiences. The findings suggest the female military experience is comprised of seven phases: (a) choosing the military, (b) adapting to being in the military, (c) being in the military, (d) being a female in the military, (e) departing the military, (f) experiencing stressors of being a civilian, and (g) making meaning of being a veteran-civilian (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). In research conducted by the Wounded Warrior Project (2021), using 4,871 survey respondents and 13 focus groups, the findings suggest that women veterans largest challenges faced during their post-military service transitions included: (a) coping with mental health such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression, (61%), (b) financial stress (30%), (c) coping with mental health issues related to MST (25%), (d) finding employment (22%), (e) feeling isolated (21%), and (f) coping with physical injuries (20%). In addition, women veterans' post-military transition challenges might include feelings of isolation, loneliness, and the struggle to identify with other veterans or civilian women (Wounded Warrior Project, 2021).

In a research effort conducted by the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) with women veteran respondents, nearly one-third of the 829 participants reported having experienced challenges with mental health (32.1%), financial stability (30.4%), and connectivity with a community of women veterans (29.4%). Primary findings from this study suggest links between concerns that women report while on active duty with poor outcomes reported by women veterans after they transition out of military service (Thomas et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2019).

## METHOD

### DESIGN

This study featured a cross-sectional, mixed-methods survey research design to examine employment and personal well-being outcomes (sense of purpose) among US women military veterans following their transition from military service. The survey was composed of closed-ended and open-ended questions, permitting quantitative and qualitative data analysis. As part of a project for a leadership development program at the Bush Institute, the survey was designed by a woman veteran interested in exploring questions of well-being and employment in her peer community. The study survey was developed by one of the authors of the present study in partnership with the Bush Institute. The survey was created, modified, and tested for face validity during the six-month “Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program” at the George W. Bush Institute.

Data for this study were collected between August and November 2019 through an online survey hosted on the Qualtrics platform. The study survey was shared electronically, via email, LinkedIn, and Facebook, with professional networks, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) engaged in women veteran programming, and veteran Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). The final analytic sample included 822 female participants. In 2021, an interdisciplinary team of researchers partnered with the study designer to conduct a secondary analysis of the collected data. Following approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of St. Thomas, analysis of the previously collected, disaggregated data began. The purpose of such analysis and the present study was to examine the transition experience of female veterans to civilian life following military service.

### MEASURES

The survey instrument focused broadly on measuring different aspects of military transition for women veterans, aiming to increase our understanding of women’s experiences as they transition from military service. Sociodemographic information collected included age (recorded as a continuous quantitative variable), ethnicity, marital status, military branch, whether the participant had children, and time spent in the military (recorded as a continuous quantitative variable). Participants responded to a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, to measure their sense of purpose while serving and since they transitioned from the military. Individuals who experienced a decrease in their sense of purpose since transitioning from the military were allowed to clarify their experience with the following open-ended prompt: “Please explain why you felt a decrease in your sense of purpose.”

The study survey also included questions that measured the participants’ transition outcomes after leaving the military, which included when they began preparation for their transition out of military service, if their use of transition services were helpful or not helpful, and if they had coaching or mentoring assistance to help them transition. Open-ended responses were elicited regarding the transition process with the following prompt: “Would you describe your transition from military to civilian as very difficult, difficult, somewhat difficult, neither easy nor difficult, mostly easy, easy, or very easy? Please explain your answer.”

### DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data analyses were conducted in RStudio, which included a calculation of descriptive statistics to summarize the characteristics of the participants and the use of inferential statistics to test the study’s hypotheses. The study used multiple logistic regression analyses to assess the odds of female veterans’ transition behaviors from military service. The independent variables for these analyses included sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, ethnicity, military branch, years served, marital status, and having children), as well as sense of purpose among participants (i.e., strong sense of purpose while serving and strong sense of purpose since leaving service). An alpha level of  $p < 0.05$  was used for all data analyses to determine the statistical significance.

First, the study used a multiple logistic regression model to examine whether sociodemographic variables and the participants’ sense of purpose were predictors of female veterans’ transition preparations from military service. For this model, a dummy variable was created with the value of 1 if participants began preparing for their transition out of military service for more than 1 year, and a value of 0 if they began preparing for their transition out of military service during the last year or less. Second, the study used a multiple logistic regression model to examine if sociodemographic variables and the participants’ sense of purpose were predictors of female veterans’ perceived benefit of transition services from military service.

For this model, a dummy variable was created with the value of 1 if participants believed that these transition services helped them in their transition from military service, and a value of 0 if they believed that these transition services did not help them in their transition from military service. Finally, a multiple logistic regression model examined whether sociodemographic variables and participants’ sense of purpose were predictors of female veterans’ perceived benefit from coaching or mentoring assistants that help them transition from military service. For this model, a dummy variable was created with the

value of 1 if participants used coaching or mentoring assistants to help them transition from military service, and a value of 0 if they did not use coaching or mentoring assistants.

The qualitative analysis examined responses to open-ended questions about the use of transition services and self-reported satisfaction with their transition. Additionally, sense of purpose was used as a sensitizing concept in the qualitative data analysis process. All the responses to open-ended questions in the survey were searched for the word “purpose,” and 41 statements were found. Since the number of references to sense of purpose was relatively small, content analysis using an inductive approach was conducted manually (Patton, 2002). The responses were coded and categorized, and common patterns and themes were identified. The coding and patterns were verified by a researcher who was minimally familiar with the study but not involved in creating the original survey.

### Sample Characteristics

The final sample used for analysis consisted of 822 female veterans (M age = 43.79, SD = 10.52), of whom 75.18% (*n* = 615) were white, while 9.90% were Black or African American, 7.70% were Hispanic, and 7.21% reported some other race. Also, more than half of the veterans in our sample were married, and 50.82% (*n* = 374) had children. Of the participants, 36.50% were Air Force, 35.04% were Army and remaining 28.46% were Navy, Marines, or Coast Guard. The average number of years participants served in the military was about 13 years (M years served = 13.29, SD = 8.48). The sample characteristics is presented in

**Table 1.**

### Quantitative Predictors of Participants’ Transition Preparation from Military Service

A multiple logistic regression model was used to examine whether demographic variables (i.e., age, ethnicity, military branch, years served, marital status, having children, strong sense of purpose while serving, and strong sense of purpose since leaving service) were associated with female veterans’ transition preparations from military service. According to the Nagelkerke *R*<sup>2</sup> statistic, the model explained 17.3% of the variance in female veterans’ transition preparation from military service. Participants’ age, time served, and marital status emerged as the only statistically significant coefficients in this model. Participants’ age was negatively associated with a survey respondent’s report of preparing to transition from military service for more than one year. Additionally, participants’ time served and being married were positively associated with a report of preparing to transition from military service for more than one year. A complete breakdown of the regression results for

	n	(%)
Ethnicity		
Black or African American	81	(9.90)
Hispanic	63	(7.70)
White (not Hispanic)	615	(75.18)
Other	59	(7.21)
Military Branch		
Air Force	300	(36.50)
Army	288	(35.04)
Coast Guard	11	(1.34)
Marines	71	(8.64)
Navy	152	(18.49)
Marital Status		
Not Married	339	(45.87)
Married	400	(54.13)
Have Children		
No	362	49.18
Yes	374	50.82
	Mean	SD
Age	43.79	10.52
Years Served in the Military	13.29	8.48

**Table 1** Sociodemographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N = 822).

sociodemographic predictors of participants’ transition preparations is presented in **Table 2.**

### Quantitative Predictors of Coach/Mentor Assistants in Participants’ Transition

A multiple logistic regression model was used to examine whether demographic variables (i.e., age, ethnicity, military branch, years served, marital status, having children, strong sense of purpose while serving, and strong sense of purpose since leaving service) were associated with female veterans’ perceived benefit from coach/mentor assistants during their transition from military service. According to the Nagelkerke *R*<sup>2</sup> statistic, the model explained 9.5% of the variance of female veterans’ use of a coach/mentor assistant during military service. Participants’ age, time served, and sense of purpose since leaving the service emerged as statistically significant coefficients in this model. Participants’ age was negatively associated with coaching or mentoring assistants to help them transition from military service. Additionally, participants’ time served, and strong sense of purpose since leaving service

were positively associated with a survey respondent’s use of coaching or mentoring assistants to help them

VARIABLE	≤1 YEAR OF PREPARATION VS. >1 YEAR OF PREPARATION 95% CI		
	aOR	LOWER	UPPER
Age	0.95*	0.92	0.97
Years Served	1.14*	1.10	1.1.18
Ethnicity			
Black or African American	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Hispanic	0.54	0.20	1.40
White (not Hispanic)	0.76	0.39	1.48
Other	0.90	0.34	2.36
Military Branch			
Air Force	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Army	0.86	0.53	1.39
Coast Guard	0.14	0.01	1.41
Marines	1.21	0.55	2.66
Navy	1.42	0.84	2.39
Marital Status			
Not Married	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Married	2.26*	1.48	3.45
Have Children			
No	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Yes	1.07	0.71	1.63
SSP While Serving			
Strongly Disagree	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Somewhat Disagree	0.99	0.21	4.73
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2.41	0.54	10.70
Somewhat Agree	1.06	0.27	4.17
Strongly Agree	0.98	0.25	3.79
SSP Since Leaving Service			
Strongly Disagree	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Somewhat Disagree	0.66	0.34	1.28
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0.76	0.34	1.66
Somewhat Agree	1.47	0.78	2.77
Strongly Agree	1.72	0.90	3.30

**Table 2** Factors Associated with Participants’ Transition Preparations from Military Service.  
Note. \*p < .05.; aOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval; SSP= strong sense of purpose.

transition from military service. A complete breakdown of the regression results is presented in **Table 3**.

VARIABLE	NO ASSISTANT VS. ASSISTANT 95% CI		
	aOR	LOWER	UPPER
Age	0.91*	0.87	0.95
Years Served	1.12*	1.10	1.17
Ethnicity			
Black or African American	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Hispanic	0.67	0.18	2.43
White (not Hispanic)	0.89	0.36	2.21
Other	1.30	0.41	4.15
Military Branch			
Air Force	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Army	0.77	0.41	1.46
Coast Guard	0.97	0.09	9.93
Marines	1.05	0.39	2.84
Navy	1.77	0.92	3.40
Marital Status			
Not Married	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Married	1.27	0.74	2.19
Have Children			
No	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Yes	0.73	0.42	1.26
SSP While Serving			
Strongly Disagree	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Somewhat Disagree	0.98	0.09	11.10
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0.41	0.02	7.25
Somewhat Agree	3.29	0.40	27.10
Strongly Agree	2.94	0.36	24.02
SSP Since Leaving Service			
Strongly Disagree	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Somewhat Disagree	1.69	0.57	5.02
Neither Agree nor Disagree	4.21*	1.39	12.74
Somewhat Agree	3.79*	1.36	10.59
Strongly Agree	3.43*	1.20	9.82

**Table 3** Factors Associated with the Use of a Coach/Mentor Assistant During Military Transition.  
Note. \*p < .05.; aOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval; SSP= strong sense of purpose.

## RESULTS

### QUALITATIVE RESULTS FOR SENSE OF PURPOSE

A significant number of respondents indicated a loss of purpose after leaving the military, and quantitative analysis indicated that a strong sense of purpose made women veterans more likely to self-report using transition services and having an overall successful transition. Results showed that 84.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “While serving in the military, I felt a strong sense of purpose.” Only 8.6% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. However, in comparison, 48.59% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “Since leaving the military, I feel a strong sense of purpose.”

The loss of a sense of purpose was also supported by the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions on the survey. Forty-one responses specifically mentioned sense of purpose either while in or since leaving military service. The losses most frequently experienced after leaving the military that contributed to a diminished sense of purpose included a loss of identity, loss of meaningful work, and loss of close relationships with colleagues. Many respondents reported that their sense of purpose was tied to their identity. One respondent indicated that she felt, “Like I don’t have a purpose,” while another was, “Unsure of what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.” A third missed the loss of structure and found it, “Hard to (re)integrate with family after being gone for so long,” and a fourth, whose husband deployed a month later, “Felt alone.”

Other respondents associated their sense of purpose with meaningful work. One respondent shared the toll this process took on her, stating, “Not being able to get a job was depressing and [I] felt useless. Lost a sense of purpose. It took about two years to feel normal again.” Another struggled to navigate as she, “Had no purpose or direction, was enrolled in a degree program I didn’t like and didn’t want to move around to find work. It took time to figure it all out on my own during [a] depressed economy.” A third indicated, “It’s been horrible. Still, five years later, I’m making \$15 hour at a crap job I deplore. I’ve had a really hard time, went through a deep depression, and almost took my life. I felt I had no purpose.” A fourth noted that, “[I] had a hard time finding purpose and a job that allowed me to be a leader. I had a hard time adjusting to civilian life.” Finally, a fifth shared, “It’s difficult to find a purpose in [the] corporate sector. Lacking in teamwork and support.”

Several respondents indicated feeling alone, isolated, and disconnected after leaving military service. One noted that teamwork and comradery experienced in the military contributed to their sense of purpose, indicating, “I felt very isolated and without purpose. Going from being recognized by coworkers to parenting full time was a hard transition.”

Another indicated that, “Civilian life did not offer the same level of connectedness, support, and purpose,” stating, “I loved my mission and the feeling of purpose during deployment. Additionally, the amazing network of lifelong friends I wouldn’t change at all.” A third said, “You no longer have a tribe. The military machine doesn’t slow down as you get off. There is no structure, few people who understand your culture, and you are without a real purpose for the first time.”

Several survey respondents identified specific problems which contributed to their lost sense of purpose. One struggled with employment stating, “[I] held multiple jobs. Felt like employers treated me with kid gloves like I was damaged from my service. [I] didn’t feel [like] I fit in with civilians; had no sense of purpose. Felt like no one understood me.” Another struggled with health-related issues and indicated, “Because of my illness, I went from having a purpose to having nothing when I was medically retired. My illness is completely disabling, and the VA is painfully slow for healthcare.” A third spoke to how her concerns stemmed from the unplanned nature by which she left the military stating, “I was medically separated due to injuries sustained in a helicopter crash. My separation was unplanned, and I was dealing with physical issues, PTSD, and lost all sense of purpose.”

Other respondents made further connections between losing their sense of purpose and nuances associated with leaving the military. One indicated that, “Army service, even in [a] technical MOSs (Military Occupational Specialties), doesn’t always translate well to civilian employment. I also felt as if the lack of motivation and sense of duty/purpose was missing in non-veteran peers.” Another stated, “[I] felt like I needed a transition mentor.” A third struggled in:

Redefining my sense of purpose, adjustment of not being responsible for others, lack of respect as a female veteran, I felt like I needed a transition mentor from someone who had already transitioned. From loss of sense of purpose, loss of identity, not understanding the civilian world, and corporate nuances.

A few of the survey respondents did find a sense of purpose after leaving military service in various ways. One indicated that, “Today, I share the stories of military women. I have found purpose and meaning again. I didn’t realize how disconnected I was to other veterans, and now I have found a piece of the military and me again.” Another said that she had, “Dove into volunteer work as I wanted to maintain a sense of purpose.” A third shared that she wished for, “A feeling of purpose, so I enrolled in seminary and became

a minister.” A fourth stated the following: “I enjoyed the sense of purpose I had working in [fire and] rescue.”

Two respondents went so far as to describe the sense of purpose and belonging while in military service as, “Addicting.” One summarized her experience as, “I deployed two times while [on] active duty; the sense of purpose and belonging was addictive. I knew I would choose deployments.” A second noted feeling, “Immense guilt for leaving my soldiers. Nearly impossible to find the sense of value and purpose I had when deployed. That sense of value and purpose was addictive.”

In summary, women veterans may experience a diminished sense of purpose after transitioning out of the military. Their experience of loss of identity, meaningful work, and meaningful relationships with colleagues may result in feeling alone, isolated, and disconnected in their transition to civilian life. However, women veterans may find a renewed sense of purpose through sharing their experiences, volunteering, moving into a new or different career.

**QUANTITATIVE PREDICTORS OF TRANSITION SERVICES THAT HELP PARTICIPANTS’ TRANSITION**

A multiple logistic regression model was used to examine whether demographic variables (i.e., age, ethnicity, military branch, years served, marital status, having children, strong sense of purpose while serving, and strong sense of purpose since leaving service) were associated with women veterans’ perceived benefit of transition services. According to the Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> statistic, the model explained 11.9% of the variance in female veterans’ use of transition services. Participants’ age, time served, marital status, ethnicity, military branch, and sense of purpose since leaving the service emerged as statistically significant coefficients in this model. Participants’ age and ethnicity were negatively associated with the belief that transition services helped in their transition from military service. Additionally, participants’ time served, being married, and having a strong sense of purpose since leaving service were positively associated with the belief that transition services helped in their transition from military service. A complete breakdown of the regression results is presented in **Table 4**.

**QUALITATIVE RESULTS FOR TRANSITION SERVICES**

Female veterans were queried about their experiences transitioning from active duty to civilian life. A significant percentage of respondents (68.22%) reported participation in a Department of Defense mandated transition programs

VARIABLE	NOT HELPED VS. HELPED 95% CI		
	aOR	LOWER	UPPER
Age	0.97*	0.94	0.99
Years Served	1.09*	1.06	1.13
Ethnicity			
Black or African American	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Hispanic	0.50	0.19	1.30
White (not Hispanic)	0.67	0.33	1.35
Other	0.35*	0.13	0.95
Military Branch			
Air Force	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Army	0.54*	0.33	0.86
Coast Guard	0.29	0.06	1.37
Marines	0.74	0.36	1.50
Navy	1.04	0.61	1.78
Marital Status			
Not Married	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Married	1.70*	1.13	2.56
Have Children			
No	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Yes	0.74	0.48	1.13
SSP While Serving			
Strongly Disagree	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Somewhat Disagree	1.16	0.28	4.87
Neither Agree nor Disagree	1.18	0.28	5.03
Somewhat Agree	1.42	0.40	5.00
Strongly Agree	1.33	0.39	4.59
SSP Since Leaving Service			
Strongly Disagree	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Somewhat Disagree	1.45	0.79	2.66
Neither Agree nor Disagree	4.02*		
Somewhat Agree	2.58*	1.37	4.86
Strongly Agree	2.03*	1.06	3.90

**Table 4** Factors Associated with Participants’ Beliefs about Veteran Transition Services.

Note. \*p < .05.; aOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval; SSP = strong sense of purpose.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) or Executive Transition Program (ETAP). Nearly 16% of the veterans reported being unaware of any available transition services.

Of those who took advantage of transition services, only 12% believed they were helpful.

As one respondent put it, “[I participated in] TAP but [it was] very poorly run.” Some respondents’ comments reflected the state and availability of transition-related services when transitioning out of the military. One indicated, “I don’t think there were any [transition services] when I got out,” while another stated, “I was unaware of anything except TAP.” Yet another indicated that, “[I] was aware of TAP but [it] was not mandatory to attend in 1994/1995; other transition services were not known about if there were any.” A fourth indicated that, “In addition to not knowing of the services that were available to transitioning service members, I did not even know I was eligible for VA benefits at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Other respondents’ comments spoke to circumstances surrounding their transition out of the service pertaining to the use of transition services. One indicated, “[I] was told there was no funding as an Air Reserve Technician (ART) available for retirement briefing. Retirement was a painful and uninformed feeling!” A second explained that she:

ETS’d (Expiration Term of Service) from active duty less than four months after returning from Saudi Arabia [in] 1991. A lot of people were getting out at the same time after the stop-loss policy was lifted, and the post didn’t seem prepared for the backlog. I’m not even sure transition services existed in 1991.

A third found it:

Hard to find support and time to do transition prep on an Air Force Base (AFB) since they didn’t really have the local Army structure in place to support me. I was still expected to work my job, so traveling to the nearest Army base to get transition support was very hard. And the Army attitude of once they knew you were getting out, you were “dead” to them.

A small number of respondents (6%) mentioned taking advantage of local, private, and non-profit transition services. The most mentioned were Hire Heroes USA, Mission: Getting to Next, Wounded Warrior Project, and the USO Pathfinder Transition Program. Overall, 69.36% of the female veterans described their transition from military to civilian life as difficult, while only 6.18% reported it to be easy, and 10.85% reported it to be mostly easy. The

remaining 13.6% referred to their transition as neither easy nor difficult.

## DISCUSSION

Transition is a known time of risk and upheaval for military veterans (Thomas et al., 2015). With most military and transition-related literature to date having focused on male veterans’ experiences, limited comparisons between male and female veterans’ experiences can be made. Looking at what makes a transition successful for some and problem-plagued for others is an important line of inquiry that is useful to the military and the many service organizations that strive to serve women veterans transitioning from military service. However, the review of literature did not yield any studies on the awareness of transition services among female service members. As such, this study fills an important gap in the literature.

This study explored questions related to transition services from multiple angles. The quantitative analysis examined whether key variables predicted the following behaviors that contribute to successful, healthy transitions for female military veterans: taking time to prepare for end-of-service transition; having positive, helpful experiences with transition services; and using a coach or mentor to assist with the transition. The predictor variables included age, ethnicity, military branch, years served, marital status, having children, strong sense of purpose while serving, and strong sense of purpose since leaving service. The qualitative analysis coded responses to an open-ended question about the use of transition services and satisfaction with them. Additionally, the qualitative analysis looked at the variable, sense of purpose, which repeatedly came up in the survey data analysis.

Interestingly, increasing age was associated with lower likelihood to prepare for transition for a year or more or use services to help through the process. This important finding reveals that there might be a need for tailored outreach for older female veterans. In addition to reinforcing support (e.g., resources, guidance, information) that may have already been introduced (Ziencik, 2020), additional outreach might include bolstering TAP’s Individual Transition Plans so that they are better tailored for female veterans’ transition process and post-transition goals. The findings of the present study present important feedback for organizations hoping to reach female veterans, who are the fastest-growing veteran population (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2012). It is important to note that many female veterans did not feel like recent efforts to assist with their transition were effective.

As noted earlier, approximately 16% of study respondents did not know there were programs available to help them. Understanding the service challenges many of these female veterans likely faced while on active duty can and should inform programming for both TAP and the Department of Veteran Affairs' Women Health Transition Training. Culturally competent programming could include trauma-informed offerings in a single-sex environment that offer a bridge into larger group participation. Gender norms in military family life must also be considered in programming offered by military and veteran services groups, since women are more likely to be the primary caregivers to dependent children (Mankowski & Everett, 2016), and unavailability of childcare could be a barrier to participation (Thomas et al., 2016)

A variable associated with the use of transition services to include coaching was having a strong sense of purpose after leaving the service. Women who self-reported this positive emotion were more likely to take advantage of the myriad of services available to veterans leaving the military. Whether using such services resulted in job success that created feelings of purpose, or the positive mental state prompting a willingness to reach out is unknown. However, the variable is an important one to explore in future research. Respondents offered insights into what offered them a sense of purpose as women veterans, citing volunteer work, sharing service stories, and new professional work that inspired them. Additional research, including systematic long-term evaluation as well as large-scale research (Heflin et al., 2017), is needed to understand motivational factors associated with a woman veteran's sense of purpose.

This research might build upon existing literature that emphasizes the importance of building resilience by holistically addressing challenges veterans may face during post-military life (Whitworth et al., 2020) to include studies identifying values and beliefs that are carried into civilian life post-military service, how they were influenced by military culture, and operationalized in the type of volunteer work they do. In this way, service organizations might align their missions to ensure that women veterans are both supported post-service and civically engaged within their communities. This study is an important first step in understanding service member awareness of transition services. Several important areas of research need to be explored to include questions of resilient reintegration and social adjustment, partner relationships during reintegration, parenting and relationships with children during and after service, as well as an exploration of dual-career lifestyles (Blaisure et al., 2016). Naturally, the next step in this line of research would be to compare male and female transitioning experiences to observe the

disparities in awareness of and utilization of transition services prior to separation.

## LIMITATIONS

When considering the findings of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged, including its overall exploratory nature. Data were self-reported, which could be problematic due to respondent recall or reluctance to answer sensitive, personal questions honestly. However, the use of self-report in survey-based research in the field is both accepted and common (Alvarez et al., 2012). Because of the nonrandom sample, results are limited in generalizability (Seale et al., 2004); further assessments should seek larger sample sizes. Another limitation was the cross-sectional nature of this study's design, providing information from one snapshot in time from survey respondents. As such, we were unable to make causal claims about the relationships between the study variables.

## CONCLUSION

Women in the military and their post-military transition needs are emerging areas of research, while the past focus has been limited to a few main areas, such as access to medical care and military sexual trauma prevalence. Women are the future of the military. Consequently, we must work to ensure we understand their needs as they separate, transition to civilian life, and fully embrace their civilian roles.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

### Kari Fletcher

University of St. Thomas, US

### Justin McDaniel [orcid.org/0000-0001-8008-1645](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8008-1645)

Southern Illinois University, US

### Kate Thomas

George Mason University, US

### Marjorie Scaffa

University of South Alabama, US

### David Albright

University of Alabama, US

### Mohammed Alsheri

Southern Illinois University, US

### Jennifer Anthony

Wounded Warrior Project, US

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