

HARC: Valley vets have higher rates of major illnesses



Victoria Pelham, The Desert Sun 8:17 a.m. PDT March 9, 2015



(Photo: Crystal Chatham, The Desert Sun)

Coachella Valley veterans, mingling at the American Legion meeting site on a weekday afternoon, proudly tout their branch of military service in caps and off-the-cuff comments and say they would serve their country all over again if they could. They have fought and kept watch all over the world, in submarines, on fighter planes, in ground combat and wars, amid protests and peace time.

But with complaints of decades of tinnitus-induced hearing problems, caused by explosions going off near them, there are also unique challenges and issues they face that civilian friends and relatives do not deal with.

A new report (http://www.harcddata.org/UserFiles/File/HARC_VeteranReport.pdf) from the Health Assessment Resource Center focuses specifically on and quantifies the health and wellness of valley veterans — the approximately 50,352 of them or around 14.1 percent of the adult population, in an effort to inform care providers. Most of them served in the 1950s and 1960s.

"They risked their lives to protect us; the least we can do is protect their health," said Jenna LeComte-Hinely, a researcher with HARC who helped to compile the report.

The study found that Coachella Valley veterans had a "significantly higher disease burden" than local non-veterans — greater rates of cancer (25.7 percent versus 11.9 percent), diabetes (18.4 percent versus 8.9 percent), as well as cardiovascular issues including heart disease, heart attack and stroke.

Drafted into the U.S. Army and serving stateside as a track mechanic in the early 1970s, Lee Gussler, 68, said he used air compressors and pneumatic tools with no ear protection or gloves and solvents to clean.

"They didn't know the dangers long-term back then," he said.

Gussler was diagnosed with colon cancer around four years ago. In 2012, it was prostate cancer and, while he was in treatment, diabetes.

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People often turn a "blind eye," he said.

The report attributes this trend in part to the pronounced aging of veterans in the Coachella Valley retirement communities — about three-quarters are over age 55, making many veterans' issues also senior issues. But it also points to "side effects of service" such as exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, chemicals known to increase risk of a range of cancers, heart disease and diabetes, and also the "Gulf War Syndrome" of medically unexplained illnesses linked to cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, fatigue and respiratory issues, among others.

LeComte-Hinely stressed the importance of valley care providers looking out and screening for these increased rates of "very serious health consequences" in veterans.

These same veterans also were more likely to lean on assistive technology such as canes, wheelchairs and hearing aids — the result of age, the loud, shocking sounds of war and lingering injuries such as one veteran who had shrapnel hit his leg in the 1950s and now relies on a cane because of nerve damage. About 9,000 valley residents who served lean on these tools to get by.

A decorated veteran, Les Carlyle, 89, now of Indio, fought in the World War Two battlefields of the Marshall Islands, Saipan and eventually the massive, deadly battle of Iwo Jima as a young adult in the 24th Marine Regiment.

"Most of the time we were scared stiff," he said.

Surviving amid so much turmoil, the main long-lasting effect has been tinnitus in his ears, which he uses hearing aids for but still needs people to repeat their sentences and relied on his wife to help with answering interview questions. She says it has never been the same since one particular explosion he witnessed.

"They should take care of them," his wife said. "World War Two vets, they just kind of put them under the rug and forget about them but the new guys get

everything," his wife said.

Interwoven into the community's bedrock, the military and veteran history here is rich — from legends of the desert's use as a World War II training ground to veteran clubs, the Twentynine Palms Marine base and the Palm Springs Air Museum which carries airplanes from various wars in U.S history. In spite of their challenges, these shared experiences tie them to each other and helps to strengthen their health unlike in other communities, they say.

"It's very gratifying; it made me appreciate even more my own service but also others service," said Tim Hayes, 71, of Palm Desert, who is a retired Navy captain, spent 26 years in active duty and did a tour in Vietnam.

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The Department of Veterans Affairs Palm Desert Health Clinic is located along Cook St., as seen on Tuesday, March 3, 2015. (Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun)

Hayes has had little to no complaints or difficulties with health care, he said, and has had all his needs met.

Most veterans in the valley have kept up on preventative care such as cholesterol checks, dental cleanings, vision, men and women's health screenings and others and 82.2 percent (more than 40,000 people) have visited a doctor in the last six months. Many went to the VA clinic in Palm Desert or the Loma Linda site, which some said was a far drive. Valley veterans were more likely to have health insurance — 95.7 percent, compared with 75.3 percent — than those who had not served, through benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, disability benefits as well as Medicare and veterans' private health insurance carriers. Though the largest barrier to care was understanding what was covered by their plan.

"Programs or organizations that could raise awareness of available benefits, or help veterans to determine if they are eligible for benefits, would be very much welcome," the report said.

And about 17.5 percent of Coachella Valley veterans surveyed said their health was "excellent," relatively similar to other local adults. On the flip side, about 13.8 percent of them rated it fair or poor.

Still, experts raised questions of possible under-reporting.

"It is worth considering whether the frame of reference of what constitutes 'fair' or 'poor' health for these veterans may be different than the frame of reference for non-veterans," who have likely seen combat, the study said. For example, two veterans interviewed in the research focus group said they were "doing all right" and "in pretty good shape" despite having between them possible cirrhosis, PTSD, tinnitus, bad knees, high blood pressure, past bladder cancer history and a recent bout of rectal cancer.

Among soldiers who deploy, "mental health disparities" can be common — causing post-traumatic stress disorder in around 7 to 8 percent of the general population and 30 percent of Vietnam veterans. About 5.9 percent of valley veterans — 2,980 people — reported diagnosed PTSD, not a significant difference from the 3.9 percent of non-veterans. But the study says that is likely due to a lack of diagnosis and people not reporting it, since many focus group participants and key experts talked about PTSD symptoms such as "flashbacks," depression and nightmares.

Jeff Wall, 65, of Cathedral City went to fight in Vietnam in infantry with the Marines at 19 and saw heavy combat. He took shrapnel to the head after an explosion and believes it caused a traumatic brain injury. Though he says he has not had PTSD, he speaks freely of the different effects war can have on people, the loss you witness and the problems he has had both emotionally and physically since.

"It impeded my development in every way of life," he said.

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