

**National Veterans' Technical Assistance Center (NVTAC)  
Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) Community of Practice (CoP)  
LGBTQIA+ Veterans and Connections to Veteran Services  
Thursday, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 3 p.m. – 4 p.m. ET**

### **Guest Presenter**

Andrea Norton, LMSW, Community Engagement and Partnership Coordinator, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

### **NVTAC Staff**

Chris Taylor, NVTAC Coach

Sarah Chung, NVTAC Coach

Temitope Fagbemi, NVTAC Coach

Miranda Moffat, Outreach Coach

Justin Venneri, Senior Analyst

Jenn Steigerwald, Project Manager

### **Key Points**

- **Introduction**
  - NVTAC Coach Chris Taylor introduced Andrea Norton, Community Engagement and Partnership Coordinator at the Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center. Her objective was to explore with attendees what a veteran looks like, the intersection of veteran and LGBTQIA+ identities, and diversity in the veteran population.
- **Who are LGBTQIA+ Veterans?**
  - Guest speaker Andrea Norton used herself as an example of the multitude of facets a veteran can have as part of their identity, including United States Air Force veteran, bisexual, queer, cisgender, alumnus, neurodivergent, etc.
  - Andrea shared that she served under Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT), a former official U.S. policy (1993–2011) that restricted service members from talking about their sexual orientation. As a result, she felt she had to compartmentalize her LGBTQIA+ identity during her military service. After leaving the service, she still struggled with compartmentalization, this time with her identity as a veteran.
  - Not self-identifying as a veteran led Andrea, as it does many others, to avoid seeking services (i.e., health care, financial assistance, housing supports, etc.) she was eligible for and earned through her service. To mitigate this problem, Andrea emphasized the importance of proper screening tools to capture former service members that may not identify themselves as a veteran.
  - Veterans are a diverse group, as are LGBTQIA+ individuals. Both are best served when we recognize this variety.
- **A Timeline of one LGBTQIA+ Veteran's Life**
  - Military service provided a specific identity for Andrea. As with many veterans, this resulted in a sense of a loss of identity after transitioning to civilian life.

- Andrea shared that a college professor encouraged her to go to the VA for the care she needed. After being connected to a wealth of veteran services and opportunities, she now works for the VA. As a Community Engagement and Partnership Coordinator, Andrea helps community partners understand the diverse needs, challenges, and identities within the veteran population.
- LGBTQIA+ individuals face higher barriers to housing, employment, and other necessities. One's veteran identity can add compounding challenges to these needs. To address these barriers, service providers should perform outreach to both veteran and civilian LGBTQIA+ organizations.
- **What Does a Veteran Look Like?**
  - The guest speaker stated that many people's stereotype of a veteran is a white, middle-aged Vietnam veteran because this is what is most often depicted in popular media, which can lead former service members who do not fit this mold to avoid self-identifying as a veteran. For many, their service becomes something they did, not who they are.
- **The Voices of LGBTQIA+ Veterans**
  - It is important to remember that every statistic is comprised of individuals with rich stories. Denny Meyer, an LGBTQIA+ veteran who served in the Navy during the Vietnam War, stated, "In those days, we served in silence. And not one day passed when you didn't worry that you were going to be found out."
- **Voices of Veterans Discharged under DADT**
  - For organizations serving veterans, it is important to note that less than honorable discharges may be a result of discriminatory policies regarding sexual orientation and gender identity like DADT, or trauma experienced during service. This can create additional barriers to services. These individuals should be notified that they can apply for a discharge upgrade.
  - Service providers should strive to use effective screening tools to reach veterans who are not connected to services they have earned due to their identity or hesitance to engage in veteran-specific services.
- **Creating a Welcoming Environment**
  - To create an environment that is welcoming to LGBTQIA+ veterans, Andrea suggested organizations:
    - Use visible signs of inclusion (i.e., pins, lanyards, posters with LGBTQIA+ symbols or support);
    - Participate in ongoing education to remain up to date on special populations and improve case workers' effectiveness;
    - Review policies and procedures and post non-discrimination statements;
    - Build relationships/partnerships with diverse communities;
    - Use inclusive language; and
    - Gestures of inclusion (i.e., using pronouns in signature block).

- **Resources**
  - Federal
    - [Veterans Health Administration \(VHA\) LGBTQ+ Health Program - Patient Care Services \(va.gov\)](#)
      - LGBTQ+ Care Coordinators: available at every VA hospital and tasked with removing barriers, reviewing policies for inclusion, and assisting veterans with navigating care and resources.
    - VA Community Engagement and Partnership Coordinators: available at every VA hospital and tasked with connecting individuals to life-sustaining resources.
  - State
    - [Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency](#) Special Advocacy tab
  - Local
    - [CenterLink LGBTQ Community Member Centers in Michigan](#)
      - LGBTQ Community Member Centers are available in most states.
  - Additional
    - [MiGen – Michigan LGBTQ+ Elders Network](#)
    - [PFLAG](#)
      - Trusted source of information and resources with local chapters in every state.
    - [LGBTQIA+ In Service & Beyond — Psycharmor](#)
      - LGBTQIA+ In Service and Beyond is an initiative that aims to foster an environment of understanding, respect, and support for LGBTQIA+ veteran communities. It offers articles, podcasts, and more from members of the community.

## Discussion/Questions and Answers (Q&A)

- **Guest Presenter Question:** Is “veteran” a title or an identity?
  - **Attendee Responses:**
    - Multiple attendees responded “both” or “could be either.”
- **Guest Presenter Question:** What does a veteran look like?
  - **Attendee Response:**
    - Like a person, they come from all walks.
- **NVTAC Question:** How are you implementing inclusive policies in your programs? Or is this your first time?
  - Attendees responded that they have implemented inclusivity in their programs by hiring team members who identify as LGBTQIA+, hosting events targeted at this population, doing outreach to local LGBTQIA+ organizations, and participating in ongoing training in subjects like trauma-informed care to create a safe and supportive environment. One grant recipient mentioned the Rainbow Chamber of Commerce as a great place to build relationships with this community.

- NVTAC TA Coach Sarah Chung stated she has heard from other HVRP grant recipients that they had success partnering with LGBTQIA+ agencies and asking them to present to their program on serving LGBTQIA+ veterans.
- NVTAC TA Coach Chris Taylor stated that in previous roles, he had success connecting to the community by attending LGBTQIA+ events. Often, this community is overlooked by veteran services for outreach. Guest speaker Andrea Norton seconded this strategy, saying that even if a veteran is not in attendance at an LGBTQIA+ event, someone who loves, serves, or knows a veteran could be there and inform them of services.

## **Conclusion**

For LGBTQIA+ veterans, especially those who served while policies like DADT were in effect, their sexual orientation, gender identity, military service, and other identities may be difficult to reconcile. This has led many service members, including guest speaker Andrea Norton, to not identify as a veteran or seek out veteran-specific housing, employment, or other quality-of-life services they have earned. Andrea recommends utilizing effective screening tools and performing outreach to LGBTQIA+ organizations (veteran and civilian) to connect with this population of veterans. Both veterans and LGBTQIA+ individuals face higher barriers, with LGBTQIA+ veterans facing the compounding barriers of both identities, making outreach to connect these individuals with services particularly important. Service providers can create a welcoming environment for LGBTQIA+ veterans by using visible signs of inclusion, engaging in training on special populations, and using inclusive language.

*You can review the presentation recording here: [NVTAC June 2024 CoP](#)*