

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Caregiver Discovery

Sprint 1 Report

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Summary

Background

The Mission Act of 2018 mandates the expansion of the Family Caregiver Support Program beyond Post-9/11 Veterans.

To prepare for this expansion, DSVA conducted a deep dive into the Caregiver Family Support submission/application process (VA Form 10-10CG) to understand the Veteran and Caregiver experience to identify areas where VA might make improvements to support the expanding demand.

While the initial focus was toward the 10-10CG form, the user research (aka “Discovery”) illuminated a number of issues beyond simple form improvement that would significantly improve the experience but also help VA to meet the impending expansion in demand (slides 6-7).

Also important to note, while user research and engagement are instructive for identifying initial steps for significantly improving the Veteran/Caregiver program and application experience, they must not end with the identification of initial requirements. Continuous iteration and validation with the intended audience is essential to deliver effective outcomes.

User Research Informs Throughout



Discovery

Focus on the problem space to deliver opportunities



Opportunity Assessment

Strategize to define backlog



Product Discovery

Iteration of design and user validation to define product backlog



Product Development

Plan, design, develop, and user validation to deliver solution

Problem Space

Strategizing

Solution Space

Understand the person, someone with a purpose

Understand the user, someone using your product or service

User Research to understand people, develop empathy, and identify patterns for opportunities

Evaluate patterns, establish Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) to inform hypotheses, ideation, prototypes, validation with *user research*, and *iteration* to define backlog

Iteration of ideation, hypotheses, prototypes, and validation with *user research* to define product backlog, with validated user stories and prototypes

Planning, design, and development sprints with *user research* validation to deliver user-validated solution with metrics to monitor and measure

Principal Takeaways

Online Form Application and Submission

The application form itself is straightforward, however, Caregivers, Veterans, and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) we spoke with believe an online application would be better because it would:

- Reduce effort to submit the application, which currently must be mailed or hand delivered to a VA facility, while providing an electronic footprint of submission and VA receipt, easing worries expressed that applications may be lost. Electronic submission also is easier for VSOs to help Vets submit application forms.
- Allow applicants to legibly complete the form at their own pace, save progress, and take breaks as needed, which they currently struggle to do with the online PDF.
- Address legibility, as any Veterans and Caregivers expressed they have poor handwriting, thereby reducing workload for VA personnel processing applications who must decipher and manually re-enter data.
- Minimize form completion errors through real-time validation and error processing.
- To help applicants understand requirements and set realistic expectations, design criteria and instructions understanding this audience is time and attention challenged.

Principal Takeaways

Caregiver Program Single Source of Truth

Veterans, Caregivers, and VSOs referred to two different Caregiver websites (<https://www.caregiver.va.gov/> and <https://www.va.gov/health-care/family-caregiver-benefits/comprehensive-assistance/>) and multiple online caregiver forums, which may lead to inconsistent information and confusion. There is a need for a “single source of truth” that:

- Provides an authoritative source for program information, including eligibility criteria, process, guidelines, rules, roles, responsibilities, appeals options, and lists alternative support resources, which altogether may encourage more to apply for help they actually need.
- Specifies an applicant’s application status or provides an avenue to contact a VA representative for information about their application’s status, which may reduce anxiety and confusion.

Principal Takeaways

Caregiver Login, Profile, and Portal, Associated with Veteran Profile

Veterans and Caregivers we spoke with were interested in the creation of a Caregiver login, profile, and portal, associated with the Veteran. Caregivers expressed distinct needs for support, resources, and benefits, which may be met through a personalized portal.

Security and Access

Establish and communicate what information Caregivers have access to, so a Veteran may protect information they prefer to keep private.

- If a Caregiver's personal relationship with a Veteran changes, the Veteran would need to be able to manage or remove access from Caregiver.
- Currently, *some* Caregivers may use the Veterans' login credentials, which may have legal risk vulnerabilities for the Veteran, Caregiver, and the VA, so establishing separate login would enhance security.

Discovery Research & Findings

Purpose

The purpose of this discovery is a deep dive into the Caregiver Support Program (CSP) 10-10CG submission and application process to **understand the Veteran, Caregiver, and VA requirements to apply for the program in order to design a user-centered and streamlined experience** for both the applicants to the Caregiver Support Program and the Caregiver Support Coordinators (CSCs) who disposition the applications.

The output of this deep dive will be a summary and analysis of the user research in order to provide an understanding of the current application experience and opportunities for improvement to help mitigate the increased demand expected as a result of the CSP eligibility expansion.

USER RESEARCH

Research Goals

User Research Goal

This study was meant to reveal **successes and pain points as Veterans and Caregivers search for information about and apply for Caregiver Benefits.**

- Understanding what is working or faulty in the application process is important as the program expands to include Pre-9/11 Veterans.
- Learning from Caregivers and Veterans with experience applying to the Caregiver program provides opportunity to improve the experience for future applicants.
- These findings drive our goal to recommend the best path forward in the effort to digitize the Caregiver Support Program application process, which includes future visioning around a broader Veteran and Caregiver experience.

Hypotheses To Be Tested

- Veterans and Caregivers will be interested in an online version of the form, but may have some uncertainty about how to get everyone necessary to sign the form.
- Veterans and Caregivers will want an easy way to see the status of their form, and an easy way to know the steps involved in receiving benefits.
- The paper form isn't that onerous, but the process afterwards (clinical assessments, training, and in-home assessments) are a lot to do and keep track of, and anything we can do to streamline those would help our participants.
- The paper form may be harder to complete if the Veteran doesn't live with their Caregiver.
- Some Veterans may be unable to complete their part of the application. When this situation occurs, the path forward may be unclear to potential Caregivers.

USER RESEARCH

Methodology

Methodology: Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative Interviews explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific matters. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, often provide a 'deeper' understanding of behaviors, including the “why,” than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods.

Key insights may be generated during qualitative interviews that may not have been discovered through usability testing later in the process.

While we used qualitative interviews in this discovery stage, user research is woven throughout a human-centered design process, aiming to co-create with users of the product or service. Later we will validate designs with additional usability testing, contextual inquiry, generative research, validating prototypes of various fidelity, to ensure we are building the right solution.

Who we spoke with

- 5 Caregivers
 - 1 currently receiving benefits
 - 1 that used to receive benefits
 - 3 not receiving benefits
- 4 Veterans — two with their Caregivers on the line, one in the program, one not
- 2 VSO conversations

Topics Covered

- How participants found information about the Caregiver Program
- What participants knew about the Caregiver benefits process
- How participants applied to the program, if they did
- Participants' thoughts about the existing 10-10CG form (pros and cons)
- Participants' expectations and experiences after they submit the form
- Experience with technology, devices, assistive technology
- The pros and cons of a potential online application form and broader online Caregiver experience

Research Questions

- How do current Caregivers learn about the Caregiver Support Program (CSP) and what was their motivation to apply?
- What have Caregivers and Veterans experienced when applying using the current paper application process?
- How do Caregivers and Veterans feel about the overall process (from applying for benefits to receiving them)?
- Are Veterans and Caregivers able to receive an application status?
- What is the average time an application takes to be processed?
- Where do Caregivers and Veterans expect to be able to apply for Caregiver benefits online?
- When the online application is launched, how do Caregivers and Veterans expect to learn about it?
- What's the easiest way for Caregivers and Veterans to digitally complete the Application for Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers Program?
- How do Caregivers and Veterans feel about needing multiple people to fill out and sign the application?
- How do Veterans feel about potentially sharing personal information with their Caregivers?
- After submitting an application, what do Caregivers and Veterans expect to happen? What questions do they have after they submit the application?
- Do Veterans and Caregivers understand the application process?
- Do Veterans and Caregivers prefer to complete the application online or via the paper process? Why?

USER RESEARCH

Findings

Key Findings

1. The application form itself is straightforward, yet, many think an online one would be easier in many ways.
2. For most Veteran/Caregiver dyads, Caregivers were the ones finding and applying for Caregiver benefits.
3. Participants heard about the Caregiver program through multiple sources, often with conflicting information, leaving some confusion, leading to missteps.
4. The Caregiver process isn't clear to Veterans, Caregivers, and Veteran Service Organizations (VSO).
5. Participants struggle to find information about their application and status in the Caregiver program.
6. When Caregivers need help, they reach out to online communities or other support resources.
7. Veterans expressed concerns about who has access to their information.
8. Both expected and experienced timeframes for a decision range widely from 2 weeks to 3 months.
9. Caregivers and Veterans feel frustrated about not receiving information when denied.
10. Applying for Caregiver benefits may be an additional source of stress, but the benefits truly help.

1. The application form itself is straightforward, yet, many think an online one would be easier in many ways.

Participants who had completed the form stated it was a straightforward process, while those who hadn't indicated it wouldn't be difficult. All preferred the online option due to legibility concerns, paired with electronic submission and receipt. The form instructions state it must be mailed or hand-delivered, which is different from most other forms, creating issues for VSOs and Vets.

“An online application process would be a good start.”

IMPLICATIONS

1. Providing an electronic footprint reassures of application submission and VA receipt. VSOs said electronic submittal is easier for them to help Vets apply.
2. An online form allows applicants to legibly complete at their own pace, save progress, and take breaks as needed, which some revealed difficulties with using the PDF online.
3. Many Veterans and Caregivers expressed that they have poor handwriting, so an online application may ease the workload of VA personnel processing the applications.

2. For most Veteran/Caregiver dyads, Caregivers were the ones finding and applying for Caregiver benefits.

Most Caregivers we spoke with research the CSP, handle paperwork, scheduling, speaking with providers, etc., with an exception for when the Caregiver was not a native English speaker.

“Usually when it comes to forms I am the elected representative of the relationship to get that done. He hates paperwork. The paperwork is necessary.”

IMPLICATIONS

1. When designing the CSP online application, make sure not to assume the Veteran is filling out the form because in many cases it may be the Caregiver. Additionally, take care to match language with this reality.
2. As Caregivers may not be native English speakers, use [plain language](#) to support usability.
3. Currently, *some* Caregivers may use the Veteran’s login credentials, which may have legal risk vulnerabilities for the Veteran, Caregiver, and the VA. This would be more accurate if Caregivers had their own profile login, views, and associate with the Veteran’s profile.

3. Participants learn about the Caregiver program through multiple sources, often with conflicting information, leaving some confusion, leading to missteps.

Many people we spoke with struggle to find information about the program on VA websites. Instead, they're learning about the program through multiple sources including word of mouth, online communities, and VSOs. This results in confusion around the program due to conflicting information.

"I think we heard it's hard to be considered a caregiver, and so it's hard to qualify because he's not paraplegic or wheelchair bound. I mean he's 'not disabled enough'..."

IMPLICATIONS

1. Clearly identify the single source of truth for Caregiver Support Program with resources to support the process. There is a single source of truth but people do not know about it.
2. Possibly coordinate with other organizations to discover the resources Caregivers need most.

4. The Caregiver process isn't clear to Veterans, Caregivers, and VSOs.

Many participants weren't aware of all the application steps. Some spoke of a home interview as part of the application process, others said it was after approval. While obviously a misperception, for stressed Veterans and Caregivers it becomes a reality, perpetuated through word of mouth and online forums. Many wanted an opportunity to speak with someone during the application process due to clarify issues with their medical paperwork.

“Oh no, we were denied benefits. I was told based on my medical situation I don't qualify. But my situation is very complicated, my medical records got messed up very early on and it has snowballed.”

IMPLICATIONS

1. Consider adding contextual help and information at each input and stage of the process.
2. Once an application is submitted, redirect the applicant to a page with information and/or resources about what they can expect to happen next in the application process.

5. Participants struggle to find information about their application and status in the Caregiver program.

Caregivers and Veterans may worry about their application's status. Currently, they may try to get status updates through a variety of touchpoints with little success. Applicants indicated that being able to access online status updates would help ease their stress.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Consider providing a way for applicants to either view their application's status or contact a VA representative for information about their application's status.
2. Possibly include both a visual representation and a timeframe for each stage in the application process to minimize applicants' anxiety.
3. An online application portal that includes status and contact functionality would ease the burden on local VA facilities, reduce Veterans' stress, and streamline the system.

6. When Caregivers need help, they reach out to online communities or other support resources.

Many Caregivers are active in online Caregiver communities to share information and support one another. Due to the closeness of this online support system, they often prefer turning to their social media groups to find answers before going through the VA's resources.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Increase awareness of existing Caregiver support services.
2. If Caregivers are reaching out to their social media groups for information, they may be receiving incorrect information.
3. There is interest in providing an online space for Caregivers to access information, particularly resources in their local area.

7. Veterans expressed concerns about who has access to their information.

Most Caregivers and Veterans are comfortable sharing personal information with the VA. However, *some* Veterans expressed concerns about being able to control who has access to their information.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Caregivers are comfortable providing personal information when applying online or creating a profile.
2. Some Veterans are unsure what information Caregivers have access to, which could have negative implications if a Veteran would like to keep certain information private.
3. If a Caregiver's personal relationship with a Veteran changes, the Veteran would need to be able to manage or remove access from Caregiver.

8. Both expected and experienced timeframes for a decision ranges widely from 2 weeks to 3 months.

Participants that applied for the program recalled receiving an application decision in as little as 30 days to more than 6 months. When asked how long it should take to receive a decision, responses ranged from 2 weeks to 3 months.

“The waiting period to hear back was ridiculous and took over 6 months.”

IMPLICATIONS

1. Consider providing clarity on when applicants may receive a decision on their application.
2. An online portal where applicants may check the status of their application would reduce anxiety, afford an opportunity to address any missing documentation, and provide applicants the ability to plan accordingly.

9. Caregivers and Veterans feel frustrated about not receiving information when denied.

Many of our participants ultimately were denied caregiver benefits. Often, they weren't completely sure why they were denied, or didn't agree with the reasoning. They also often would "give up" and not be sure where else to turn in terms of other options available to them.

"We decided not to fight it, I guess."

"It was lack of information and we didn't know how to proceed with the appeal or anything."

IMPLICATIONS

1. Consider providing thorough explanations for why folks were denied.
2. To help applicants understand requirements and set realistic expectations, design criteria and instructions understanding this audience is time and attention challenged.
3. Consider providing a personalized portal where Caregivers and Veterans may see available options for them, resources filtered by Zip Code, with caregiver benefits as a potential route.

10. Applying for Caregiver benefits may be an additional source of stress, but the benefits truly help.

Participants shared how hard things can be, and how much they need help. Some may not apply or not be truthful out of fear of being judged.

“It was just really awkward to have to admit to someone how much you struggle.

And that fear of them judging me and saying, oh, we're going to take your kids away or something, your husband's not fit to be with your kids.”

One Caregiver credits the program for getting the Veteran to go for a physical every year and see their mental health provider every 3 months.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Providing transparency about guidelines, rules, roles, and responsibilities may reassure and encourage more to apply for help they actually need.
2. Providing this information in a central location where it may be readily updated by the VA based on feedback will reduce stress for Veterans, Caregivers, and their family.

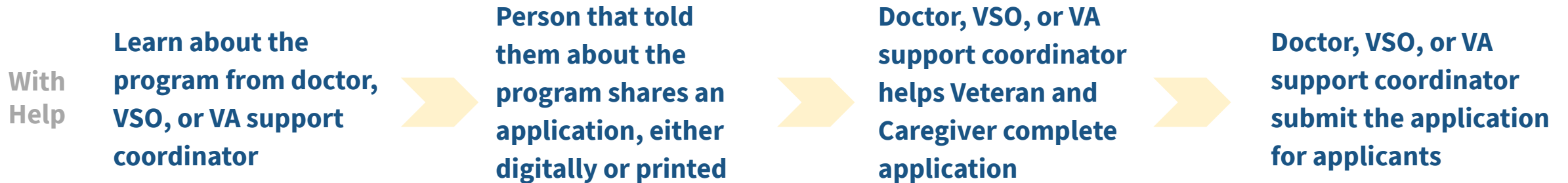
Additional Insights

1. Some participants thought the “Primary Caregiver” section was for their Primary Care doctor.
2. Veterans and Caregivers have expressed interest in being able to apply for the Caregiver program — or at least learn about the program — while the Servicemember is still on active duty while being discharged. They believe all the information included in the med board process is relevant to the CSP application.
3. One Caregiver was told to apply to the program while the Veteran they care for was still on active duty, to get the information into the system so it would be there later when they become eligible.

User Research

Caregiver Program Application – Experience Map

With Help vs On Their Own



“His doctor submitted everything for us, so it was a really easy process for us. Then we received a letter saying we'd been approved for the program. Then we had an in-home visit with a home care nurse, then some training with easter seals on the computer. It was really not stressful at all. I feel like it was smooth and easy for us. I learned the criteria through his primary care. They did all of that process for us, which was really nice. It was through the VA. They found him eligible, which was really helpful.”



“I actually found the local office and at one of his appts we went and dropped it off at the front desk. I asked and they said they had it, they were reviewing it, and they'd be in touch. They sent a letter saying we were denied.”

Summary Takeaways

Summary Takeaways 1 of 4

Online Form Application and Submission

- ❑ Providing an electronic footprint reassures of application submission and VA receipt. VSOs said electronic submittal is easier for them to help Vets apply.
- ❑ An online form allows applicants to legibly complete at their own pace, save progress, and take breaks as needed, which some expressed difficulties with using the PDF online.
- ❑ Many Veterans and Caregivers expressed they have poor handwriting, so an online application eases the workload of VA personnel processing the applications.
- ❑ When designing the Caregiver benefit online form, make sure not to assume the Veteran is filling out the form, that in many cases it may be the Caregiver, and take care to match language with this reality.
- ❑ As Caregivers may not be native English speakers, use [plain language](#) to support usability.
- ❑ Consider adding contextual help and info where a person will be filling out the form.
- ❑ Once an application is submitted, redirect applicant to an information and resources page outlining next steps.
- ❑ To help applicants understand requirements and set realistic expectations, design criteria and instructions understanding this audience is time and attention challenged.
- ❑ Providing transparency about guidelines, rules, roles, and responsibilities may reassure and encourage more to apply for help they actually need.

Summary Takeaways 2 of 4

Caregiver Benefit Program Single Source of Truth

- ❑ There is a need for a “single source of truth” to prevent confusion. Providing this information in a central location where it may be readily updated by the VA based on feedback may reduce stress for all.
- ❑ There should be an online space designated as a definitive information about eligibility criteria, the application system, appeals process, and other resources.
- ❑ Consider providing clarity on when applicants may receive a decision on their application, as well as thorough explanations for why folks were denied.
- ❑ If Caregivers are reaching out to their social media groups for information, they may be receiving incorrect information.
- ❑ Possibly coordinate with other organizations to discover the resources Caregivers most need.

Summary Takeaways 3 of 4

Caregiver Login, Profile, and Portal, Associated with Veteran Profile

- ❑ An online application portal that includes status and contact functionality affords an opportunity to address any missing documentation, eases the burden on local VA facilities, reduces stress on Veterans, and streamlines the system. To reduce anxiety for applicants, possibly include a visual representation of where they are in the process, paired with the range of time they may expect things to take during each stage, providing applicants the ability to plan accordingly
- ❑ Currently, *some* Caregivers may use the Veteran's login credentials, which may have legal risk vulnerabilities for the Veteran, Caregiver, and the VA. This would be addressed if Caregivers had their own profile login, and views, associated with the Veteran's profile.
- ❑ Increase awareness of existing Caregiver support services.
- ❑ There is interest in providing an online space for Caregivers to access information, particularly resources in their local area. A personalized portal where Caregivers and Veterans can see options available to them, resources filtered by Zip Code, with caregiver benefits as a potential route.
- ❑ Caregivers expressed being comfortable providing personal information when applying online or creating a profile.
- ❑ Many wanted an opportunity to speak with someone as part of the application process due to issues with their medical paperwork, and to provide clarity on their medical record or circumstances.

Summary Takeaways 4 of 4

Security and Access

- ❑ Some Veterans are unsure what information Caregivers have access to, which could have negative implications if a Veteran would prefer to keep certain information private.
- ❑ If a Caregiver's personal relationship with a Veteran changes, the Veteran would need to be able to manage or remove access for the Caregiver.
- ❑ Currently, *some* Caregivers may use the Veteran's login credentials, which may have legal risk vulnerabilities for the Veteran, Caregiver, and the VA. This would be addressed if Caregivers had their own profile login, and views, associated with the Veteran's profile. *[Also listed on #3]*

Next Steps

Next Steps

Prioritized Roadmap and Recommendations

The lessons learned from this research will be used to generate a subsequent set of recommendations and roadmap for providing an optimal intake experience to Caregiver applicants. **The roadmap will include: prioritized recommendations, design, and technical solution for digitizing the Caregiver assistance application** to include the multiple signature capability necessary to complete the implementation by a May 2020 deadline. Continuous iteration and validation with the intended audience during design and development is essential to deliver effective outcomes.

Co-creation with Veterans, Caregivers, VSOs, and support coordinators

User research continues to be woven throughout the design and development process to ensure the solutions are not only desirable, feasible, and viable, but validated every step of the way with the Veterans, Caregivers, VSOs, and Caregiver Support Coordinators.

Appendix

Additional VSO Findings

1. The three VSOs we spoke with said they aren't very familiar or up to date on current Caregiver Program criteria or process
2. Online application would improve submission process
 - a. Veterans need ability to save progress on forms
 - b. Veterans need instructions on how to handle and complete PDF forms
 - c. Caregiver form submission is different from all the other forms, creating issues for VSOs and Vets
 - d. Caregiver application has to be mailed, instead of electronic submission, different from other forms
3. VSO often sends people to VA hospital to help with Caregiver Program interest
4. VFW Vetrospect application populates Veteran information into multiple forms at once
5. Instructions on form are difficult to read
6. There may be some misinterpretation of disabilities in "Injured in Line of Duty"
7. Vets often make mistakes filling out forms, and need help
8. VSOs asked for clarification of the purpose of primary and secondary caregiver.