

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

VSA eBenefits Team | October 2019

Readout: Rainbows team 21-686c form research

686: Add dependents to Veteran disability benefits



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Background

Veterans have difficulty applying to Declare a Dependent using the 21-686c form. Currently, users can file an application through mail, with a VSO or on the eBenefits website. A significant percentage of applications are incomplete when submitted, leading to manual processing, increased processing costs, and delays for the Veteran.

As of April 2019, the form is “live” in the VA.gov staging environment. The frontend was built, and the backend submission through EVSS was also built, but the two were not connected. The work was deprioritized in favor of focusing on the VA.gov relaunch in November 2018.

Research goals

The same goals were stated for both the April and June sessions.

Gain a clearer understanding of how easily Veterans can fill out form 21-686c online.

Develop insight as to how Veterans might want to interact with other forms related to the 21-686c (e.g. form 21-674).

Determine which sections of form 21-686c cause user frustration.

Guiding questions

Questions fell into two categories: awareness and sentiment regarding dependents benefits, and 21-686c form functionality and experience.

Do Veterans understand who is and isn't eligible for dependents benefits?

Do they know what to expect after they apply?

If Veterans or their dependents are able to remember their first time filling out this form, does this version compare more favorably to that experience?

How would users like to be alerted to fill out these forms?

Are Veterans successfully able to apply in most or all cases?

What are Veterans' reactions to questions about their marriages and spouses' marriages?

Guiding questions

Does the flow of form 686 make sense to users?

Are Veterans and their dependents able to fill out a 686 with as little frustration or confusion as possible?

Do users know whose information we are asking for at any given time?

Are the form labels appropriate so that Veterans aren't confused by what we're asking from them?

What are the most difficult portions of the form for Veterans or their dependents to fill out? Why?

Would Veterans prefer to handle additional 674 questions 'within the 686' or at another time in a different workflow?

If not, how would they like to be prompted to return to this content?

Rainbow team's methods

A high-level walkthrough appears at the end of this document.



Usability testing was conducted remotely and guided by a moderator. Other team members served as observers and note takers. It's not clear what application was used to facilitate the sessions (Zoom and GoToMeeting are currently used).

For the April 2018 sessions, high fidelity mockups were presented to users. During the June 2018 sessions, users were guided through the form as deployed to the VA.gov staging environment.

Participants

Details are missing regarding the April participants. There are notes available for session 5, and sessions 1 through 3 have audio recordings available. The latter should likely be deleted after review.

In the April 2018 Research

- Five Veterans participated (evidence of four)
- Some had disability ratings above 30% (the threshold for receiving dependents benefits)
- Some have used VA for services
- Some had dependents for which they received benefits

In the June 2018 Research

- Four Veterans participated
- All with disability ratings above 30% (the threshold for receiving dependents benefits)
- All have used VA for services
- Two had dependents for which they received benefits

Participants

Participants in both the April and June sessions were distributed across the continental United States. The Army, Navy and Air Force were represented. The Army was the most visible branch, with 67% of participants.

Army - 6



Navy - 2



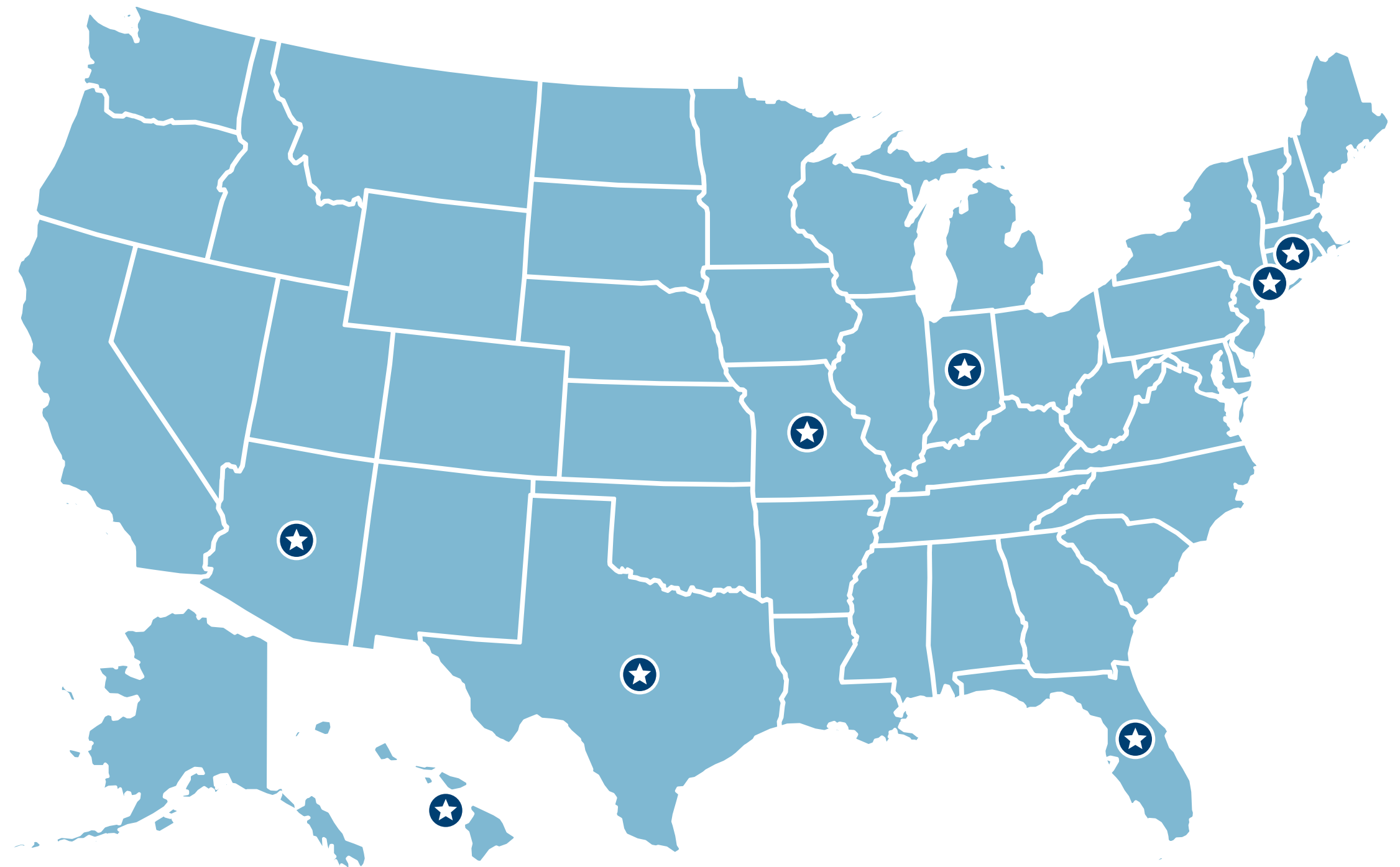
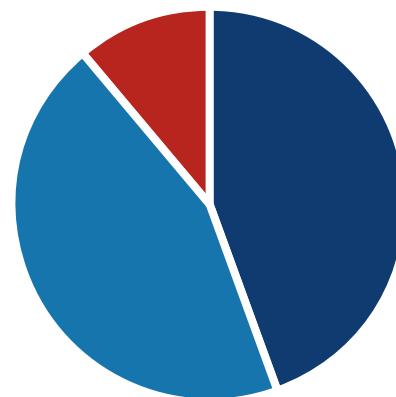
AirForce - 1



Female - 4

Male - 4

Unknown - 1



Rainbow team's key findings

The initial research session uncovered a need to have clear headers and labelling across the form. The most problematic section was the one covering marriages. But the section that covered children also caused confusion seemingly due to the various statuses child dependents can have.

In the April 2018 Research

- There was an expectation that information would be “pre-filled” in the form
- Some participants were confused as to how to start; some believed the paper form was required
- Clarity is needed around the status of dependent children; some wording was seen as strange
- Labeling need greater clarity and consistency
- The section regarding marriage(s) was confusing and fostered frustration
- Researcher considered sequencing steps in the form to simplify the workflow and pre-fill “known” information

Rainbow team's key findings

The 21-686c tested held up generally well, with participants understanding what was being asked of them. The form broke down in several areas.

Interrupted workflows increased chances of abandonment. The section regarding former spouses was emotionally painful to participants, who felt it was intrusive and unnecessary. Error messaging throughout the form was unhelpful, and promoted frustration and abandonment.

Most Veterans felt their ultimate recourse was to call the 800 number.

In the June 2018 Research

- Form labels were determined to be clear and understandable
- The former marriage section and questions regarding former spouses elicited strong emotional responses; many Veterans felt the information was irrelevant; the subject of former spouses was painful to most Veterans
- Half of the participants were inclined to abandon the form if they needed to leave the computer to retrieve a document
- Error messaging within the form was confusing to participants; half were inclined to abandon the form when presented with ambiguous form errors
- Participants felt they needed some kind of support (emotional, technical, documentation) during the course of completing the form
- All participants expected to be able to complete form 21-674 inline with submitting the 21-686c

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Our takeaways

Many of these Takeaways were identified in the Rainbow team research findings; however it seems there was no time to implement changes that were uncovered through testing.

- Only the end-to-end “add dependent” workflow was tested
- The VA.gov implementation of the 21-686c form seemed on a pace for 50% abandonment
- Workflow interruptions should be eliminated; they lead directly to abandonment
- Care must be taken with the child dependent section to reduce or eliminate confusion
- Consideration may need to be given to extended explanations of the marriages sections
- The marriage section may need particular attention due to the stress it seems to cause users
- Users fully expect to be able to submit a 21-674 during the course of completing the 21-686c
- There seemed to be trust issues regarding the “Save & Finish Later” feature
- Labels may need to be “neutralized” to address a claimant other than a Veteran using the form
- The 21-686c form may require a considerable overhaul regarding its error alerts and messaging



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Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

1 of 5 Veteran Information

Your first name (*Required)

GREGORY

Your middle name

A

Your last name (*Required)

ANDERSON

Your Social Security number (*Required)

796121200

☐ I don't have a Social Security number

« Back

Continue »

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

1 of 5 **Veteran Information**

Country **(*Required)**

USA

Street **(*Required)**

140 Whitehaven Cir

Line 2

Line 3

City **(*Required)**

Highlands Ranch

State **(*Required)**

Colorado

Postal Code **(*Required)**

80129

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Continue »

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

2 of 5 Household Information

What's your marital status? (*Required)

- ☒ Married
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Never Married

How many times have you been married? (*Required)

2

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[Continue »](#)

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

2 of 5 Household Information

First marriage

Former spouse’s first name (*Required)

Jennifer

Former spouse’s middle name

Former spouse’s last name (*Required)

Anderson

When did you get married? (*Required)

Month

Aug

▼

Day

3

▼

Year

2006

Where did you get married? (city and state or foreign country)

Country (*Required)

USA

▼

City (*Required)

Alexandria

State (*Required)

Virginia

▼

When did the marriage end? (*Required)

Month

▼

Day

▼

Year

Where did the marriage end? (city and state or foreign country)

Country (*Required)

▼

How did this marriage end? (*Required)

- ☐ Death
- ☐ Divorce
- ☐ Other

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Continue »

✔ Application has been saved. Last saved at Nov. 4, 2019 at 3:18 p.m.

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

2 of 5 Household Information

Current marriage

Spouse's first name (*Required)

BETTY

Spouse's middle name

Spouse's last name (*Required)

WHITE

When did you get married? (*Required)

Month

Day

Year

Jan

2

2019

Where did you get married? (city and state or foreign country)

Country (*Required)

USA

City (*Required)

Gringleport

State (*Required)

Missouri

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Continue »

✔

Application has been saved. Last saved at Nov. 4, 2019 at 3:29 p.m.

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

3 of 5 Spouse Information

BETTY WHITE's date of birth (*Required)

Month

Jan

Day

1

Year

1930

BETTY WHITE's Social Security number (*Required)

543251236

Is BETTY WHITE also a Veteran? (*Required)

☐ Yes

☒ No

Do you live with BETTY WHITE? (*Required)

☒ Yes

☐ No

How many times has your spouse been married (including current marriage)?

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Continue »

✔ Application has been saved. Last saved at Nov. 4, 2019 at 3:30 p.m.

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

4 of 5 Veteran's Unmarried Children

Please provide details about your unmarried children.

Do you have unmarried children? (*Required)

☐ Yes

☐ No

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Continue »

✔ Application has been saved. Last saved at Nov. 4, 2019 at 3:30 p.m.

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

5 of 5 Review Application

Veteran Information



Household Information



Spouse Information



Veteran's Unmarried Children



Note: According to federal law, there are criminal penalties, including a fine and/or imprisonment for up to 5 years, for withholding information or for providing incorrect information. (See 18 U.S.C. 1001)

☒ I have read and accept the [privacy policy](#). (*Required)

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Submit application



We're sorry. Some information in your application is missing or not valid.

Please check each section of your application to make sure you've filled out all the information that is required.



Application has been saved. Last saved at Nov. 4, 2019 at 3:31 p.m.

[Finish this application later.](#)

Apply to add a dependent to your VA benefits

VA Form 21-686c

5 of 5 Review Application

Veteran Information

Veteran Information

Edit

Your first nameGREGORY

Your middle nameA

Your last nameANDERSON

Your Social Security number796-12-1200

I don't have a Social Security number

Veteran Address

Edit

CountryUSA

Street140 Whitehaven Cir

Line 2

Line 2

Line 3

CityHighlands Ranch

StateColorado

Postal Code80129

Household Information

Marriage history

Edit

What's your marital status?Married

How many times have you been married?2

First marriage

Edit

Former spouse's first nameJennifer

Former spouse's middle name

Former spouse's last nameAnderson

When did you get married?08/03/2006

CountryUSA

CityAlexandria

StateVirginia

When did the marriage end?01/01/2019

CountryUSA

CityNorfolk

StateVirginia

How did this marriage end?Divorce

Second marriage

Edit

Spouse's first nameBETTY

Spouse's middle name

Spouse's last nameWHITE

When did you get married?01/02/2019

CountryUSA

CityGringleport

StateMissouri

Spouse Information

Edit

BETTY WHITE's date of birth01/01/1930

BETTY WHITE's Social Security number543-25-1236

Is BETTY WHITE also a Veteran?No

Do you live with BETTY WHITE?Yes

How many times has your spouse been married (including current marriage)?

Veteran's Unmarried Children

Edit

Do you have unmarried children?No

Note: According to federal law, there are criminal penalties, including a fine and/or imprisonment for up to 5 years, for withholding information or for providing incorrect information. (See 18 U.S.C. 1001)

☒ I have read and accept the [privacy policy](#). (*Required)

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Submit application