

# VA.gov Facility Operating Status Veteran Research

**Pittsburgh's facility site**

Prepared by the VA.gov CMS Team  
Prepared for and presented to VA stakeholders & DSVA

[Research: August 20-23. Presented during Sprint 21 demo, August 28]

# Outline

1. Study Context, Goals, and Materials	
2. Research Methods	
3. Findings	
4. Recommendations	
5. Next steps	

This research includes Veterans to examine the effectiveness and clarity of operating statuses and alerts.

# 1. Study Context, Goals, and Materials

# Study Context, Goals, and Materials

**Operation statuses** are notices for VA.gov and facilities page users that indicate *disruptions in VAMC function that directly impact the VA service experience*.

In addition to operating hours for each facility, these include nation- and site-wide alerts, VISN-wide alerts, and facility specific notices.

# Study Context, Goals, and Materials

Evaluate notional designs for alert components, notification emails, and operating status detail pages.

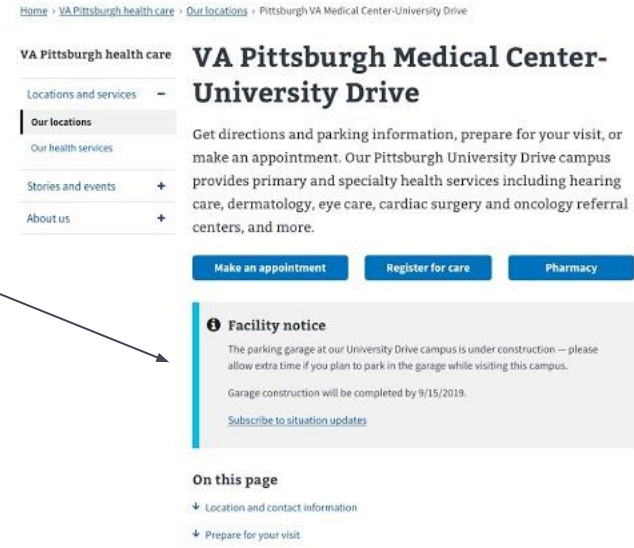
1. Inform the frontend design and content of alerts that communicate details about VAMC operating statuses.
2. Inform how to provide a series of alerts/updates for a single event, such as natural disaster, on an alert detail page.
3. Uncover how the user experience changes when alerts stack, so that the business can inform Drupal logic.

# Study Context, Goals, and Materials

## Facility page with alerts

Two kinds of alerts:

- Banner alert (national, VISN, and region)
- Facility alert (notices and specific operating status)



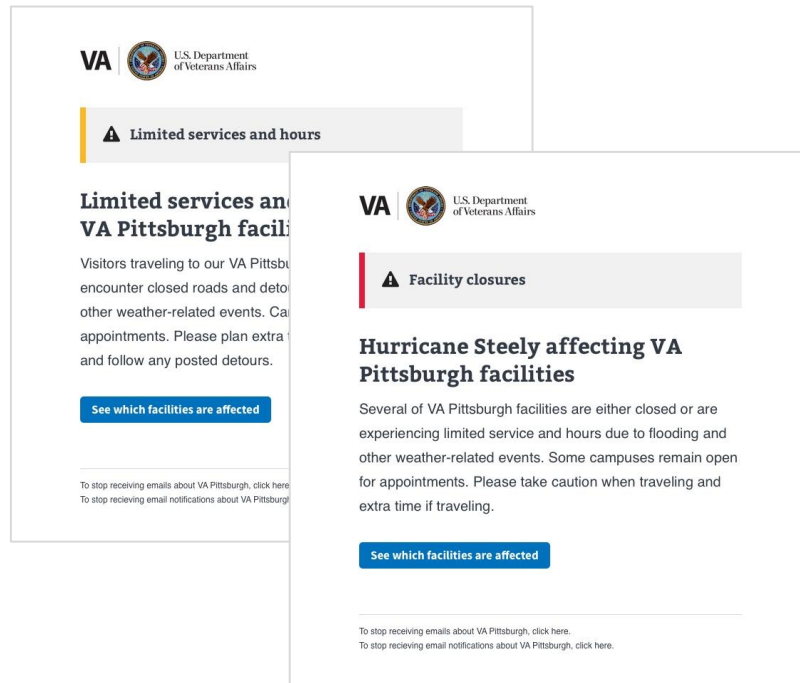
# Study Context, Goals, and Materials

## Email notifications

Two updates of the same situation:

- “Limited services and hours”
- “Facility closures”

(Both leading users to corresponding detail pages)



# Study Context, Goals, and Materials

## Operating status detail page

Includes:

- Info about a specific event
- All regional facilities with operating statuses and notices
- Patient VA resources
- Local emergency resources

The screenshot shows the VA Pittsburgh health care website. The top navigation bar includes the VA logo, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and links for Search, Contact Us, and Hector. Below the navigation bar, there are links for VA Benefits and Health Care, About VA, Find a VA Location, My VA, and My Health. The main content area is titled "Hurricane Steely affecting the Pittsburgh region" and includes a section for "VA Pittsburgh health care" with links for Locations and services, Stories and events, and About us. The "Locations and services" link is highlighted. The main heading is "Hurricane Steely affecting the Pittsburgh region". The text states: "We are monitoring the weather situation by the minute. We are working to ensure the safety of all patients and visitors at our VA Pittsburgh health care facilities." There is a link to "Subscribe to situation updates". Below this, there is a section for "Facility operating statuses" with the text: "You can find out more about the operating status for each facility by going to each facility page." The facilities listed are: University Drive campus (Normal services and hours, Facility notice), H.J. Heinz III campus (Normal services and hours, Facility notice), Beaver County VA Clinic (Normal services and hours, Facility notice), Belmont County VA Clinic (Limited services and hours), Fayette County VA Clinic (Normal services and hours), and Washington County VA Clinic (Normal services and hours).



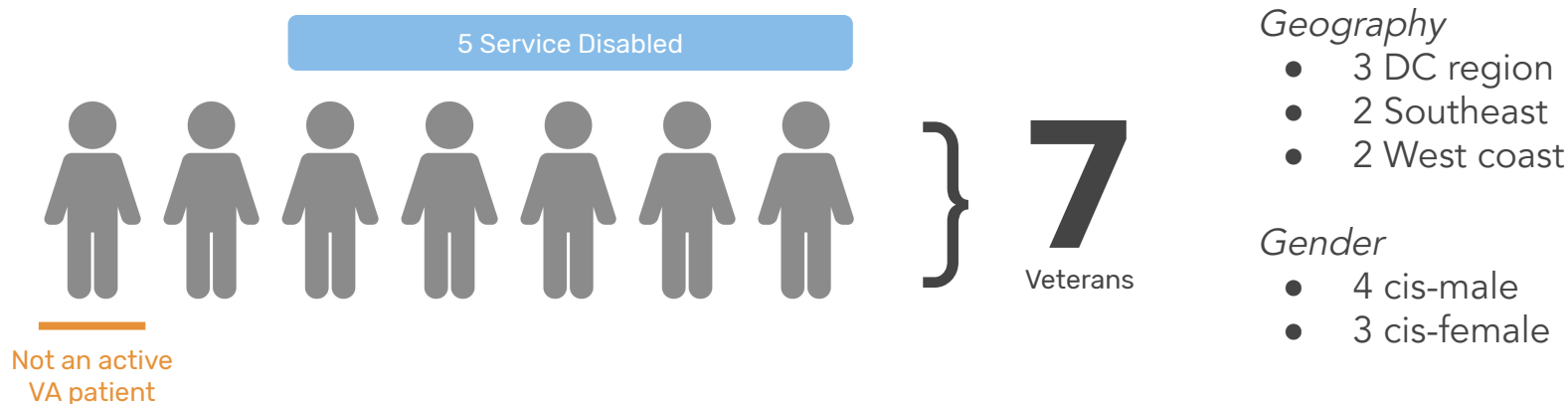
## 2. Research Methods

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# Context for Methods and Participants

**Focus areas:** usability of current architecture, content labels, on-page interactions, future content discovery.

To cover gather input about what other kinds of situations Veterans might expect to be included, we recruited nationally and conducted sessions over Zoom.



# Hypotheses

1. Participants will be able to verbally distinguish system-wide notifications from facility level notifications upon seeing both notifications on the same page.
2. Participants might not initially visit VAMC webpages to research operating statuses, but might rather use a search engine for similar content.
3. Going to the operating status page from an email will feel natural as an entry point for participants.

# Tasks

1. Find information that might affect their visit using the facility page; specifically, look for parking.
2. Receive an email about limited service hours and find more information about which facilities are affected.
3. Receive an email about closures and find out more information about what the facility you were going to visit (University Drive).

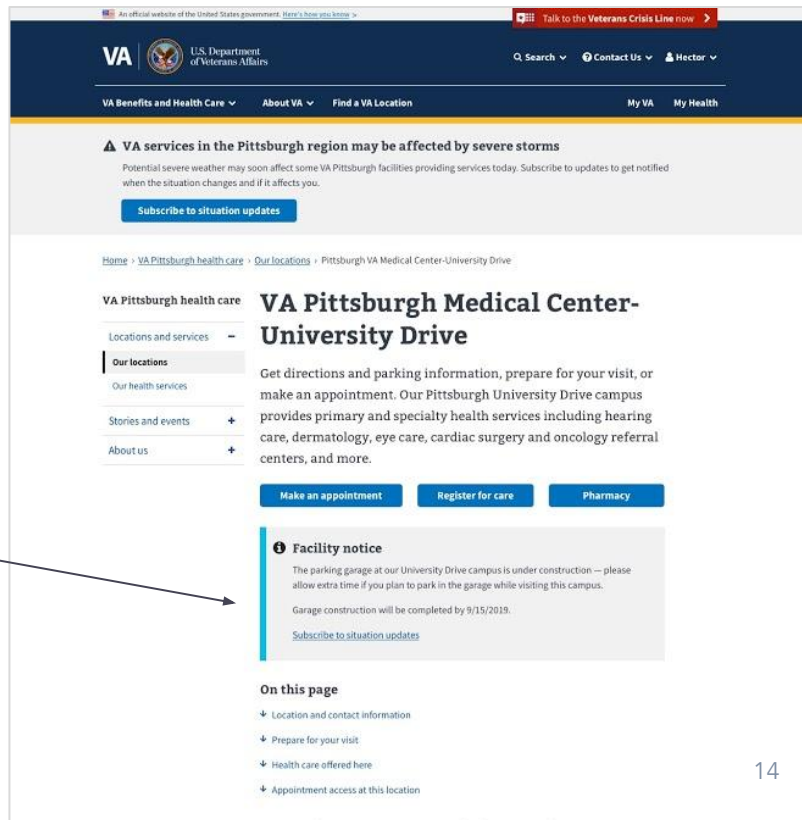
# 3. Findings

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# In-body alerts were clearly facility specific.

**H:** Participants will be able to verbally distinguish system-wide notifications from facility level notifications upon seeing both notifications on the same page. **Validated**

While people did not proactively differentiate the banner alert as something for a broader audience, they recognized that the Facility Notice was specific to that facility (in testing, University Drive).



# VA.gov isn't considered the first stop... yet.

**H:** Participants might not immediately refer to VAMC webpages to research operating statuses, but might rather use a search engine for similar content. **Somewhat validated**

People weren't expecting these kinds of messages from the VA, and the notion came as a pleasant surprise.

Today, they might use weather apps to gauge for themselves or call the VA to re-confirm their appointment.

(What the design team should consider)

**"Follow the self-service methodology. People are getting more tech savvy by the day."**

**"It's more robust than it has been! The websites at the VA are kind of chaotic. This feels much cleaner and more user friendly. Human-centered, I guess."**

## Why only email for notifications?

**H:** Going to the operating status page from an email will feel natural as an entry point for participants. **Validated**

Participants generally liked the idea of being notified about situations, but email felt limiting when preferred options might be via a text message. or an application that contains more comprehensive personalized options.

**"I've only received emails for appointment reminders. For me it's over the top."**

**(How might you prefer to hear about this?)**

**"I'd more likely fill out the phone number."**

**"Where's my VA app? [An app would] know me using an identity service or something to show me when my appointments are."**



## Recency = Validity

Knowing when these notifications are published provides critical context. This was mentioned regardless of alert content; some worried that they might not see the alert or check their email at the moment they receive the notification.

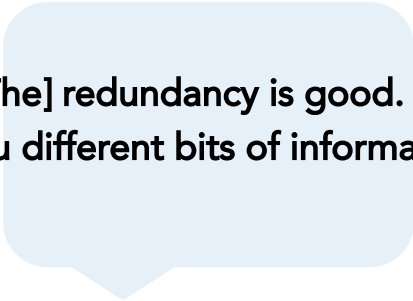
For the operating status page, some commented about not being sure of when it was last updated.

**"I would also want to know what time this alert came out, just so I know it's not an old message... If I could see a date and time, I might know that it's for today."**

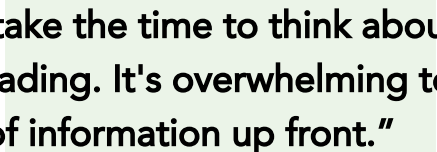
**"The VA doesn't have a reputation for being up to date... the timestamp is relevant and important. I would be really upset if I saw this and it said closed, but it was now open."**

## Redundancy for alerts reinforces visibility.

Having multiple alerts presented at once felt fine for most participants. Those who expressed information overload about the alerts also referred to the general content on the page as contributing to their sense of being overwhelmed.



**"[The] redundancy is good. It gives you different bits of information."**



**"I need to take the time to think about what I'm reading. It's overwhelming to have a lot of information up front."**

## The more guidance about options, the better.

Being able to easily reschedule as a result of service disruption was the primary concern for participants. This was expected to be included within the alert.

People were looking for specific next steps for themselves, given the alerts about operating status.

**“(The header) is up here and pretty prominent. (the H1) is generic... like how did I get here? I clicked here because I wanted to find out what my options are. When I get here, it’s basically saying ‘start over.’”**

**(Looking at Facility Closures) “I might think ‘okay that’s great... I don’t want to die, but I need to get there.’ It would be helpful to see an email saying ‘your appointment is canceled.’”**

# A facility notice is not an operating status.

During testing, people liked the options of seeing clear indication of operating statuses across facilities, but got confused about the Facility Notice badge.

"It makes me think 'eh, okay, this place is fine but there is something wrong,' which there isn't -- it's a facility notice... It makes me feel like the facility notice is related to the hours and services."

The screenshot shows a web interface for the Pittsburgh region. On the left is a navigation menu with 'Locations and services', 'Stories and events', and 'About us'. The main content area is titled 'Pittsburgh region' and contains a weather update, a 'Subscribe to situation updates' link, and a section titled 'Facility operating statuses'. This section explains that users can find more about each facility's status by clicking on a 'Facility notice' link. Below this, several VA clinics are listed: University Drive campus, H.J. Heinz III campus, Beaver County VA Clinic, Belmont County VA Clinic, Fayette County VA Clinic, Washington County VA Clinic, and Westmoreland County VA Clinic. Each clinic has a 'Normal services and hours' badge and a 'Facility notice' link. An arrow points to the 'Facility notice' link for the University Drive campus.

Locations and services +

Stories and events +

About us +

## Pittsburgh region

We are monitoring the weather situation by the minute. We are working to ensure the safety of all patients and visitors at our VA Pittsburgh health care facilities.

[Subscribe to situation updates](#)

### Facility operating statuses

You can find out more about the operating status for each facility by going to each facility page.

**University Drive campus**

Normal services and hours **Facility notice >**

**H.J. Heinz III campus**

Normal services and hours **Facility notice >**

**Beaver County VA Clinic**

Normal services and hours **Facility notice >**

**Belmont County VA Clinic**

**Limited services and hours >**

**Fayette County VA Clinic**

Normal services and hours

**Washington County VA Clinic**

**Limited services and hours >**

**Westmoreland County VA Clinic**

Normal services and hours

## 4. Recommendations

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### Today...

- Provide more instruction about rescheduling within alerts (phone number to call or link to login).
- Provide timestamps for all alerts and messages to indicate when the notice applies.
- Keep the primary intent of operating status detail page somewhat independent of situations.
  - Do not include Facility Notices on the detail page.
  - Provide information about situations within operating status pages, but compartmentalize it and provide a timeline of the situation.
- Include which facilities are affected within email notices to make them less generic.
- Provide clear steps for any evacuation procedures, if anything comes from authorities.
- Reconsider colors for Facility Notices (does cyan indicate enough criticality?)

### Eventually...

- Include text message alerts.
- Explore how identity services can integrate with emails.
- Provide Veterans a way for them to customize their subscription to alerts within their MyHealtheVet profiles (or equivalent).
- Provide redundant notices for service changes to appear within proximity of the corresponding service information (today: accordion)

## 5. Next steps

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Next steps

## What's next

- Documentation of all study materials, data, and outputs
- Dissemination to broader team
- Size and prioritize

Thank you for having me! ✨

# Thank you

Contact with questions:

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[From Aug 28, 2019 onwards, please go to Andy Lewandowski]