

About this Playbook

We've created this playbook to help you relaunch your facility website with an easier and more powerful experience for Veterans and for authors to be able to better suit the needs of Veterans and other customers. The playbook will help you understand the goals of the new VA.gov and the new content management system (CMS) that is facilitating the relaunch. Further, the principles in the playbook will spell out how to maintain the new Veteran-first VA website that the CMS powers

Who this playbook is for

This playbook should be used by people who need to author or migrate content for VA Medical Centers. Whether you are a content manager, public affairs officer, researcher, provider or other VA employee, this playbook can make the transition to the new VA.gov easier for you. Long-term, content-focused guidelines and governance will help drive the goals for different types of content and audiences across VA.gov.

Each of the plays outlined below are dedicated to helping you understand how refresh old content or create new content. In addition, these plays will help you manage your content in a thoughtful way that considers the context of your users while incorporating modernized, VA-wide digital content and tools.

The plays

Demonstrate to Veterans that you understand their patient journey

It's important that patients can immediately see that you understand what they are going through and that you understand what it's like to be Veteran in the VA healthcare system. Making this apparent will help establish trust and make it easier for Veterans to seek care when they need it.

To help accomplish this when creating your new VA website, think about how a Veteran arrived at the VA website, why they might be looking for care, and what obstacles they might face in navigating your site or visiting VA facilities. As you know, the Veterans VA serves are from diverse backgrounds and have varied needs. Demonstrating that you understand where they are in their journey through life will help you better prepare them for their journey through the VA health care system, right down to finding parking or signing up for cooking classes.

How to do this:

- Before creating any piece of content, think about the user goals related to that content.
 - What action do you want the user to take after reading the content?
 - How can you make the next steps as understandable as possible?
- Use short, clear descriptions and tell users what steps to take next.
- Provide the right amount of information to help the user achieve their goals. This can mean avoiding too much information (which distracts the user), or it can mean giving step-by-step instructions, when applicable.

Use [Search Engine Optimization \(SEO\)](#) to support the needs of Veterans who arrive at your site through Google or other Internet search engines.

Because most Veterans find information starting with Google, no matter what the content is, writing for SEO (search engine optimization) is important to ensure that we're getting the right information to Veterans regardless of where they begin their journey on the VA website.

To learn more about SEO and writing with SEO in mind, we recommend starting with [Google's SEO starter guide](#) and [The Moz Blog](#).

VA has done work to document a Veteran's patient journey, and you can use that documentation – such as the outpatient journey map – to put what you already know into words when creating your new facility website.

Key questions:

1. Why might a Veteran need the content on the page you're creating?
2. What might a Veteran might be trying to accomplish with the content on this page?
3. How can you be as clear as possible and make this content easily findable?

Use straightforward words design, and information hierarchy on your website

To help Veterans easily find what they're looking for and understand the information presented to them, your website should speak directly to them and use simple words and structures to communicate with them. The information architecture of the VA website (which defines how information is organized within the site) has been tested with Veterans, and the VA's Content Style Guide helps you choose words that are relatable and welcoming.

How to do this:

Use the guidelines and experience principles on design.va.gov to help make design and information hierarchy decisions as well as the [content principles](#) you'll find there to help you write using plain language.

Key questions:

1. Is the content you're creating presented in the simplest way possible?
2. Is the information on the page you're working on organized in a way that makes sense and helps guide users to action?

Establish and follow guidelines for VA content ownership and authority

Authority defines who is empowered to make strategic and day-to-day decisions about the content of your website. Ownership defines who is responsible for the creation and maintenance of each piece of content. For instance, there is content that only people at the regional level are responsible for, such as the content on an About Us page, and content that only people at the national level are responsible for, such as benefits information.

A more complicated, yet very important, example of this is the health services content, which is created and maintained by people at both the national and regional levels. The portions of this content that apply nationally are managed by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), while the portions that are true regionally and locally are managed by people in regional facilities and clinics.

Understanding and following these guidelines will help you maintain the integrity of the information on your site.

How to do this:

- Define the types of content you create according to how the Drupal CMS defines them.
- Establish a content governance body for health services content. We recommend you include subject matter experts in this group.
- Understand who to request changes from for content that you're not responsible for. For instance, there is a working group for national health services content, and they own content for health services that is true nationwide.
- Create a health content committee that meets monthly to review and approve updates to your health services content.
- Determine other types of groups or processes that could be helpful in governing your own web content.

Key questions:

1. What people are groups of people can be convened to review or create specific types of content?
2. Are there subject matter experts that can be included in the groups you're convening?
3. Is the content you're working on the responsibility of an organization outside of yours?

In addition to understanding what makes up national, regional and local content, understanding *tiered content* can also help you understand how to plan content creation and assign ownership to the content created. Tiered content is explained in further detail in this playbook.

Maintain synchronization among VA national, VA regional, and VA local content

- **National content** is content that applies regardless of location. It will be relevant to all facilities and you should plan to use it on your site.
- **Regional content** is content that applies to your specific region. People at your region will be responsible for creating and managing this content.
- **Local content** is intended to help users understand information about a local facility. People at your region will determine who from the region or the facility itself will create and maintain this content.

To maintain Veterans' trust in your website, you must ensure that your site is consistent. There are many ways to create a consistent user experience (e.g., using standardized visual elements, following the same information hierarchy on similar types of pages). One way to promote consistency is to ensure that national, regional, and local content on your site is harmonious.

How to do this:

Because you won't be responsible for creating content on all levels, you'll have to do some work to make sure the tone and messaging you create is consistent with content that is already on the VA website. The experience principles and the content principles featured on design.va.gov can help you with this.

Key questions:

1. Is the content you're creating applicable to the entire VA system or only your specific region?
2. What specific information can you share about your facilities to help Veterans have a great and smooth experience with VA?

Measure the impact of website content and use data to improve it

Using data to measure effectiveness will also help you make improvements and know the website is doing its job. This can help you improve your website.

How to do this:

You can use Google analytics to access data about how users find and use your website. To access Google Analytics for VA.gov, sign up for an account at [provide link].

After you have access to data about your site, learn about things that indicate whether your content is doing its job, such as bounce rate (the percentage of visitors who navigate away from the site after viewing only one page), length of time on the site, number of return visitors and new visitors. You can then define what success means for your website content.

You can also consider hiring or assigning someone with expertise in web analytics to help you accomplish this goal.

Key questions:

1. What is the bounce rate for individual pages?
2. How much time do visitors spend on the site?
3. How many return visitors and new visitors does a page have?

Help patients maximize their digital user experience on VA.gov

The new CMS presents a new digital experience for VA staff and employees. The new system is being designed with two overarching goals in mind:

- Helping VA content authors and editors write content with a Veteran-first approach.
- To drive users to self-serve digital tools, which will do things like steer Veterans to create VA.gov accounts if they don't have one. And if they do have one, they'll be encouraged to sign in.

If Veterans use digital tools, like access a VA.gov account, or refill prescriptions using the pharmacy tool, they'll save time and will experience an improved experience on VA.gov.

How to do this:

To facilitate this, you should write and organize content with a Veteran-first approach, as described in the and content and experience principles on design.va.gov. You should also be aware of the patient journey and how they relate to the top patient tasks.

Key questions:

1. What digital tools can help accomplish the tasks presented on the pages you're working on?
Can you link to them?
2. Is there enough context provided on the page to help Veterans understand how the tool can make things easier for them or improve their experience?
3. Are there any instructions that you can provide to help Veterans use the self-serve digital tools that you're linking to?

Tiered content

We've defined three tiers of content on VA.gov and each tier maps to its own set of goals:

1. Tier 1 content is dedicated to the timely delivery of benefits and healthcare.
2. Tier 2 content is dedicated to maximizing the use of benefits and services.
3. Tier 3 content includes administrative and legally required content. It is not benefits-related.

Content in tiers 1 and 2 helps Veterans with the top tasks when they are patients. Tiers 1 and 2 will likely get more attention on the site than tier 3 content. Because of the prominence of tier 1 and tier 2 content, this type of content is more highly scrutinized and should probably go through a more rigorous approval process than tier 3. As a result, it's more important to follow content guidelines for tiers 1 and 2.

If you understand the different purposes for various content types, you can set up processes to help users quickly find the information they need (when they need it).

Further, it can be helpful to think of web content as a product: It must serve a specific purpose for a specific user at a specific time to be successful. The *specific time* aspect of this is especially important; valuable content presented at the wrong time within a user's journey may seem unhelpful or distracting. For instance, a user might not find a call to action ("Make an appointment now") useful if they're unaware of what services your facility offers. Always keep your user's journey top of mind as you write content and organize it on the page.

Tier 1 content

The primary purpose of Tier 1 content is to support the goal of timely delivery of VA benefits, services, and health care by enabling Veterans and their beneficiaries to find, understand, enroll in, and access their benefits and health care. This allows them to take advantage of every applicable benefit they earned for their service. Region or facility homepages and locations and services pages are common examples of Tier 1 content.

Tier 2 content

The primary purpose of Tier 2 content is to promote awareness of the benefits, services, and resources available to Veterans and their eligible family members, enable outreach and benefits partners to reach out to Veterans and provide Veteran-centric care, and provide information and resources to people and organizations in community with Veterans to help ensure Veterans can thrive.

Although homepages and locations and services pages are often categorized as Tier 1 content, they're sometimes labeled Tier 2.

Tier 1 and tier 2 content is made up of locations and services pages. The following content types and information makes up tier 1 and tier 2 content:

- Making an appointment
- Becoming a patient
- Finding VA facility locations and contact information
- Researching and accessing services

About locations and services pages

- Locations and services pages provide information about services a Veteran can find at a specific facility or campus, along with logistical information (parking instructions, facility amenities, and more).
- Content on these pages should be clear, direct, and reassuring. Veterans visiting these pages need to quickly determine whether a given location offers the services they need. Write content that's concise. Follow the inverted pyramid structure where the most important information or action for users appears at the top while other information tapers in order of diminishing importance.
- Using plain language is always a best practice, but it's especially important within the context of writing about health and medical services. Avoid acronyms, complex terminology, and jargon whenever possible, and test new terms with actual users.

Tier 3 content

The primary purpose of VA.gov Tier 3 content is to provide excellent customer service to non-Veteran audiences to help achieve the goals of timely delivery of VA benefits and services and maximizing user of VA benefits and services and meet external and intergovernmental audience's expectations and regulations related to legal requirements and transparency.

Tier three content includes information for vendors, partners, staff, and community and is less sensitive, but serves an important purpose such as spreading awareness, community involvement, growth and health of VA Pittsburgh as an organization, research, etc. This type of content includes the following:

- Stories and events pages
- Information about policies and careers, etc.
- About us pages
- New and events pages

About news and events pages

- News and events pages provide information that's largely targeted to members of the media; this may include press releases, feature stories, and news. Events pages feature information about Veteran-focused events — for example, Veteran Town Halls.
- Information intended for non-Veteran audiences may need to provide more context than information intended solely for Veterans. When writing for non-Veteran audiences, be sure to define any military- or service-related terms.
- When writing for members of the media, provide media/outreach contact information.
- Event listings should be extremely brief. Include the event type, date, time, location, and any relevant contact information.

About the about us pages

- About us pages provide information about a specific facility or campus. These pages cover the facility's history, provide information about the leadership team, and link out to annual reports.
- About us pages may be longer and offer more narrative depth than content on other types of pages. That said, as you write for the About us pages, always keep concision top of mind.
- If you need to include series of numbers, dates, or statistics, consider formatting these items as a bulleted list (instead of including them within a paragraph). This type of information is easier to scan when it's formatted as a bulleted list.