

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Research Readout

Usability testing of rated disabilities & view dependents tool pages

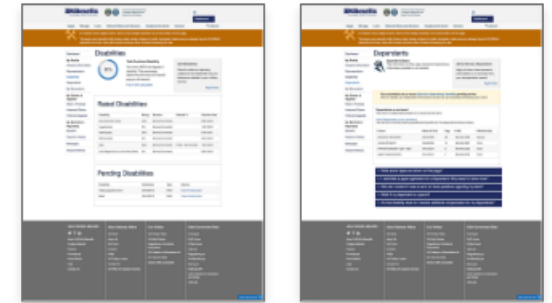
Research goals

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Background

The eBenefits features, Rated Disabilities and View Dependents, are undergoing technical and UI redesign to as they are migrated to the VA.gov.

During Discovery and Design, the core functionality of these two screens—basically viewing tabular or listed info from EVSS—was translated to VA Design System structural elements and components. These screen layouts use two new elements that were developed to align with a new “tool page” arrangement: a right-hand “helpful info” sidebar, and light grey boxes, or “cards,” to list previously tabular information. Missing from this configuration is the left-hand navigational sidebar commonly found on content pages in VA.gov.



Research Goals

The overall goal of this research was to determine the user acceptability for the overall page layouts and the presentation of list data in a “card” format.

- Can users can quickly identify the purpose of the page?
- Will users easily understand the visual hierarchy, and scan and locate key information?
- Other goals included uncovering pain points, workflow breakdowns, user expectations, and potential future features.

Guiding questions

- How often would users access Rated Disabilities and View Dependents screens?
- Can users quickly determine the purpose of the pages?
- Can they find the combined VA disability rating immediately?
- Are dependent details immediately apparent?
- Can users immediately find all the relevant information on-screen?
- Is information displayed in a clear and understandable manner (text and components)?

Guiding questions | Continued

- Are “cards” an acceptable presentation of serial information?
- Is it clear in the View Dependents screens what the card buttons will do?
- Is there a clear recourse for users if they see inaccurate or missing information on-screen?
- What other screens or information would users look for in view-disabilities or view-dependents scenarios?
- What other features would users want in future iterations of these pages?

Methods

Usability testing was conducted remotely using GoToMeeting. Participants were presented with high-fidelity prototypes created using Adobe XD. The remote moderator prompted users with guiding questions from the conversation guide. Participants were encouraged to talk through their exploration of the prototypes, and to speak candidly about their thoughts. Remote observers and note takers were often in attendance. All sessions were recorded.

Hypothesis

The Rated Disabilities and View Dependents screens will test well against their basic function: displaying information. The screen layout and card arrangements will prove adequate, the text will be clear to most users. The lack of sidebar navigation may jar users, who will be inclined to back-button to previous screens. Rated Disabilities will be lightly used by Veterans; View Dependents will be used occasionally when there is a change of status for a dependent, or if investigating a change in benefits payments.

Top insights

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Insights

- Study participants were significantly more educated than the general population.
- Participants frequently accessed disabilities/dependents pages to check the status of pending claims and appeals, and rarely after the claim or appeal was settled.
- The landing page entry points were confusing to some participants and a potential barrier to use.
- Participants requested relevant details be available for individual disabilities, and to a much lesser extent, individual dependents.
- Participants were generally aware that there is a “VA formula” for determining disability ratings.
- Most participants expected the buttons on the View Dependents page to link to a form and/or details about individual dependents.

Insights

- The Rated Disabilities and View Dependents pages tested well for content and organization, but less so for navigation.
- The most common pain point was the lack of direct, immediate communication channels to answer questions.
- The most requested new feature was live chat; though other communication channels (e.g. direct emails and phone numbers) were commonly cited as well.
- With no “apparent” navigation for users, the tools page layout led participants to use the back button and sign-out to exit the page.
- Users may intend use multiple, related authenticated tools in any given session.

Collected recommendations

RATED DISABILITIES & VIEW DEPENDENTS

- Flag items for special attention (processing errors, decision status, etc.) could be very helpful for users.
- Co-locate links to authenticated content in a centralized location (dashboard, dropdown, nav section, etc.) may help users when they are investigating claims or appeals and need several tools.
- Offer drill-down links (accordions, tooltip hovers, etc.) to details such as definitions or decisions.
- Display only the last-four of SSN on-screen to provide a degree of over-the-shoulder security.

Collected recommendations

AUTHENTICATED TOOL PAGES

- Add live chat feature to inquiry-intensive pages.
- Add specific contact info (email, direct phone numbers, etc.) to authenticated tool pages if such offices/staff exist could save users time and alleviate some frustration.
- Determine what pages the back button and sign-out will do vs. user expectations.
- Rethink landing-page/tool-page strategy; consider a single page with authenticated and unauthenticated states.
- Devise tool-page specific navigation; e.g. links to other tools or top three content links.
- Determine an interim authenticated tools page strategy ahead of Personalization 2.0.

Collected recommendations

LANDING PAGES

- Keep important, frequently-accessed tool links “above the fold” on entry pages.
- Consider a contrasting graphical treatment (icon) to highlight inline links to authenticated tool pages.
- Centralize tool page links in secondary navigation or a dropdown for easy user access.

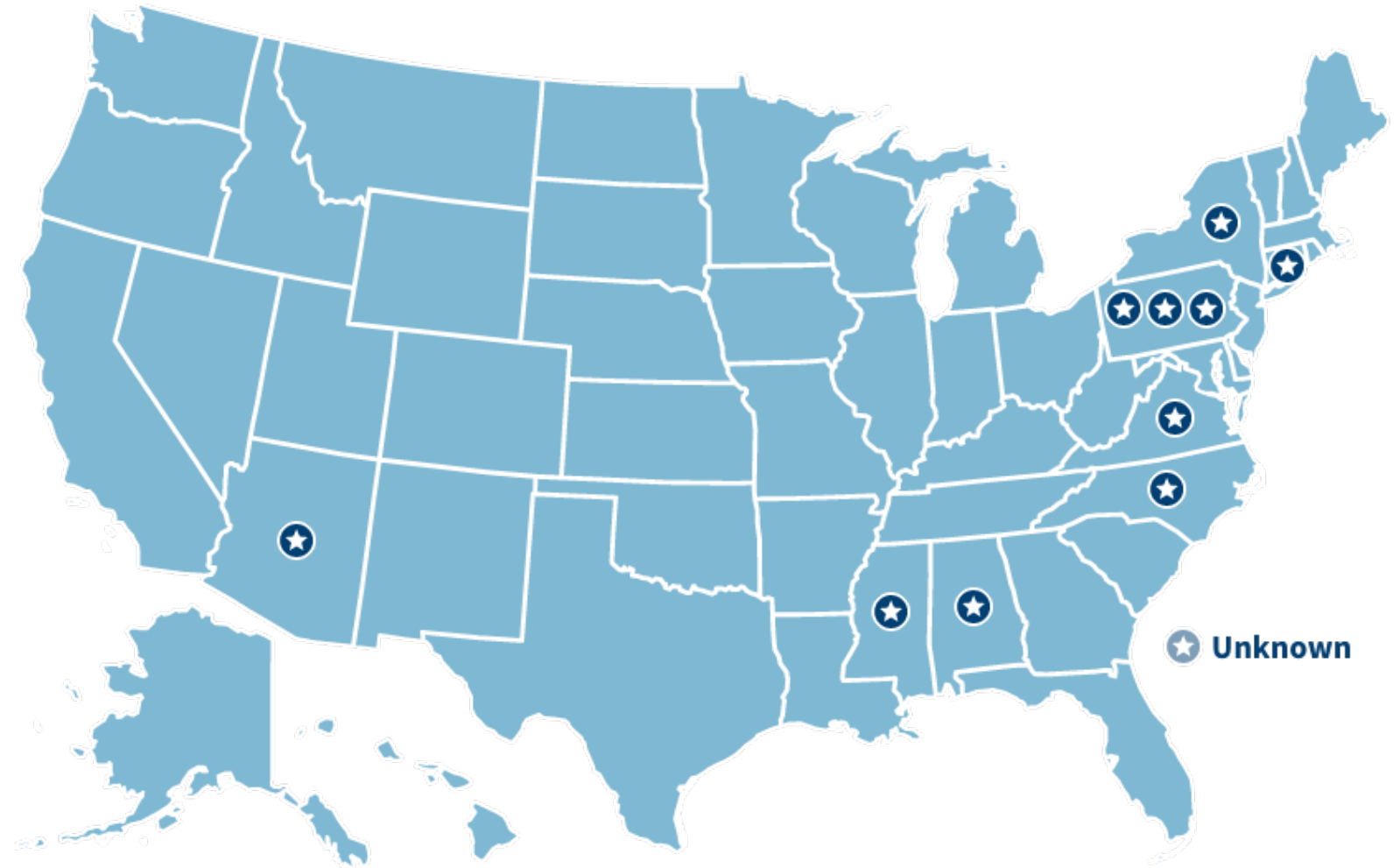
Participants

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Participants

Locations

The locations of participants across the United States shows a strong Northeast bias (45%). In 2018, only 17% of the population resided in the Northeast U.S. (Census.gov). Interestingly, three participants (27%) were from Pennsylvania.

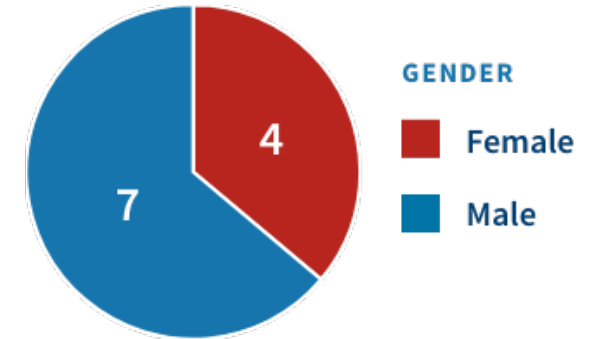
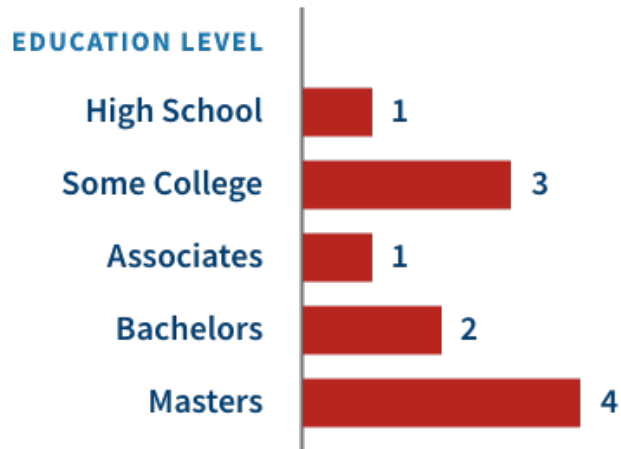
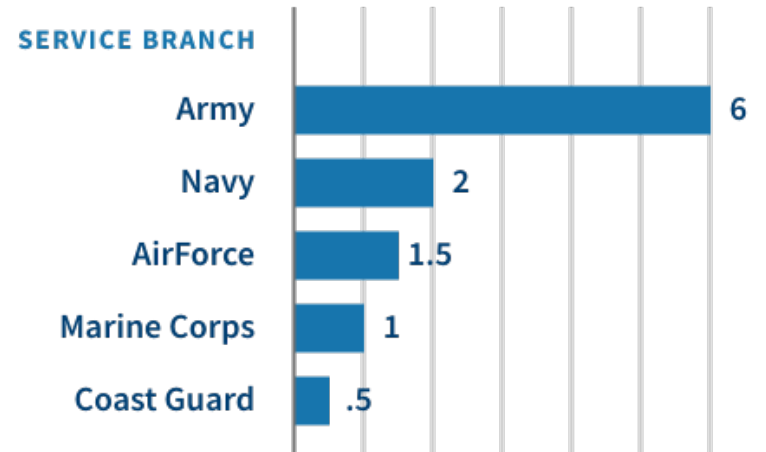


Participants

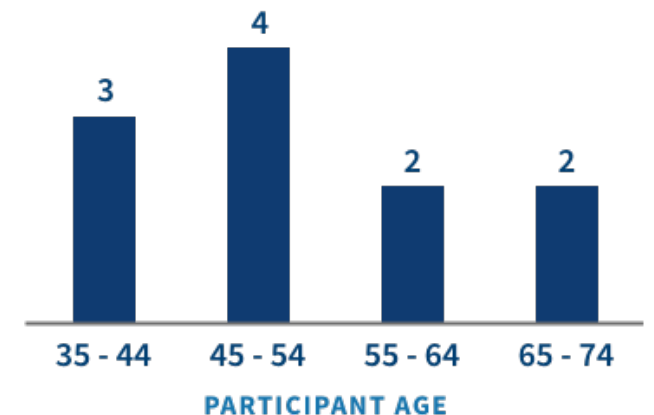
Demographics

The median participant was male, 45 to 54 years old, and a college graduate. Over half of the participants (55%) served in the Army. One participant served in both the Air Force and Coast Guard. The average age was approximately 52.

Education level was very high across this group of participants, with 36% having earned a master's degree. Just 4% of the U.S. population achieved that level in 2017 (Census.gov). Most participants had a VA disability rating. Two were identified as having cognitive disabilities.



HAS VA DISABILITY RATING: 91%
APPLIED FOR DEPENDENTS BENEFITS: 75%



Findings & recommendations

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Findings

Site Usage

At the start of the session, participants were asked if they had ever used eBenefits. They were asked to name other websites and features they used to learn about and manage their VA benefits. MyHealtheVet was specifically mentioned often, usually with a positive association. Other “sites” mentioned include VA.gov, DEERS, DS Logon, Facebook and Twitter.

*Users commonly accessed eBenefits in episodes, **primarily to check the status of claims and/or appeals.***

SITE USAGE CITED



SITE FEATURES USED



COMMON PAIN POINTS



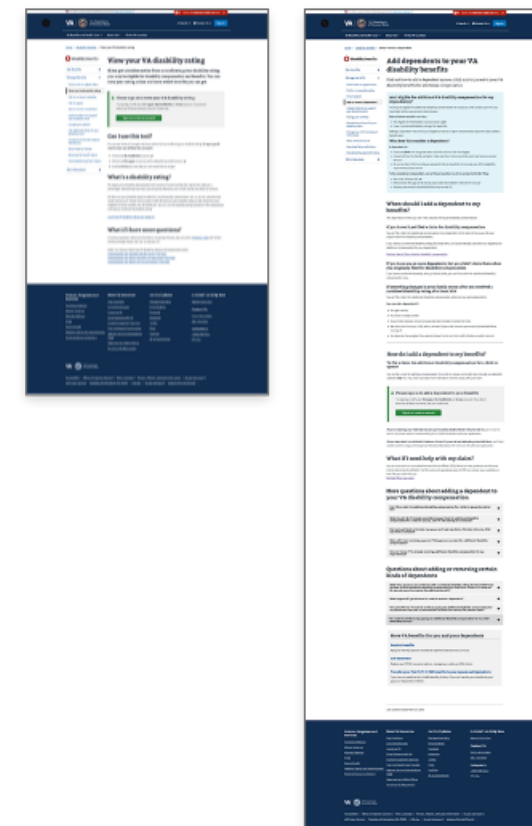
Findings

Landing pages

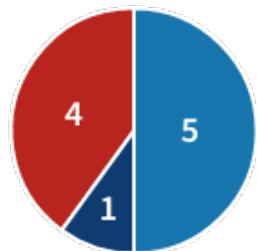
Though the “landing page” entry points were not a focus in the usability study, they were included to give participants a sense of flow and location within the VA.gov site structure.

The prompt was, “You’ve come to this page; find a where to view your disability rating,” (or dependents). **As an entry point to the tool page layout, the landing pages did not fare well, with less than half of the participants assessed being able to quickly locate the login.**

Interestingly, some participants were often drawn to the long list of links in the left-hand nav rather than the main content column. The top-most section of content was often read at length, while the remainder of the page was scanned.



DISABILITY RATING



VIEW DEPENDENTS



IMMEDIATELY LOCATES LOGIN



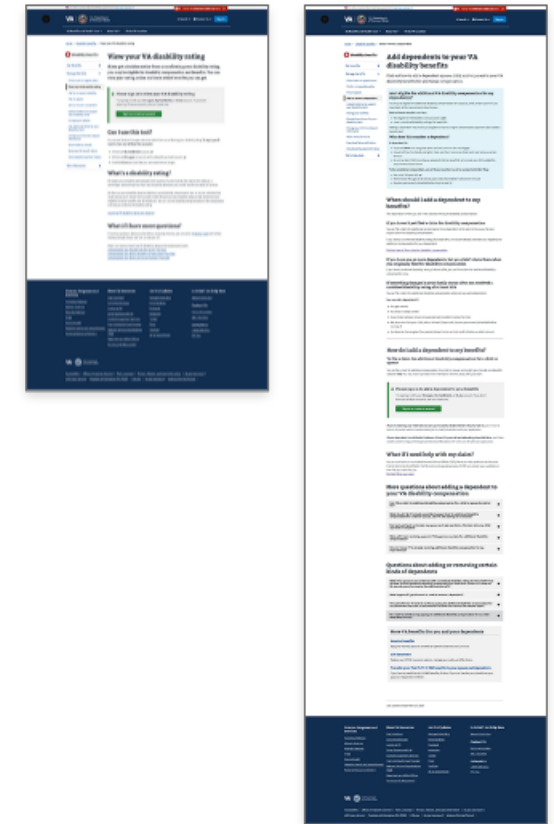
“When you start adding things it just complicates it... the average person just needs to get in there and see at a glance.”

Landing pages

Users were often distracted by large blocks of content. Several users went straight to the left-hand navigation to find a link to content, preferring that to scrolling and scanning the page. The most frequently cited pain point was password/authentication issues. While login and user security is outside the scope of this study, it was a notable finding. Password/authentication problems may be significant barriers to use.

Recommendations: Give serious consideration to the “entry points” for various tools; including a link or login on a busy screen may be problematic for users looking to quickly locate a tool — particularly if that is their focus during a given session.

- Keep important, frequently accessed tool links “above the fold” on entry pages.
- Consider a contrasting graphical treatment (icon) to highlight inline links to authenticated tool pages.
- Consider centralizing tool page links in secondary navigation or a dropdown for easy user access.



Findings

Rated disabilities

Veterans are well-aware of the general use of VA disability ratings, including the service-connected and non-service-connected aspects. Most are well-versed in the process of applying for disability claims, and **they are aware of a “formula” VA uses to determine a total disability rating**, but not necessarily the details of how the formula works.

Users found the presentation of total and individual disability ratings acceptable. Many participants had favorable impressions of how, and how much, information was displayed.

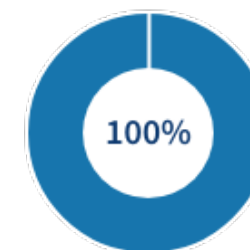
Generally, Veterans were able to locate information and links quickly. Most considered the info presented appropriate in term of content and amount.

- Determine purpose of page (“Describe what you see...”) 11/11
- Find relevant info (“Describe what you see...”) 11/11
- Locate combined VA rating (“What is the total disability rating...”) 11/11
- Locate the VA hotline number (“What if you had a question...”) 9/9
- Can define service-connected (“What does service-connected mean...”) 10/10



“It’s telling me what I need to know without bouncing between pages.”

GENERAL CONTENT



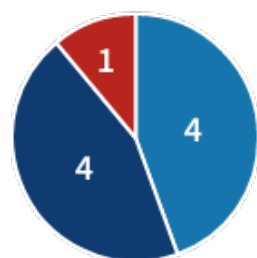
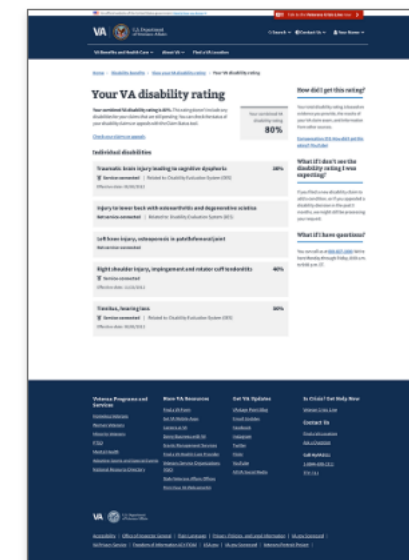
■ Quickly determined

Findings

Rated disabilities

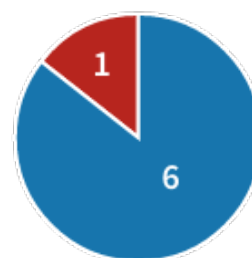
Participants were relatively slow to locate information regarding the VA disability rating formula when prompted to, “Find information about how the VA figures your rating.” Most Veterans are aware the VA uses a formula that is more complicated than an average or sum.

Six participants indicated they wanted to see links to more detailed information about the details of the injury or the VA decision.



FIND RATING DETERMINATION INFO

Quickly
Slowly
Did not find



AWARE of VA DISABILITY FORMULA

Yes
No

“Nobody here is a doctor... We’re just not sure of what we’re being rated with.”

Recommendations

Rated disabilities

The Rated Disabilities page tested well against its primary function. However, most users did ask for additional details about individual disabilities or VA decisions. The primary use case for the Rated Disabilities page as cited by participants, was checking the status of claims and appeals. Some users suggested that they would look for disabilities, dependents, applications and appeals information within the same session.

Recommendations:

- Flagging items for special attention (processing errors, decision status, etc.) could be very helpful for users.
- Co-locating links to authenticated content in a centralized location (dashboard, dropdown, nav section, etc.) may help users when they are investigating claims or appeals.
- Consider offering drill-down links (accordions, tooltip hovers, etc.) to details such as definitions or decisions.



Findings

View dependents

Only seven participants reviewed the View Dependents page due to time constraints. The presentation of individual dependents in cards was generally acceptable to participants. Many felt the content was clear and complete.

A couple of users found the inclusion of dependents' SSN problematic. One wanted additional information, such as addresses, available. Many Veterans expected VA to have their info, and information about their dependents “in the system” if they had provided it in the past (even if it was for different processes or applications).

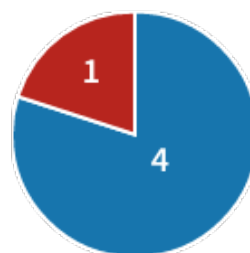


Most users expected the card “buttons” to link to a form, and/or to detailed information about individual dependents.



LOCATE HOW TO APPLY

Quickly located



FIND RATING DETERMINATION INFO

Form and/or details

Did not know

“Some people don’t like their Social Security number displayed.”

View dependents

Like the Rated Disabilities page, View Dependents tested well against its primary function. In terms of layout and functionality, the key difference between the two pages (as tested) was the View Dependents screen included buttons to “Apply to add dependent,” and “Change status” of a dependent. Most participants expected these buttons to lead them to a form and/or details about dependents.

Recommendations: Some users cited instances of uploading documents and receiving no confirmation or error indication. This led to long (avoidable) delays in processing.

- As with Rated Disabilities, consider indicating processing status or errors indicators to individual cards.
- Consider offering drill-down links (accordions, tooltip hovers, etc.) to details regarding individual dependents.
- Consider displaying last-four of SSN on-screen to provide a degree of over-the-shoulder security.



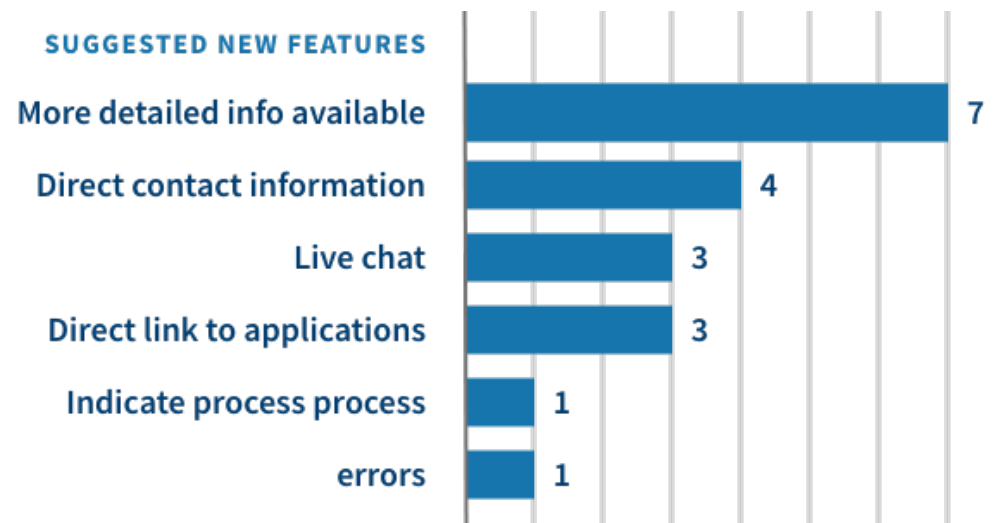
Findings

Tool page layout

A few participants who remembered using the current eBenefits site had a favorable impression of the tools page presented—and the use of cards. When users were asked to describe what they saw, most located relevant sidebar content immediately.



The new feature most requested was additional information regarding details of claims or dependents. Communication was a prevalent theme, with many users citing frustration with VA hotline numbers. **Many wanted a direct channel or immediate help via live chat.**



“...but these web pages now—there’s a lot more on here. A lot of really good information on them.”

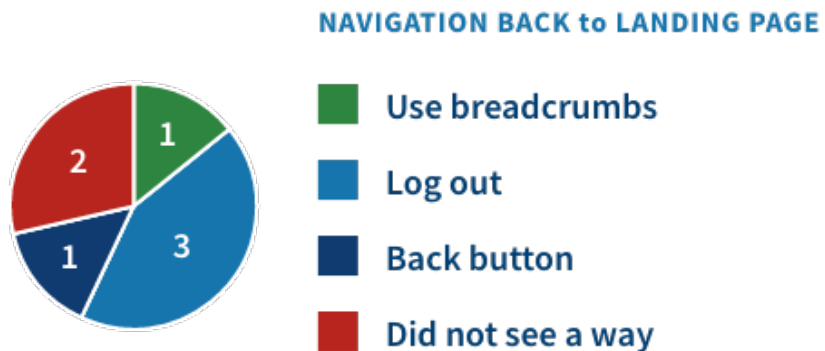
Findings

Tool page layout

Users generally did not notice the change in screen layouts moving from the left-hand-nav, content style of the landing pages, to the nav-less right-sidebar layout of tools page. Users identified right side bar content quickly when asked to describe the page. They located specific content more slowly, but successfully in most cases. (Rating determination, hotline number, etc.)



However, navigation back to the “landing-page” entry point was unclear to many participants. They opted for the back button or simply signed-out to return to the landing screen. Only one participant quickly identified the breadcrumbs as navigation. Another attempted to use the breadcrumb links, but clicked a different option (Disabilities) and stopped.



Recommendations

Tool page layout

Alternate communication channels were cited as the most common requested feature. Participants want direct access to a person who could resolve their issues and answer their questions. Live chat was one avenue suggested, with direct personal emails, local VA contacts, and the White House hotline rounding-out the communication requests.



Recommendations:

- Live chat could prove a very user-friendly feature across VA.gov, though technical and staffing issues may preclude its implementation.
- Adding specific contact info (email, direct phone numbers, etc.) if such offices/staff exist could save users time and alleviate some frustration.
- Determine what pages the back button and sign-out will bring users to vs. their expectations.
- Possibly rethink landing-page/tool-page strategy; consider a single page with authenticated and unauthenticated states.
- Devise tool-page specific navigation; e.g. links to other tools or top three content links.
- A larger (interim) authenticated tools page strategy is needed ahead of Personalization 2.0.

Takeaways

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Hypotheses

Our thoughts about page content and structure were generally proven correct:

- The Rated Disabilities and View Dependents screens tested well.
- The screen layout and card arrangements were acceptable to most users.
- The lack of sidebar navigation on the tool pages drove users to hit “back” or sign-out to return to the landing screen. This was not unexpected but should be addressed going forward with the tool page layout.

Our ideas regarding usage frequency were refined: Rated Disabilities and View Dependents were frequently visited when users were in the application or appeals processes; other wise these pages were rarely or never visited.

Conclusion

The usability study validated the general design direction of the Rated Disabilities and View Dependents pages in terms of presenting content. The use of “cards” elements was well-received. That said, it is likely that users will access several authenticated tools within a given session—particularly if they are investigating benefits or checking-up on claim status. There is likely a need for greater cohesion across the formatting, navigation and content of these tools, even in the short term.

Notable holes in the study include accessibility testing, as well as testing for mobile platforms. Likewise, edge cases (16+ disabilities, 8+ dependents, etc.) were not tested. **We recommend greater consideration of navigation on “tool page” layouts, and follow-up usability testing when pages are live in pre-production.**

Resources | Links

(Not currently live)

- [Research Plan](#)
- [Conversation Guide](#)
- [Prototypes](#)
- [Session Notes](#)
- [Preliminary Research Summary](#)