Form 526 PTSD research, Part 1

Summary of 526 PTSD Research, February 2021

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Intro and background

Goals and methods

With this research, we want to understand:

- Are the PTSD-related questions in Form 526 triggering for Veterans?
- What are the most common and significant usability issues and pain points?
- What prompts veterans to apply for PTSD?
- Are veterans filling out form 526 alone or do they get help?
- Can the form be shortened?

The methods we are utilizing for part 1 of this research:

- Interview with 4 VSO's
- Interview with 2 stakeholders at the VA
- Workshop with 2 VHA doctors
- Affinity mapping of all the findings

Team

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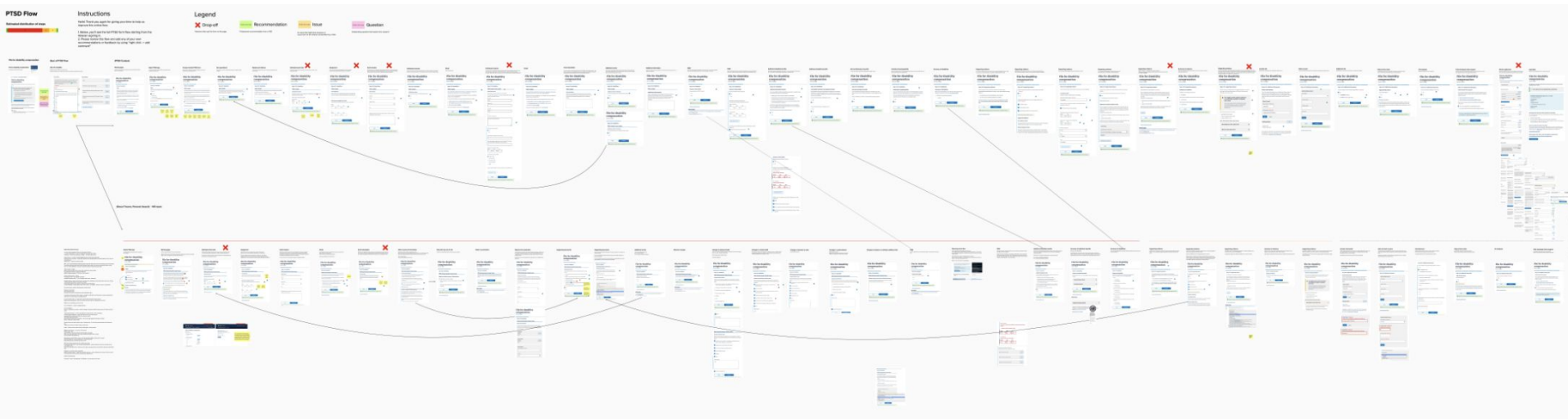kstachura@governmentcio.com

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Process and findings

Overview of the 526 Form PTSD flow (Combat (top part) and Sexual trauma/Personal assault (bottom part))

Process and insights

We individually created hypotheses after revisiting transcripts from the research and used *practitioner triangulation* through an affinity mapping exercise to determine what we were confident in and what would require more research.

Selected insights:

- We should be transparent about why we are asking questions and what we will be doing with that information.
- There is a language mismatch between medical VA terms vs Veteran's day to day terms.
- Several questions/terms in the form is asking for details of event. This can trigger trauma/PTSD symptoms.
- The current method of providing event dates is a significant pain point for Veterans.
- The current state of the online 526 form is too long and should be split apart to reduce Veteran fatigue and frustration.
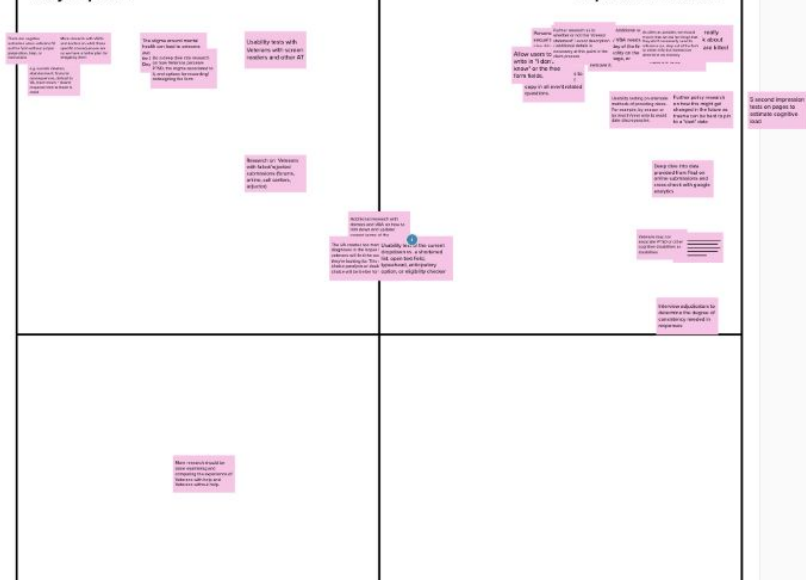
More research needed:

- What questions are absolutely necessary to ensure that VBA have enough information to support a claim?
    - Can certain questions be removed from the 526 PTSD Form?
    - Should the form as it is, continue to persist online given the risks that exist?
- Are there negative outcomes when veterans fill out the form *without proper preparation, help, or instructions*?

Prioritizing insights and opportunities

We created a feasibility vs impact matrix to prioritize future research efforts and design recommendations.
The closer an insight or opportunity is to the top right corner of the matrix, the more it should be prioritized.
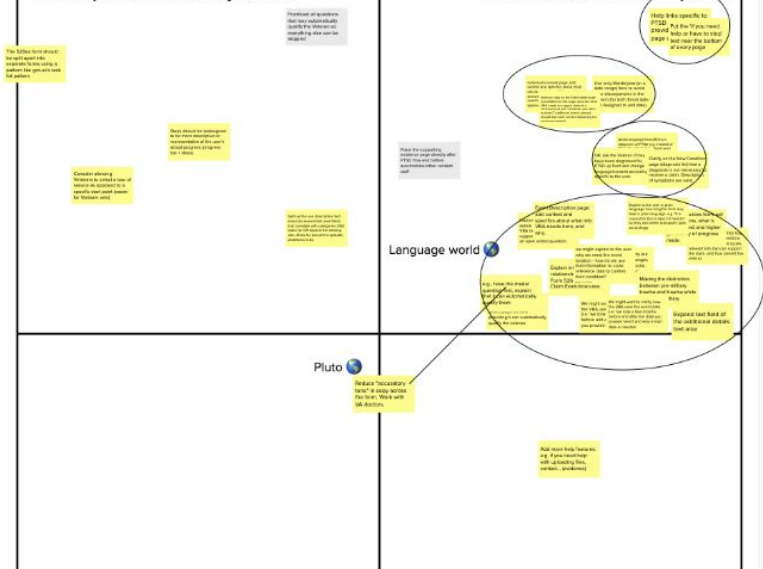
Insights from Event Details

In the PTSD flow, Veterans are asked to provide details of the event linked to their PTSD which involves:

- Remembering the event date
- Listing descriptions of all individuals involved and killed
- Providing event details in an open form field

We conducted a design workshop with two VHA doctors to identify triggering pain points in the experience.

> **Did you kill anyone?** It's all of a sudden, if someone is asking that question, you don't have a clue what I went through.
>
> And *I lose trust in you*.
>
> I think we want people to know this is the agency that's going to care for you.
>
> Veterans don't distinguish between VBA and VHA. And I think any opportunity **we have to be more sensitive in our language,** we have to take it.

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Note: Combat veterans have complained for years of civilians
asking them, "Did you kill anybody?"
```

File for disability compensation

Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

Individuals involved

Was anyone else injured or killed during this event?

(•) Yes

( ) No

« Back   Continue »

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> **The more people have to revisit the details of those memories, the more likely it is to be triggering for them.**
>
> If they're going deep into remembering-- "oh, **what was the second child wearing," and that reminds me of the terrible image** I have of him in my head…
>
> …It just **forces them to engage with the memory** in a much **deeper way** than they probably need to."

Note: Veterans have to write details for individuals involved *one at a time*, which the doctors pointed out could have significantly negative ramifications should-- in their example-- the information of 5 killed children need to be provided.

PTSD: Combat & non-combat

Individuals involved

Please provide the name of the person injured or killed.

If you don't know the person's name, please briefly provide details that would help us identify the person.

First name

John

Middle name

Last name

Smith

Or

Description of the person

Tall and non-descriptive person

Were they a service member?

> So I think what the **whole section [should explain] what a VBA [would need]** that may help us identify things that are already in your record that we can use **to support your claim.**
>
> **And so people understand really clearly what the context is-- that you don't need me to fill this out for five different children.**
>
> Because *this is not helping* anybody get to what they need.

Date they were injured or killed

Month   Day   Year

How were they injured or killed?

- ● Killed in action
- ○ Killed non-battle
- ○ Wounded in action
- ○ Injured non-battle
- ○ Other

If anyone else was killed or injured in this event, you can add them

Add another Person

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Insights from PTSD Combat (resources)

File for disability compensation
Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat & non-combat

Individuals involved

Please provide the name of the person injured or killed.

If you don't know the person's name, please briefly provide details that would help us identify the person.

First name
John

Middle name

Last name
Smith

Or

Description of the person

File for disability compensation
Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

If you need to take a break from the process, your responses are being saved and will be here when you return to your online application.

If you're in crisis, we can support you. Our Veterans Crisis Line is confidential (private), free, and available 24/7.

To connect with a Veterans Crisis Line responder anytime, day or night:

- Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 and press 1, **or**
- Visit Veterans Crisis Line to start a confidential chat online, **or**
- Send a text message to 838255.

If you have hearing loss, please call TTY at 800-799-4889.

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File for disability compensation
Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

Event description

Please tell us what happened during the event. You don't have to repeat any information that you've already shared in this form. You only need to provide the level of detail that you're comfortable sharing.

« Back   Continue »

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In the PTSD flow, the veteran are presented with a page that suggest taking a break if needed, and contact info to resources if they are in a crises :

- This information are presented three times in the flow
- We do not know when and where a Veteran will feel overwhelmed or triggered
- This information might be better served in other ways.

In a design workshop with two VHA doctors we learned more about this.
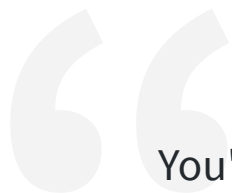
You're signaling on this page that **they may be having problems** with this question.

I'd vote to **move** this page **to the beginning** of the flow.

Maybe add something about **stress and crisis management** here?

File for disability compensation

Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

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> If there's a way to **have this on each page** to say "take a break come back later"-- a reminder on each page?
>
> Or maybe **create a button**, a reminder on each page - that they can click and **get this info at any time.**

File for disability compensation

Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

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If you're in crisis, we can support you. Our Veterans Crisis Line is confidential (private), free, and available 24/7.

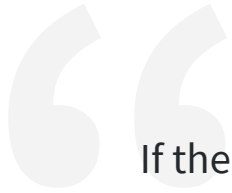To connect with a Veterans Crisis Line responder anytime, day or night:

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Insights from PTSD Combat page (medals)

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Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

To help us research your claim, please let us know the names of any medals or citations you received for the event.

Medals or citations you received for this event

2

2

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One of the first questions in the PTSD flow, asks if the veteran received any medals or citations for the event (that caused their trauma).

- Due to a lack of context, the intention of this question could be misunderstood, and viewed as problematic.
- There are no context about why we ask this question.
- There is no information what VBA will use this information for.
- There is no information that this could in fact support the veterans claim.

In a design workshop with two VHA doctors we learned more about this.

> **This question** will turn me off [because it] **invalidates my trauma**. Does it mean: if I did not get a medal I will not get any support?
>
> **This is tone deaf.** If I killed a child in Iraq - and the first question is "Did you get a Medal" - this is problematic!

File for disability compensation

Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

To help us research your claim, please let us know the names of any medals or citations you received for the event.

Medals or citations you received for this event

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> [This is a] question about experiences that I potentially have grief and ambiguous thoughts about.
>
> **If this question** enables VBA to auto-confirm an event and **makes it easier to file a claim**… **explain** [why]!
>
> **It must be transparent why this is asked.**

File for disability compensation

Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

To help us research your claim, please let us know the names of any medals or citations you received for the event.

Medals or citations you received for this event

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Insights from PTSD Combat (Event date)

File for disability compensation

Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

Estimated event date

Please tell us when this event happened. If it happened over a period of time, please tell us when it started. ①

What if I can't remember the date? ⌄   ③

Date of event

Month	Day	Year
Jan ⬍	1 ⬍	2011	②

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The Veteran is asked to provide the exact date of the event that caused their trauma. This is difficult for Veterans.

- For older Veterans, this date can be several decades old and hard to remember.
- The trauma is often made up by more than one event.
- If an incorrect date is given, this can cause a problem if a discrepancy is detected by VBA.

In a design workshop with two VHA doctors as well as in interviews with VSO's we learned more about this.

> **Why** are you asking me about these **dates**? Are they **necessary?**

Maybe the exact day is not needed. Give the Veteran **more flexibility:** like **month and year** or season "spring 2008".

When it started - this might not be right term, it may be **difficult** with a sexual assault. **Instead: "Provide a time-frame**, for when the assault happened, so we can find evidence to support your claim".

File for disability compensation

Form 21-526EZ

Step 2 of 5: Disabilities

PTSD: Combat

Estimated event date

Please tell us when this event happened. If it happened over a period of time, please tell us when it started.

What if I can't remember the date? ⌄

Date of event

Month	Day	Year
Jan ⇅	1 ⇅	2011

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Key insights and opportunities

Insight #1: Context and Transparency

Bottom line

We should be transparent about why we are asking questions and what we will be doing with that information.

Opportunities (very feasible, moderate to high impact)

- To the best of our ability, we should explain *why* VBA needs certain information in plain language to the Veteran
  - Explain why we need the *Event location*: VBA use that information to cross reference data to confirm their condition, and potentially support their claim
  - *Individual involved* page: add context and explain what info at a minimum VBA needs here, and why it is needed (e.g. you only need to provide one name as opposed to four)
- Add more context: why are we asking for changes in physical, mental, social, professional behavior (markers)?
- Add context on the *Event details* page and the *Additional info* page: describe what VBA need at a minimum to know in order to support a claim, instead of just an open-ended question

Insight #2: Event Date and Event Details

Bottom line

The current method of providing event dates is a significant pain point for Veterans.

Opportunities (very feasible, moderate to high impact)

- Clarify how the VBA uses the Event date (i.e. 'we look a few months before and after the date you provide here') and why a start date is needed

- Use only Month/year (or a date range) here to avoid date discrepancies in the system (for both *Event date* and *Assigned to uni*t date)

- Expand text field of the *Additional details* text area

Insight #3: Mitigate Triggering Content

Bottom line

The PTSD flow *will* trigger Veterans. We must do our best to mitigate or remove triggering content.

Opportunities (very feasible, moderate to high impact)

- Provide help information on *every* page of the PTSD flow as opposed to checkpoints (since we can't predict reliably *when* someone will be triggered)

- Front-load questions (e.g. combat awards) that automatically award eligibility. Explain this to users, and when this info exists, end the flow *before* asking additional triggering questions

- Identify gaps in the experience between VBA, VHA, and the Veteran and remove all questions that are unnecessary

- Invest more research into identifying triggering content and rewriting immediately

Insight #4: Set Expectations

Bottom line

Set clear expectation for claim process and next steps

Opportunities (feasible, moderate to high impact)

- In the beginning of the PTSD flow, explain that all the questions are asked to help VBA locate relevant info that can support the claim, and thus benefit the veteran

- Improve across 526 PTSD form: set expectations, what is coming next and provide more granularity about the progress made in the form

- Provide explanation on the *PTSD Combat award* page on how providing this info can automatically qualify the veteran

- Explain intention and relationship between Form 526 questions and Claim Exam/interview.

Insight #5: Language and Terms

Bottom line

There is a language mismatch between medical VA terms vs Veteran day to day terms.

Opportunities (very feasible, moderate to high impact)

- Avoid language that affirms a diagnosis of PTSD: e.g. instead of "Provide information about your PTSD" word it as "Provide information about your symptoms"

- Provide clear instructions with plain language, in smaller cognitive chunks

Insight #6: Other findings

Bottom line

Additional opportunities

Opportunities (very feasible, moderate to high impact)

- Clarify on the *New Condition* page (diagnosis list) that a diagnosis is not necessary to submit and potentially receive a claim. Description of the veteran's symptoms are valid

    - OR, ask the Veteran if they have been diagnosed for PTSD up front, and change language/content accordingly specific to the user

- The current state of the online 526 form is too long (veterans are experiencing cognitive fatigue) and should be split apart to reduce Veteran fatigue and frustration

Research: Next Steps

Next steps:

- Additional research needed (pink sticky notes on slide 8)
  - Usability test of 526 PTSD form with Veterans.
- Work with VBA to validate or reject our hypotheses with *lower confidence*

End

Questions? Email: josh.kim@adhocteam.us, kstachura@governmentcio.com, cvalla@governmentcio.com