

# Virtual Agent & Spanish-Speaking Veterans



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Research Goals

Virtual Agent & Spanish speaking veterans | 01, 2022

## Goal

Understand the needs of Spanish speaking veterans and beneficiaries when trying to access information in the VA, how the needs for a chatbot differ for this group, and if there are any specific needs.

## Main question

How do the needs for a chatbot differ for the Spanish speaking veterans?

## Hypothesis

- Spanish speaking veterans, especially family members and caregivers would prefer a chatbot as a way of interacting with the VA, rather than via telephone.
- Spanish speaking veterans will have similar information needs than the English speaking ones: ex: Facilities, Claims and Appeals. Nevertheless, there can be expected challenges to access this information, as well as independent topics related to language related topics.

# Participant Demographics

Virtual Agent & Spanish speaking veterans | 01, 2022

Interviewed 7 Hispanic bilingual veterans:

4 Spanish as preferred language

3 English as preferred language

1 Non Bilingual, preferred English

1 in Puerto Rico

Needs of Spanish-Speaking Veterans															
# of participants		8		# of AT users							# of no shows				
Category	%	Target	Study	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
<b>Veterans</b>															
Based on current VA statistics															
<a href="#">Age 55-64+</a>	50.00%	4	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">Cognitive Disability</a>	50.00%	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">Mobile user</a>	50.00%	4	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">Rural</a>	25.00%	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">No degree</a>	25.00%	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">Other than honorable</a>	21.00%	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">Immigrant origin</a>	17.00%	2	7	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">Women</a>	10.00%	1	5	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
<a href="#">Expat (living abroad)</a>	0.40%	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Race</b>															
Based on VA's projected statistics															
Black	15.00%	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hispanic	12.00%	1	7	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Biracial	3.90%	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Asian	3.00%	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Native	0.30%	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

[Participant Tracker on Google Sheets](#)

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Key findings

Virtual Agent & Spanish speaking veterans | 01, 2022

1. Veterans with services available in their preferred language expressed better satisfaction with the VA.
2. Veterans with SPL\* have relied on a third party or acted as support for other Spanish speaking veterans.
3. Information sharing in Spanish is mostly done verbally, with information lost in translation.
4. Veterans showed the need for information consistent with previous research, but preferred having it in their preferred language.
  - a. Most important: emergency services, health, general benefits, solving benefits problems.
5. Challenges navigating the VA website were: inconsistent language across pages, most resources in Spanish as PDFs, not knowing what to search for.
6. Challenges related with interacting in English being: specialized language, time and effort , and comfort of expression.

\*SPL - Spanish as preferred language



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Key findings: Virtual Agent & Spanish

Virtual Agent & Spanish speaking veterans | 01, 2022

1. Veterans see the Virtual Agent as a guide to navigate the VA
2. Veterans found that with providing them a link it was very time and effort saving
3. Veterans mentioned if the Virtual Agent was in Spanish they would expect the content of the links to also be in Spanish
4. Veterans would prefer to use it in their preferred language, but would use it in English if it was the only available option.

\*All veterans had a medium to high proficiency of English.

# Details of findings

About the veterans



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Spanish in day-to day life

**Veterans with services available in their preferred language expressed better satisfaction with the VA.**

1. Veterans who lived in communities with abundance of Spanish resources reported better experiences in the VA.
2. Veterans described that the services found in Spanish differ by community.
3. Veterans described their proficiency as *'defending myself in English'*
4. Main struggle discovering information, and communicating with specialist language, as health related language.

*"I can defend myself in English, and I just try to read it. Others may not though."*

# Veterans with limited to no English proficiency

**Veterans with SPL\* have relied on a third party or acted as support for other Spanish speaking veterans.**

Veterans identified family members, spouses, caregivers (parents of veterans), and other veterans as with little to none proficiency in English,

User mentioned that veterans, beneficiaries and caregivers with another preferred language than Spanish, struggle more accessing services.

Veterans have relied on a third party or acted as support for other Spanish speaking veterans. (ex. Lawyers, friends)

*" I search for information in Spanish, because my parents and brother may take care of me if I get surgery, and I need them to access the information and to understand."*



# Details of findings

Information needs

# Topics of interest

**Veterans showed the need for information consistent with previous research, but preferred having it in their preferred language.**

- Veterans showed the need for information consistent with overall veteran population
- They highlighted as mostly important about general benefits, health, solving benefits problems, and onboarding themselves to the VA.
- Veterans mentioned topics were mentioned with Urgent Need for Spanish:
  - Emergency Services
  - Onboarding time sensitive topics, as PTSD
  - COVID Information,

*"Everything, but specially compensation, medical records, when this is only in English, if I am thinking about the surgery, I can send to a friend of my dad's who's a surgeon, but he doesn't speak English, so it's harder to get a second take."*

# One VA for all

**Veterans showed the need for information consistent with previous research, but preferred having it in their preferred language**

- Veterans preferred to find information in their first language (EN, ES)
- All veterans spoke some level of English, so even though SPL rather find it in Spanish, they would search if English for lack of choice
- Raised concerns for caregivers who don't speak English

*"Speaking in Spanish it's easier, for example to explain pain, in English you can but it is not the same level as in Spanish"*

# Details of findings

Interacting with the VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Interacting with the VA

## Challenges navigating the VA website

- Veterans defined as a first source of information was navigating the VA Website, following link chains.
  - Challenges:
    - Inconsistent languages across content and navigation.
    - Usually end-up being redirected to PDFs
    - Now knowing what to search for
- Described as a *disencouraging* process.
- Veterans described other = alternative resources have been calling, google or printed flyers to find the information.

*“Six or seven links in, I found the information, and got a PDF, it was by chance and at some point I just found it”*

# Information sharing between veterans

**Information sharing in Spanish is mostly done verbally, with information lost in translation.**

7/7 of the veterans have gone to a third party for help or have supported Spanish speaking veterans to find information, navigating the VA and solve issues.

This information sharing to veterans is mostly done verbally, with information lost in translation.

Challenges navigating with English can be:

- Specialized language

- Effort

- Comfort

*“He has sat down with them (SPL Veterans) 3-4 hours and showing them the website and walking them through”*

# Language as a barrier for self service

**Challenges related with interacting in English being: specialized language, time and effort , and comfort of expression.**

Veterans described the biggest barrier for SPL Veterans with limited English was the language.

- English was found as intimidating.
- Takes more effort to understand, ex. reading the information 2 or 3 times,

Veterans described needing translations for some specialized topics, but it has risks

- Veterans showed here is a risk of being lost in translation
- Nuances in language can be missed, and specialty language adds an additional layer.
- Specially for health related information.

Translating from Spanish to English can also be a challenge when the English term is not known.

*“When this happened they gave me a whole book in English, but for a hispanic person, it's not as easy to understand, you don't 'capture' the information the same way”*

# Language as a barrier for self service

**Challenges related with interacting in English being: specialized language, time and effort , and comfort of expression.**

Veterans said they would prefer to navigate the VA:

1. 4/7 Prefer to navigate themselves in Spanish for comfort and reduced effort
2. 2/7 Would like a chat with guidance to guide for subtopics.
3. 2/7 Preferred calling or contacting a live person for help

*"Not 1%, 0% Spanish speaking veterans do not understand how to knock the doorbell"*

*"I call the hospital directly. The site redirects you. A link takes you to another link, and I prefer calling over struggling with the links"*



# Details of findings

Virtual Agent & chatbots expectations



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Previous chatbot experience

## Veterans have some experience with private sector chatbots

1. Veterans were, on balance, familiar with Chatbot concept & had used one before.
2. Most veterans pointed out advantages of CB use (speed & efficiency, relevance, privacy).
3. Some reasons of use where:
  - a. For sensitive information/big risk situations AND more day to day less sensitive tasks
  - b. For multitasking
  - c. Allows resolution from comfort of own home/support different abilities

*"Advantages: not wasting time on hold, depending how responsive the bot is, maybe quicker than getting someone off the phone. Depends on responsiveness and limitations."*

# Expectations from a VA Chatbot

## Veterans see the chatbot as a guide to the VA

1. Veterans expect the elimination of a single resolution track. Allows alternate path options, multi-tasking, and reduces time
2. Operator service: Connects to human for certain next steps or situations the bot does not handle
3. Acts as a file clerk, directing them to where information is stored
4. Takes ownership of disconnections and maintains memory to pick up where left off
5. Accountability: memory of chats and eliminates hear/say

*"It's faster because I write them immediately and it responds immediately, and they route you to the information quickly. I'm not the first to ask the question."*

*"Chatbots in Whatsapp - documents come to you via WA and you can print it out. Everything is kept on file. "*

# Details of findings

Virtual Agent Feedback

# First impressions

## Veterans see the chatbot as a guide to the VA

1. 2/7 Veterans had the first impression that the greeting questions were clickable
2. Rest of veterans saw it as examples
3. Some veterans struggled to understand how to start the chat, and that it was to be started after the disclaimer
4. Most veterans scanned through it or didn't read thoroughly

*"I would think you could click on those examples and it would automatically pop up in the box. "*

# Asking the chatbot

**Veterans found that with providing them a link it was very time and effort saving**

1. Veterans asked mostly general questions about the VA, and the expectations were set as much: benefits, education, facilities,
2. Veterans expected to be authenticated.
3. Veterans felt that bot was sufficient/ worked for their needs.
4. Veterans found that with providing them a link already helpful to find what they need, and effort saving.
5. Veterans expected to authenticate within the chat

*“After the answer gives a link, I understand I don’t need the chatbot anymore”*

# Asking the chatbot

**Veterans found that with providing them a link it was already good help to find what they need, and very effort saving.**

1. Veterans described non-personified voice and tone as being clear, basic.
2. Veterans offered ways disappointment in errors could be mitigated:
  - a. if it were in Spanish,
  - b. if it routed them differently,
  - c. if it offered live resources after errors.
3. Most would prefer to chat than call due to it being time consuming.
4. Veterans would prefer to escalate for complex problems and problem resolution

*"[...] when you have something [in Spanish] it's great, it makes it a very positive experience for the veteran"*

# Virtual Agent and Spanish

**Veterans mentioned if the chatbot was in Spanish they would expect the content of the links to also be in Spanish**

1. All veterans tried to type in English, since the bot was only in English and had no Spanish available.
2. Veterans mentioned if the chatbot was in Spanish they would expect the content of the links to also be in Spanish
3. Veterans mentioned it was very easy to ask

*"To have to transcribe and try to find it in the site it's too cumbersome this would be more easy"*

\*All veterans where proficient in English



# Virtual Agent and Spanish

**Veterans would prefer to use it in their preferred language, but would use it in English if it was the only available option.**

- All Preferred Spanish speaking veterans mentioned they would rather use it in Spanish, but would use in English if it was the only alternative.
- Some assumptions regarding language were:
  - Assume using in Spanish would provide faster escalation since possibly less people using Spanish than English
  - Assume using in English is better because allows more accountability and escalation paths to get to resolution

*"I'd see if there was a Spanish version, but if there wasn't I'd just use it in English."*

\*\* All veterans had a good enough English proficiency to use the chatbot, even if it was not a preferred language

# How to switch the language?

**Veterans would prefer to use it in their preferred language, but would use it in English if it was the only available option.**

- 3/7 Veterans said they would switch the language from the top navigation bar, or the bottom navigation bar
- 4/7 Veterans said they would try to switch the language from the chatbot
  - In the blue title bar of the chatbot
  - As a option in the welcome message
  - Typing: They had the expectation that they had to find it
  - Able to configure in the account
- 3/4 mentioned it would not be easy to find all the words in English they need to ask and would rather ask in Spanish.

*"More spanish specific: 'Ayuda', what can it help with, and with which topics"*

# Opportunities and Recommendations

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Opportunities

Virtual Agent & Spanish speaking veterans | 01, 2022

1. Helping spanish speaking the veterans to navigate and self service VA.gov, even when content is in English
2. Improve the satisfaction and reduce the barriers for spanish speaking veterans
3. Expand on the good bilingual experience of veterans, by providing comfort options in digital services.

# Recommendations

Virtual Agent & Spanish speaking veterans | 01, 2022

1. Continue with the bot in English, and try to add a Spanish option in the future
2. Provide option to redirect to existing Spanish content
3. Offer guidance in bot to help navigate people through the VA and how to ask, ex. Navigation trees.
4. Set clearly when services in the VA are available or interactable in Spanish
  - a. For the Virtual Agent to be explicit it can be asked in Spanish (if available).
5. Monitor traffic of Spanish interest in chatbot via Analytics.
6. Set expectations of language for the links redirection, if the link will not be in English
7. Test solution before implementation for language switch



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs