

Harassment Reporting Landing Page & Poster

Research Readout

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U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Warning:

Harassment, sexual harassment, and assault will be discussed in this presentation, but without any graphic details



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Research Goal & Questions

Goal: Get **Veteran feedback on the new static landing page and poster** about harassment reporting at VA

Research Questions:

1. How do Veterans today report harassment at VA?
2. How would Veterans find out how to report harassment at VA?
3. What are Veterans' reactions to the poster?
4. What are Veterans' reactions to the static landing page?
5. How do Veterans prefer to report harassment?

Poster tested

Report sexual assault or harassment as a Veteran or visitor to VA



Call 911 or the VA police if you've been sexually assaulted or you're at risk of harm right now.

Everyone has the right to safety and respect at VA. If you experience or witness harassment at VA, you can report it by phone or in person.

We'll support you, and respect your need for confidentiality, at every step of the process.



To report harassment by phone

Call our VA harassment prevention office at **800-488-8244**. If you have hearing loss and need help to make a TTY call, call **711**.



To report harassment in person

Tell a VA patient advocate, police officer, or building security professional.

What harassment is and when to report it

Harassment is any unwelcome behavior that creates a hostile space. It can come in many forms:

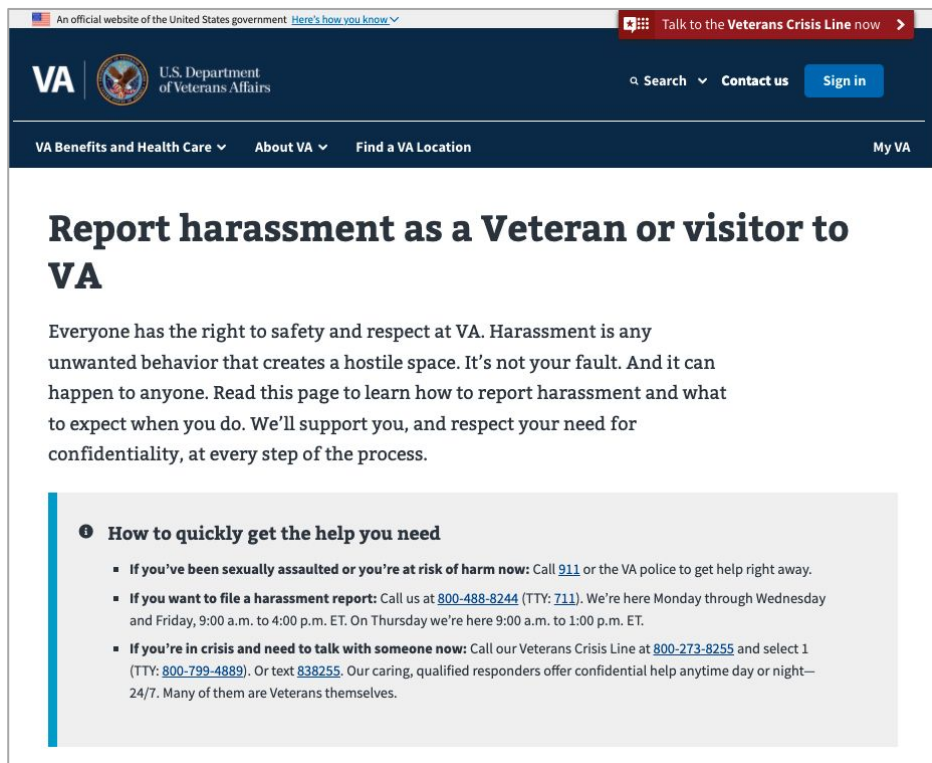
- Verbal comments or threats
- Physical gestures or threats
- Images, emails, text messages, or written messages

Harassment is not your fault. And it can happen to anyone.

We encourage you to tell us right away — or whenever you're ready — if either of these situations happens to you:

- Someone makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe at VA.
- You see or hear harassment of someone else at VA.

New static landing page



The screenshot shows the top portion of the VA website. The header includes the VA logo, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs name, and navigation links for Search, Contact us, and Sign in. Below the header is a dark blue navigation bar with links for VA Benefits and Health Care, About VA, Find a VA Location, and My VA. The main content area has a large heading 'Report harassment as a Veteran or visitor to VA'. Below this heading is a paragraph explaining that everyone has the right to safety and respect at VA, and that harassment is unwanted behavior that creates a hostile space. A section titled 'How to quickly get the help you need' follows, containing three bullet points: 1. If you've been sexually assaulted or you're at risk of harm now: Call 911 or the VA police to get help right away. 2. If you want to file a harassment report: Call us at 800-488-8244 (TTY: 711). We're here Monday through Wednesday and Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. ET. On Thursday we're here 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. ET. 3. If you're in crisis and need to talk with someone now: Call our Veterans Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 and select 1 (TTY: 800-799-4889). Or text 838255. Our caring, qualified responders offer confidential help anytime day or night—24/7. Many of them are Veterans themselves.

How to report harassment as a Veteran or visitor to VA

You have options for how to file your report. When you're ready, we're here to support you.

Report harassment by phone

Call us at [800-488-8244](tel:800-488-8244).

We're here Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. ET and Thursdays, 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. ET.

If you have hearing loss and need help to make a TTY call, call [711](tel:711).

What if I'm not comfortable giving my name with my report? [▼](#)

Report harassment in person

You can also report harassment to us in person at these VA locations:

- **VA health facility:** Tell a VA patient advocate, police officer, or building security professional.
- **VA Vet Center:** Tell the center's supervisor. They'll connect you with the local VA harassment prevention coordinator.
- **VA regional office:** Tell a VA police officer or building security professional. They'll connect you with the local VA harassment prevention coordinator.
- **VA national cemetery:** Tell a VA employee in the cemetery office. If there isn't an office at the cemetery, you can call any cemetery district office by phone.

[Get phone numbers for VA national cemetery district offices](#) [▼](#)

What harassment is and when to report it

Harassment is any unwelcome behavior that creates a hostile space. It can make you feel uncomfortable, unsafe, intimidated, or offended. It can sometimes be sexual in nature. And it can come in many forms:

- Verbal comments or threats
- Physical gestures or threats
- Images, emails, text messages, or written messages

Harassment is not your fault. And it can happen to anyone.

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[Landing page tested \(only part of it is shown\)](#)



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Methodology

Remote moderated 1-hour sessions

over Zoom

- Asked participants **warm-up questions**
 - how to report a hypothetical harassment incident
 - where to look for info about reporting harassment at VA
- **Showed poster** to desktop participants *not* using a screen reader
- **Showed landing page** to ALL participants

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Harassment is any unwelcome behavior that creates a hostile space. It can make you feel uncomfortable, unsafe, intimidated, or offended. It can sometimes be sexual in nature. And it can come in many forms:

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Harassment is not your fault. And it can happen to anyone.

We encourage you to tell us right away—or whenever you're ready—if either of these situations happens to you:

- **Someone makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe at VA.** This can include at a VA location, during a phone or video call, or in written communications. We'll support you through each step of the reporting and resolution process. And we'll connect you with any counseling or other support you may need.
- **You see or hear harassment of someone else at VA.** We're committed to making VA a comfortable and safe place for all. And we need your help.



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Participant Demographics

14 participants—all Veterans

- 10 women, 3 men, 1 non-binary & trans
- 1 gay/lesbian/bisexual
- 5 with cognitive disability
- 1 screen reader user
- 10 desktop, 3 phone, 1 tablet

Findings in 3 areas

We were looking for Veteran feedback on the new static landing page and poster about harassment reporting at VA, but we also got feedback in other areas.

- 1. Feedback on the landing page and poster**
- 2. Attitudes around harassment and reporting**
- 3. The broader VA context**

Key Findings: Feedback on landing page and poster

1. The **desired amount of content varies greatly** among participants
(from "all the details" to "only the headers" to "just the phone number/link to report")
2. The **days/hours for reporting by phone were too limited**
(Mon, Tue, Wed, Fri 9 am - 4 pm ET and Thu 9 am to 1 pm ET)
3. Some participants **expected to be able to report online**

Days/hours for reporting by phone were too limited

Half of the participants (7 of 14) were concerned about the limited hours for the harassment reporting phone number (M/Tu/W/F 9-4 and Th 9-1 ET) because

- Time of day **when they finally summon enough courage to report harassment is unpredictable**, and they don't want to have to wait until the next morning or weekday

"I would hope for a 24-hour line...Sometimes this stuff happens at 3 am, or you remember it at 3 am, or you come to the conclusion that you should report it then" (p12).

- *"Might be **closed by the time I get home from my appointment**" (p11).*
- **Inconvenient to report in private after work** for Veterans who work during the day

Some said they might call the Veterans Crisis Line because it's available 24x7 but doubted that they would be able to report harassment that way.

One person wondered what message they would get if they called the phone number after hours to report.

Expected to be able to report online

4 of 14 (29%) participants expected a link on the landing page to report online

and were disappointed when they couldn't find one

- They wanted to be able to write out what happened in private instead of having to talk to someone, and also not get stuck on hold on the phone
- One participant said that if they didn't want to talk to anyone, they would text Veterans Crisis Line

"Sometimes you're on hold forever...I don't want to call the VA again...also if you're not comfortable talking about it" (p8).

Key Findings: Attitudes around harassment and reporting

1. **Much harassment isn't reported** for a variety of reasons, most commonly because it doesn't seem serious/bad enough or physical, and so many people just say something directly to the person and then try to forget about it.

"How bad did it make me feel--harmless or psychologically damaging?...Have I felt victimized enough to complain about it?" (p14).

2. Participants said they'd **decide how to report harassment based on their current location** (i.e., at a VA site vs. at home), **their own preferences, and their past experiences**. The most common way to report was in-person with a patient advocate.

Key Findings: The broader VA context

1. Participants reacted with varying degrees of **skepticism about whether the new landing page and poster would reduce harassment** at VA.

"Oh my goodness, the fact that you're even going to put it out there that these things exist at the VA--that's huge...because for years, nobody wanted to admit that any of this type of behavior was going on...It's the accountability--knowing that something's going on, and we're going to try to find a way to address it" (p6).

"Is this creating a product to cover their behind? I wonder about the resources offered...I'll wait to assess until I try it" (p4).

"A bit more transparent than VA has been in the past...Honestly, it feels like 'nice try'. This is cool, but we've kind of seen this stuff before. I've been getting this since I was in the service--classes about sexual harassment, and nothing changes" (p9).

2. **Harassment is pervasive at VA and in the military, especially directed towards women.**

"Harassment happens so frequently [at VA that] it's a surprise when it doesn't happen" (p9).

VA



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Skepticism about whether the new landing page and poster would reduce harassment at VA

Some Veterans are skeptical because of their experiences to the contrary at VA and in the military. They **don't think anything will change and want to see evidence** in addition to a new poster and web page, such as new policies and behaviors by VA employees.

"This would get my interest: Sexual harassment or lunchtime events or women's stuff, a separate entrance for women. Actions that I could feel happen--not just a web page...Tell me what's being done...What best practices and standard operating procedures are you going to be going under when this happens? What have you done...to show me that it's not going to continue like that? Tell me you're hiring X number of MST coordinators, or you're putting more time into better therapy for MST, or you're going to require the men on base have some kind of class on it. If a guy is found to have done it, he's no longer welcome at that VA anymore, because when people get in trouble for that kind of stuff, they're still allowed to come back to the VA, and it's just a problem waiting to happen" (p9).

Harassment is pervasive at VA and in the military

10 of 14 (71%) participants said they've experienced harassment at VA.

"I got out in '96 and avoided the VA for 17 years because I couldn't stand the harassment...better now because they recognize that harassment does exist...When I got out, it was 'don't make a scene, don't say anything, you're going to get in trouble'...The VA and the military both need to do some reckoning with how they serve women and how they treat assaults..." (p9).

- 4 participants shared their **experiences of harassment by VA employees**, including the following:
 - p14 was asked by a VA employee for her disability rating and said "100%". The VA employee then laughed and said, "Who'd you have to do to get that?"
 - p4 saw a VA-contracted provider who heard about her MST and said, "I don't know what this is" and countered her story with "maybe you're misperceiving this."
 - p7 requested a female provider but didn't get one. She didn't feel comfortable with the male provider she saw and asked for a different provider. After that, the male provider called her and was defensive and berated her for not feeling comfortable with him.
- 4 participants shared **experiences of harassment by other Veterans or visitors** at VA

Key Recommendations: Technology, content, and design

1. The landing page and poster need to **provide simple, clear instructions for how to report harassment or assault**, with easy access to optional information for those who want more detail. To do this, we need to simplify the harassment reporting process.
2. **Provide an online form to report harassment**, which would enable more people to report in private and at any time of day or night

Key Recommendations: VA processes and services

1. In order to simplify the landing page and poster, we need to **simplify the harassment reporting process** to reduce the burden on the person mustering up the courage to report. They may be distraught and not know whether what happened is assault, sexual assault, or harassment.
 - a. **Veterans expect ONE phone number that you can call ANYTIME day or night**
(vs. having to choose between EIGHT different numbers for different times/locations on landing page)
 - b. Veterans told us about their experiences trying to report to various staff members and their varied outcomes. **Veterans expect to be able to report to someone in person and consistently get empathy and results**
(vs. FIVE different kinds of people listed on the landing page)

Key Recommendations: VA processes and services (cont'd)

2. Veterans are not confident that VA will do what the landing page and poster say will be done

"Is this creating a product to cover their behind? I wonder about the resources offered...I'll wait to assess until I try it" (p4).

We need to increase Veterans' confidence as we launch **and communicate that harassment is something that VA cares about** and will be taking action to reduce

- a. Communications should speak to ALL Veterans—including women who have been repeatedly harassed at VA
- b. Show what actions VA is taking

One research participant suggested handing out a little card with the harassment reporting phone number, as is currently done for the VCL

Next Steps

1. **Simplify the content as much as possible and launch** the landing page and poster
2. Continue working with this team to **simplify the harassment reporting process** and communicate that to Veterans and visitors
3. **User-centered design of an online harassment reporting tool**

Questions?

Link to [full research report on GitHub](#)

Reach out to Cindy Merrill, Martha Wilkes, or Danielle Thierry on Slack