

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Vet Centers Client Research

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Discovery Readout

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Background

Vet Center Veteran Clients were interviewed, as part of a larger discovery effort to understand the services offered by Vet Centers for the purpose of:

- Upgrading Vet Center facility detail pages
- Assessing the need to update or add to the broader health services taxonomy

This study followed a recent study where we interviewed Vet Center employees (Outreach Specialists) for the same purpose.

The screenshot shows the official website of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. The page is for the Atlanta Vet Center. It includes a header with the VA logo, a search bar, and a 'Talk to the Veterans Crisis Line now' button. The main content area has a title 'Atlanta Vet Center' and a 'View on map' button. Below the title is a section titled 'Limited services and hours' with a warning icon. The text in this section states: 'We're currently open for limited in-person service, and screening all visitors for symptoms, due to the coronavirus COVID-19. For individual and group counseling, we recommend using our telehealth services. If you need to talk with someone confidentially, please call us anytime 24/7 at 877-927-8387.' Below this is the address: '1800 Phoenix Boulevard, Building 400, Suite 404, College Park, GA 30349'. There is a 'Main number: 404-417-5414' and a 'Get directions' link. A note says 'Planning to visit? Please call first as information on this page may change.' To the right of the address is a map showing the location. Below the map is a table of 'Hours of operation' for each day of the week. At the bottom, there is a 'Services' section with a list of services offered. A red box highlights the 'Services' section.

Services

- Individual and group counseling for Veterans, service members, and their families
- Family counseling for military related issues
- Bereavement (grief) counseling
- Military sexual trauma counseling and referral
- Community outreach and education
- Substance abuse assessment and referral
- Employment referral
- Referral of other VA services

Existing Vet Center detail page

Research Goals

The goal of this study was to:

- Understand a Vet Center client's experience, impression, and relationship with Vet Centers
- Identify gaps between what Clients and Outreach Specialists think about Vet Centers

Prior to the study, we hypothesized that:

- Clients have a favorable view of Vet Centers and the services that they offer.
- Clients view Vet Centers as distinct entities from other VA facilities.

Research Questions

- How do Veterans and service members first learn about Vet Centers?
- What is the client experience for different demographics?
- What services, resources or activities are most valuable to Veterans, service members and their families?
- How long do clients typically engage with Vet Centers and does their engagement or opinion of Vet Centers change over time?
- What information do Veterans and service members want or expect to see on a website?

Method

- **45 minute generative questioning interview sessions conducted via Zoom**
- **Review of current Vet Center facility detail page**

Who we talked to

- 15 Veterans (8 of which were confirmed to be Vet Center clients)

Of the 8 Clients:

- Ages: 1-(25-34), 1-(35-44), 2-(45-54), 1-(55-64), 2-(65-74), 1-(Undisclosed)
- 5-GWOT, 1-Vietnam, 1-Army reservist (not deployed), 1-Marine (not deployed)
- 4-Caucasian, 2-Hispanic/Latino, 1-African American, 1-Native Hawaiian/Pac Islander
- All clients received group or individual counseling
- 7 major metro, 1 rural
- Wide range of disability ratings and cognitive disabilities
- 3-PTSD, 2-PTSD+MST, 1-MST, 2-Undisclosed

Research Findings

Findings by Hypothesis

Clients have a favorable view of Vet Centers and the services that they offer: **TRUE**

Clients view Vet Centers as distinct entities from other VA facilities: **TRUE**

Findings Summary

1. Vet Centers are not well known among Veterans
2. 8 of 8 Clients had a favorable view of Vet Centers
3. 7 of 8 Clients expressed being “separate from VA” as a key benefit of Vet Centers
4. Clients feel deeply understood at Vet Centers
5. Clients value the Veteran to Veteran approach to counseling, outreach and staffing of Vet Centers
6. Veterans often need help with VA benefits and want to know what help is available at a Vet Center
7. Military culture can be especially difficult for clients dealing with MST
8. Clients would like to know the name and background of VC staff before calling or visiting
9. 3 Clients were surprised to see employment referral as a Vet Center service
10. 2 Clients called out flexibility in scheduling as a benefit that should be highlighted on a website

1. Vet Centers are not well known among Veterans.

Non-clients confuse Vet Centers with any place you get medical care within the VA system. Most of the non-client participants were convinced that they had been going to a Vet Center. Of the 7 non-clients, only 1 was familiar Vet Centers.

How clients in this study learned about Vet Centers:

- 3-Referred by a VA medical professional (often another counselor)
- 2-Internet search
- 1-CBOC (2 negative experiences with CBOCS by MST participants)
- 1-Outreach event
- 1-Another Veteran

2. 8 of 8 Clients had a favorable view of Vet Centers

Clients value Vet Center's unique ability to help Veterans with diverse needs, at different stages of their journey, navigate the transition to civilian life, especially when they had already hit brick walls with care or eligibility

"I went from 0 to 100 having stumbled upon it and having no expectations to advocating for it."

"I think with vet centers they do their best to help folks because it can be stressful when you have veteran friends that get benefits but you don't so you feel isolated or targeted because you don't get what they get. The vet center is able to show you that you can get help that is not contingent on va medical care."

"[A Vet Center is] an institution that was established to respect the privacy of veterans that were distrustful of the VA hospitals. I held it in when it happened almost 30 years ago. [Of a Vet Center counselor:] I told her she saved my life because that's how I feel."

3. 7 of 8 Clients expressed being “separate from VA” as a key benefit of Vet Centers

This sentiment was expressed most often when asked “What is the most important thing for someone to know before visiting a Vet Center for the first time?” or when asked to compare a Vet Center with other VA facilities. **What “separate from VA” means to a Veteran:**

Confidentiality - 5 of 8 Clients interviewed expressed the importance of privacy and confidentiality that Vet Centers provide. Veterans felt confident that counseling would remain “off the record” and could not be used against them. This was expressed by 100% of the female participants in this study.

Location and environment - The physical location being away from other VA facilities seemed to reinforce the sense of confidentiality for clients. Clients often mentioned the “small”, “warm”, “intimate”, nondescript nature of a Vet Center that creates the “safe” environment that makes them comfortable.

“I would say confidentiality, for me, when I started it was really important because of the military culture and my situation. I was worried that if I said anything I thought it would get back to the VA and would prevent me from getting benefits. I think most veterans are spooked and kind of in the mindset that what you said will be used against you. To let them know confidentiality is highly important.”

4. Clients feel deeply understood at Vet Centers

Clients felt Vet Center staff and counselors do a good job of asking questions and understanding a Veteran's context when assessing their needs and helping them find solutions.

"I think the vet center can take in account what is occurring and with their training/understanding they can maybe take an errant comment like 'I'm going to kick your ass' whereas if it is at a PCM appointment, it has to be taken at face value. A [VC] counselor may have better understanding and get deeper without having to do a more formal reporting. Not that it isn't documented but they have better context if that makes sense"

"The VA has gotten better with bad paper discharges but there are still hard lines where anything less than an honorable discharge then they don't get services whereas Vet Centers are able to interpret what happened. Vet centers ask why they made them do it and they get the answers. The army, there is little room to recover or grieve. Like 45 minutes to grieve then get back out to the mission, we lost 19 guys and we had the highest casualty rate. You come in grieve then go back out to combat, you get water and eat, cry, and get back out there."

5. Clients value the Veteran to Veteran approach to counseling, outreach and staffing of Vet Centers

Shared military experiences helps to creates a sense of belonging and similitude among clients, especially those that engaged in group counseling. Sharing of their own personal experiences was the way most clients said that they would approach describing a Vet Center to friend who might benefit from contacting a Vet Center or to make them comfortable visiting.

“The vet center is where I felt like I belonged and not alone in what I was feeling. I am from a nonmilitary family so I came home feeling screwed up. Knowing that someone else has gone through it and has been there. I put myself out there so they know they aren't alone. The biggest thing is the stigma with mental health, you're not weak for asking for help.”

“I would tell them my experience, having a group of veterans from your era then the leader starts the topic and then talking about the issues like living with PTSD with family. It was instructional the first time I heard it because it was the same issues I was having. Meeting with people that you were in war with is the number one way to deal with it.”

“The Vet Center for me was a great fit because we all are similar. Us taking care of us.”

6. Veterans often need help with VA benefits and want to know what help is available at Vet Center

Many participants faced administrative challenges when dealing with VA benefits disability ratings, claims and eligibility that created barriers for them before they were able to begin managing their mental health. Clients valued the help that Vet Centers can offer in navigating the VA system for benefits but some were unaware of the help available to them and wanted to see this spelled out more clearly.

“It doesn't seem like they can help with benefits at least not from what I am aware of.”

“Most veterans need help with claims so if they help with va claims and appeals you need to say that and it be prominent. They are not VSO's like people that help with claims so if they are you need to spell that out.”

“[The Vet Center] did help me, I just had eligibility issues so they helped to provide records of my PTSD to further show that I deserve the care at the VA which is frustration that you need to prove and then do everything except give up your first born.”

“If you call and ask to talk to a counselor it's like jumping through 1000 hoops and the Vet Center can break those barriers and if you need to go to the VA, the Vet center can work as a liaison for you.”

7. Military culture can be especially difficult for clients dealing with MST

In this study 4 of the 5 participants dealing with MST were also dealing with PTSD. In this study all MST participants were women and while the majority of these Veterans were satisfied with their care, they shared similar accounts of having to endure "military culture" which makes their situation extra challenging. Making this demographic feel comfortable is important to understand.

“I went to the VA first and they always asked me if I'm here with my dad, or husband but I am like I spent this time in Iraq and you can't even respect me as a veteran so that's what changed now. [with Vet Center]”

“When me and my friend started working to get more women to use the VA, they changed the layout of the lobby so that when a female goes in there, you don't have to sit and listen to guys talking about who they screwed over the weekend. I don't have to sit in an environment like that. They starting putting signs up to watch your languages.”

“For MST, they are going to be particular about the gender of the person, keyed in on how confidential it is. I can envision some that would be comfortable doing it in group but others that would be terrified of group sessions. Maybe spelling it out what resources for MST is available for the vet center and how it is different from the medical center would be useful.”

8. Clients would like to know the name and background of VC staff before calling or visiting.

4 of 8 Clients offered this suggestion as a website improvement.

“I think that would lessen some of the unknowns, for me when I first went in I had very few expectations and was open to it but I didn't know what I was getting into so if I had the opportunity to learn a bit about the staff that were there I would have taken advantage and read it before my first visit”

“Maybe one more thing, they could put the counselor's name and/or pictures of who are the people that operate that Vet Center, like introducing themselves and telling a little about themselves, so maybe the person will know who they are going to see, what to expect more or less. I look at this but I don't know who I'm going to meet, their experience or what they look like. ”

9. 3 Clients were surprised to see employment referral as a Vet Center service.

4 of 8 Clients offered this suggestion as a website improvement.

“[After reviewing the list of services on Vet Center website] That tracks with my understanding but I didn't know they did employment referral and that's what I actually do. I work with job seeking veterans.”

10. 2 Clients called out flexibility in scheduling as a benefit that should be highlighted on a website

“I also know that they have some flexible scheduling and make some appointments available to come in early or later in the day and weekend times but it is on a case by case basis.”

“Another thing I don't like is the hours of operation, their hours are more broad and they have someone that stays late, if you are working 9-5 then you think this may not work for me because they end at 4:30. It doesn't give you the idea that someone is [available] there until 8pm. Stuff like that, you feel more comfortable calling in if I need a late appointment but this website doesn't indicate that.”

Additional Findings

Additional Findings

1. Transitioning into civilian life can be lifelong. One Veteran mentioned waiting 50 years and another 30 years before finally seeking professional help to deal with their military trauma.
2. Some eligibility details are unclear and/or may create a barrier to Veterans seeking assistance.
3. Clients expressed an awareness of underrepresented populations difficulty getting VA benefits.
4. 3 male clients expressed an awareness of MST as important.
5. Not all VA's promote Vet Centers. One Memphis, TN, Vietnam Veteran group counseling client said in the 16 years he'd been going to the VA for counseling and psychiatry he'd never been told about Vet Centers nor seen Vet Centers promoted on walls. He thought it was a failure on the VA's part.
6. One Veteran was confused as to why PTSD was not listed within the services.
7. Hearing loss made one Vietnam Veteran choose individual counseling over group and avid user of text over phone.

Recommendations

Recommendations Summary

1. Explore keyword search analytics, SEO, and search improvement opportunities to connect VC services to Vet needs, eg PTSD, MST [Language analysis to inform this]
2. Improve findability of Vet Center locations from Google
3. Stress 100% confidential
4. Leverage by Veterans for Veterans mission statement on website
5. Mirror Vet language in content writing [Language analysis to inform this]
6. Give concrete examples of the types of benefit & employment help Veterans can expect
7. Communicate Vet Centers' intimate, casual, non-intimidating environment on website
8. Highlight client testimonial on website
9. List accurate examples of affinity groups available at each Vet Center
10. Give MST a dedicated section or page with tailored information and imagery
11. Highlight flexibility in scheduling
12. List key personnel with a brief background on website
13. Simplify and clarify eligibility with an emphasis on "just call, we'll help"
14. Highlight Vet Center's inclusivity and broad ability to help Vets in need

“I wish they could put it in there that there are more Veterans that can get help through the Vet Center than the Veterans know. A lot of Vets don't know that they can use it.”

Next Steps & Appendix

Next Steps

Upcoming sprint

- Share findings with stakeholders and discuss highest priority needs for MVP.
- Second pass language analysis to inform any needed updates to health services taxonomy and copywriting for Vet Center website MVP
- Work with team to explore keyword, SEO, and search improvement opportunities to connect Veteran needs to Vet Center services

Future sprints

- Prototype Vet Center website MVP incorporating content and design recommendations
- Test prototype with Veterans and service members.

Appendix

[Conversation guide](#)

[Interview transcripts](#)

[Synthesis Spreadsheet](#)

[Research Findings on GitHub](#)