

VA

Digital Health Modernization: Research Readout

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Research Overview

Research Goals and Methods

Our objective was to understand how **Veterans and caregivers think about and experience VA health care and the My HealtheVet patient portal in the context of other VA benefits and non-VA health care systems.**

We conducted remote, semi-structured interviews with 23 Veterans and caregivers to understand their story.

We asked participants to show us how they would complete a series of health-related tasks online to help us understand their workflows.

[Research plan and conversation guides](#)

Recruitment

Recruited **Veterans and caregiver participants** based on 3 main criteria:

1. Era of military service
2. Use of VA benefits
3. User role: Veterans, Veterans with dependents, and caregivers

Segmentation that emerged during analysis:

1. How and when participants enrolled in VA health care
2. Use of non-VA health care and insurance for themselves or dependents
3. Cognitive impairments (TBI, PTSD)

Constraints and other disclaimers

Remote ethnographic research has its limits.

The insights from this study do not include perspectives of:

- Participants using assistive technologies or with functional disabilities
- Transitioning service members (see #4 from previous slide)
- Providers (VHA, Community Care, or private)
- MHV coordinators, call center representatives, or VSO/VSR participants

Synthesis is ongoing.

Key Findings

My HealtheVet branding & trust

#1 INSIGHT:

Veterans and caregivers value MHV because it is the fastest, easiest method available to them. They prefer digital tools to phone or in-person alternatives for health tasks.

My HealtheVet branding & trust

SUPPORTING THEMES

My HealtheVet had **high name recognition, satisfaction, and trust** among participants.

Participants **preferred My HealtheVet to phone or in-person** alternatives at the VA.

VA benefit workflows

#2 INSIGHT:

Veterans and caregivers don't go to VA.gov to do health tasks. They have worked hard to learn the fragmented VA digital landscape, and they go directly to MHV because it enables them to complete most of their health tasks.

VA benefit workflows

SUPPORTING THEMES

Participants went to **legacy sites (MHV, eBenefits) instead of VA.gov** to manage their benefits.

Participants **struggled to complete health tasks** whenever those tasks took them **outside MHV**.

Participants **did not appear to notice that they had been redirected to** a new site when tasks took them to **VA.gov**.

Secure sign-in

#3 INSIGHT:

Veterans and caregivers do not use the secure sign-in partner options on MHV.

The secure sign-in (SSOe) options are not familiar, not fully understood, and not visually prominent.*

* This user behavior was overwhelmingly consistent across participants in this study, however, subsequent research should be conducted in other contexts (outside of MHV and health care).

Secure sign-in

SUPPORTING THEMES

Because participants did not use the secure sign-in option, they **experienced issues when they went outside of MHV** to do tasks.

The **secure sign-in options were not understood** or visually prominent.

Participants **did not have concerns about the security** of their MHV account.

Health care and disability on VA.gov

#4 INSIGHT:

Veterans miss opportunities to effectively obtain, manage, and maximize their benefits because VA presents disability and health care separately, without explaining the connections between them.

Health care and disability on VA.gov

SUPPORTING THEMES

Participants were **more confident** in their understanding of **eligibility and rules for disability** than health care.

Participants felt that having **access to their medical record was critical for the success of their disability claim.**

My HealtheVet patient portal

#5 INSIGHT:

Veterans and caregivers felt MHV was easy to use because the tools on the homepage are discoverable and reflect their top health care tasks. The tools featured on the homepage are Pharmacy, Appointments, Messaging, and Health Records.

My HealtheVet patient portal

SUPPORTING THEME

Participants **frequently used and highly valued the homepage tools**, but did not use, find value, or easily discover other features.*

* This user behavior was overwhelmingly consistent across participants in this study; however, we hypothesize that users with cognitive impairments and/or severe chronic health conditions will have different needs and exhibit different behavior in the patient portal.

My HealtheVet patient portal

#6 INSIGHT:

The lack of visibility into VA medical bills can cause confusion and financial burden to Veterans and caregivers.

My HealtheVet does not provide visibility, functionality, or pathways to complete tasks for medical bills.

My HealtheVet patient portal

SUPPORTING THEME

Participants rely on their **outside health insurance providers** and **hard copy VA medical bills to decipher their VA health finances.**

My HealtheVet patient portal

#7 INSIGHT:

The inability to delineate actions between users of a single MHV account (e.g., Veteran and caregiver) can create friction with the provider and between users.

My HealtheVet patient portal

SUPPORTING THEME

Caregiver participants had **created workarounds to effectively manage health needs** when sharing one MHV account with their Veteran spouse or child.

Secure Messaging

Secure Messaging: Overview

Secure Messaging is **trusted and often the primary method** for veterans and caregivers to **communicate with their care team** other than in-person visits.



That is the easiest way to get ahold of them. Otherwise you are sitting on hold from 45 minutes to an hour trying to transfer through the systems. Then they will either call us or email back for the follow up.



— Veteran

Secure Messaging: High Level Findings

- INSIGHT: Participants preferred My HealtheVet (MHV) to phone or in-person alternatives at the VA.
- Secure Messaging was used by majority of participants.
- Secure Messaging supports other core tasks on MHV, such as prescription refills, scheduling appointments, and ordering medical equipment.
- Secure Messaging was viewed as the best way to get in touch with doctors directly, even though messages would get triaged by a nurse first.

“

***This is my best means of communication
with my doctor***

”

— ***Veteran***

Secure Messaging: High Level Findings

- Mainly veteran or caregiver initiated communications. There was an attitude of having to be proactive on the veteran or caregiver side.
- Secure Messaging was indicated as being beneficial as a record of communication with care team. Particularly for those with memory/cognitive concerns, and/or veterans and caregivers co-managing communications.
- Secure Messaging was preferable over phone communications for veterans with hearing issues.

“

Sometimes I write better than I can speak. I can provide more detail in writing, and sometimes secure messaging provides a better place to vent that out.

”

— ***Veteran***

Secure Messaging: High Level Findings

- Participants didn't have strong workflows on VA.gov because they don't use VA.gov to manage health. MHV lets them complete all their health tasks in one location.
- INSIGHT: Because participants did not use the secure sign-in option, they experienced issues when they went outside of MHV to do tasks.
- Caregivers have their own workflows with Secure Messaging.

“

I am unable to go to all appointments due to COVID and having kids. So we usually send emails back and forth if something is going on with updates. So there's a record for her to fall back on if it needs to be tracked.

”

— Caregiver

Secure Messaging: Key Takeaways

Secure messaging is an **extremely valuable tool** for veterans and caregivers for managing health care.

Secure Messaging **supports other core tasks on MHV.**

Veterans and caregivers don't go to VA.gov to complete health tasks, and **struggle to complete tasks when they take them outside of MHV.**

Recommendations & Potential Improvements

Secure Messaging: Recommendations

- Deeply consider connection between Secure Messaging and other MHV tools.
- Improvements in sign in flow and less friction with VA.gov would greatly improve experience when switching between sites.

Composing Messages:

- Could the subject field options change based on who message was addressed to.
- Add ability for patients to update their contact list with latest provider (currently can only remove).

Secure Messaging: Recommendations

Composing Messages:

- In the “To” dropdown, humanize the names of care teams so it’s easy to choose the correct one.
- Move the “Compose a Message” button link so it’s closer to the message box in main content. (Some folks had trouble finding it above the left navigation).
- Consider adding an icon to “Compose a Message” button.

Notifications:

- Add SMS notifications

Secure Messaging: Recommendations

Signatures:

- Allow for multiple signatures to indicate veteran vs. caregiver.

Other tools:

- Cross link messaging with other patient portal features. Example:
Secure Messaging is often used when Rx is not available for refill/has expired.

Next Steps

Secure Messaging: Next Steps

Access to Providers & Admins:

- Need to better understand Secure Messaging works from the provider side. How does this tool work for them?
- How could the system be improved to support veterans/caregivers and provider tasks.

Others folks:

- Participants using assistive technologies or with functional disabilities.
- MHV coordinators, call center representatives, or VSO/VSR participants.

Questions