

# All Hands: Platform Crew Strategy

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VA



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## Platform Crew

CMS Core Application

Testing Tools

Front End Tools

Back End Tools

Operations

Service Design

Product Support

Content & IA

Analytics

## Sitewide Crew

Facilities

VAMC Upgrade

CMS Product Support

Public Website

Search & Discovery

Sitewide Content

UX & Design System

## Acct Experience Crew

Personalization

Login and Identity

Contact Center Support

Ask a Question

VANotify

VETText

## Health Tools Crew

Health Care Applications

Patient Questionnaire

Digital Health Modernization Research

Online Scheduling

COVID Response

## Benefits Tools Crew

Claims & Appeals

Debt Resolution

eBenefits Transformation

Education Application

## Native Mobile Crew

Team 1

Team 2

**this info is subject to change, but is provided here for visualization of the general structure**

Platform Crew Chief: Rachael Roueche

Platform Crew Engineering Lead: Dror Matalon

## **Platform Crew OCTO-DE Leads**

CMS Core Application: Mike

Service Design: Rachael

Testing Tools: Cory

Product Support: Rachael

Front End Tools: Dror

Content & IA: Rachael

Back End Tools: Dror

Analytics: Rachael

Operations: Dror

# Agenda

1. Background (10 min)
2. High level strategy (15 min)
3. 2021 Objectives (20 min)
4. Next steps (5 min)
5. BREAK (5 min)
6. Q&A (25 min)



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# BACKGROUND

# Background

## VA at a high level

**22 M**

total US Veterans

**5 M**

Veterans in receipt of  
VA disability benefits

4th largest health care system in  
the country with

**145**

hospitals and

**1,243**

outpatient facilities serving over

**9 M**

Veterans

**380 K**

VA employees

2nd largest federal  
agency with

**\$221 B**

budget

**VA**



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# Background

## VA at a high level

**Health:** Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

**Benefits:** Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)

**Burials and memorials:** National Cemetery Administration (NCA)



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# Background

## History of the Platform

<2013

### state of VA technology

- Rigid, waterfall deployment practices
- Lotta Java
- Self hosted on VA infrastructure
- No usability or a11y testing, plain language content, or user-centered IA
- DS Logon only sign in option

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# Background

## History of the Platform

<2013

### impact

- 3-6 months between deployments
- Customer satisfaction 53%
- Some months saw only 40% availability of online services

# Background

## History of the Platform

< 2013

Jul, 2013

“redesign the art of the possible in how our country serves our nation’s veterans”

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# Background

## History of the Platform

< 2013

Jul, 2013

Mar, 2015

README.md created for vets-website

**VA | Vets.gov**

**VA**



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# Background

## History of the Platform



50+ interactive features, and 1.3 million unique user accounts

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# Background

## History of the Platform



### state of Vets.gov technology

- From rigid, waterfall deployment process, to **CI/CD**
- From lotta Java, to **open source Ruby and React codebases**
- From self hosted on VA infrastructure, to **AWS (cloud!)**
- From no usability or a11y testing, plain language content, or user-centered IA, to **process and expertise in these areas**
- From DS Logon as the only sign in option to **multiple sign-in options including ID.me w/2FA**

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# Background

## History of the Platform



### impact

- Deployments no longer at 3-6 month intervals, but **daily**
- Customer satisfaction rose from 53% to **over 60%**
- Availability rose from the at-times-40% to **consistently above 99.9%**

“

It's one of the better websites than any gov agency...VA seems more user friendly than anything else.

It's not quite what I expected - it's cleaner. I'm used to seeing a jumble of links that's hard to understand.

”



# Background

## History of the Platform



vets.gov, but make it VA.gov

# Background

## History of the Platform



# the Platform is born

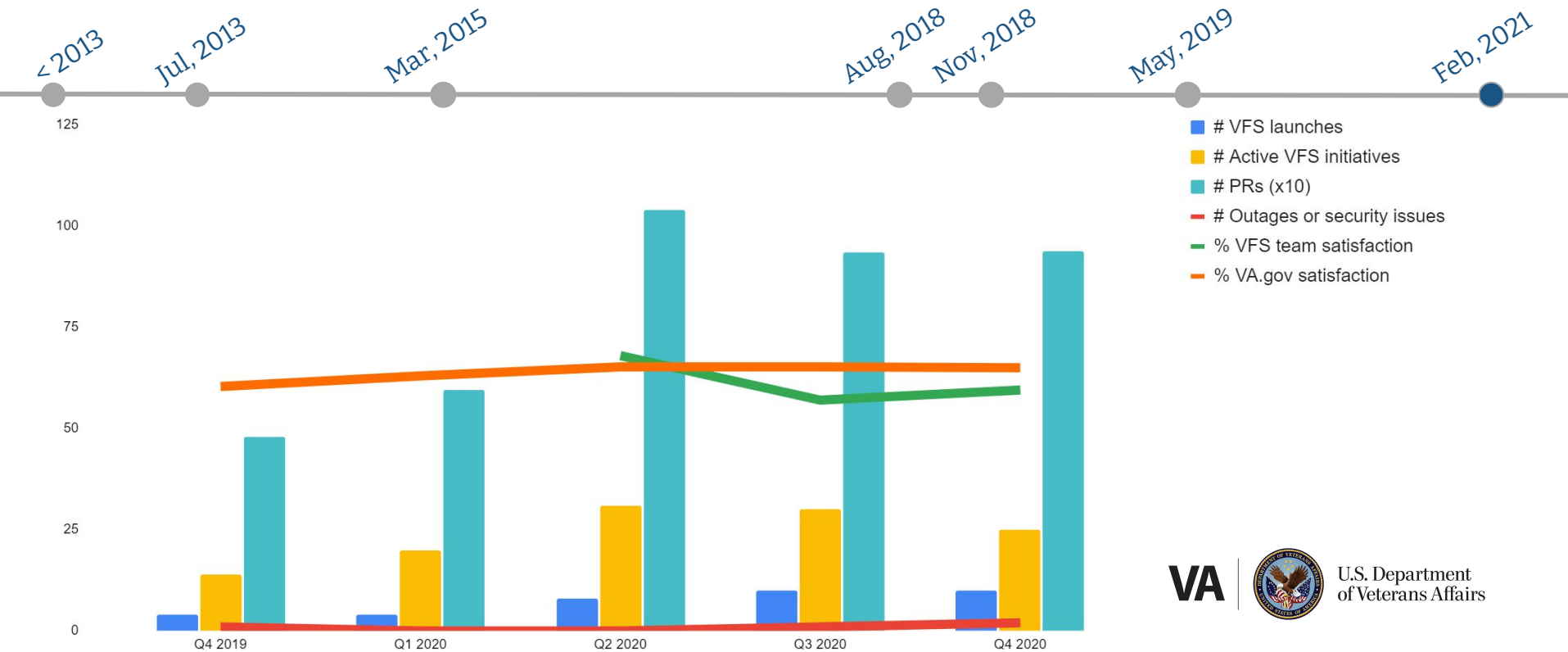
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# Background

## History of the Platform



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# HIGH LEVEL STRATEGY

# High level strategy

## Framework

Element	Definition	Timeframe	Responsible for defining
<b>Mission</b>	Why we're here	ever-present	OCTO-DE
<b>4 phase plan</b>	High level strategic path for achieving mission	ever-present	OCTO-DE
<b>Principle</b>	What must always true about our work	ever-present	OCTO-DE
<b>Objective</b>	Desired VA outcome	yearly	OCTO-DE
<b>Key Result</b>	Benchmarks and monitors for how we get to an Objective	variable	Collab: OCTO-DE Leads and Platform crew teams
<b>Initiative</b>	A delivery goal a team plans to achieve in a quarter	quarterly	Collab: OCTO-DE Leads and Platform crew teams
<b>Epic</b>	A large body of work that can be broken down into a number of smaller stories	variable	Platform crew teams
<b>User story</b>	A short, simple description of a feature told from the perspective of the person who desires the new capability	variable	Platform crew teams
<b>Sprint objective</b>	A delivery goal a team plans to achieve in a sprint	sprintly	Platform crew teams

# High level strategy

## Mission

The platform helps VA build great Veteran-facing digital products and services by...

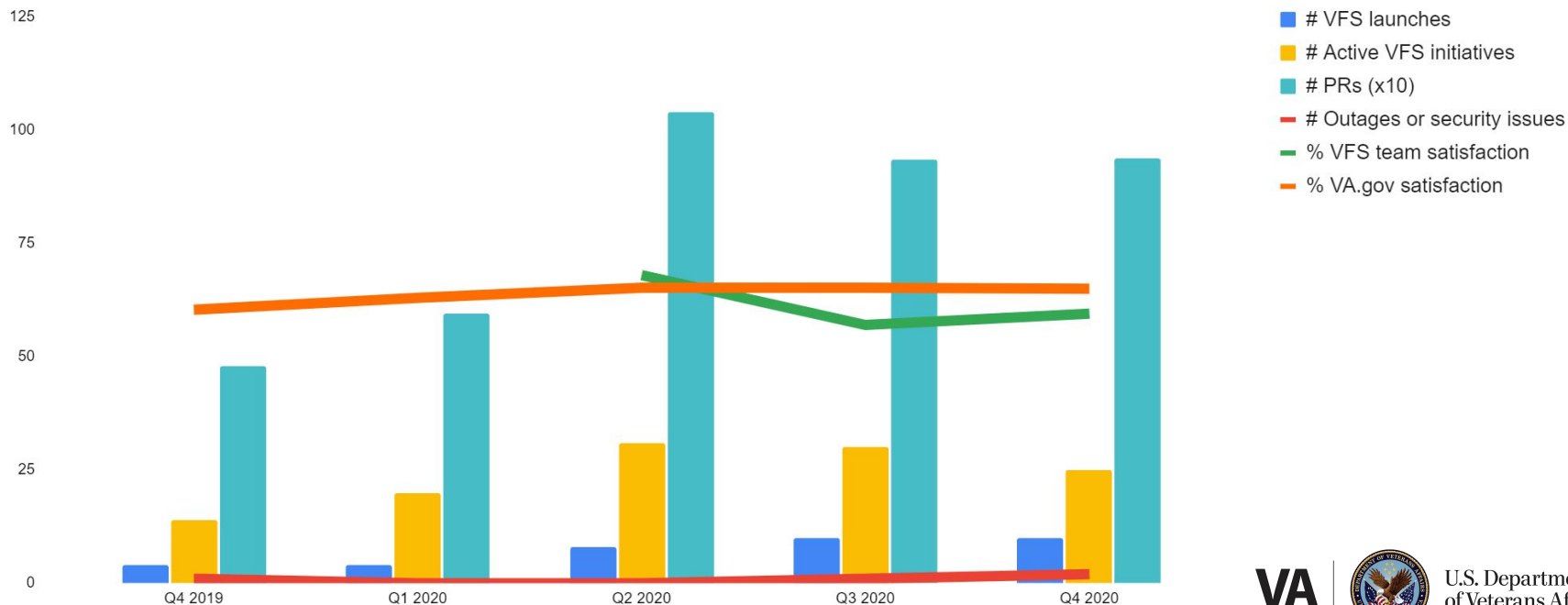
1. Keeping these products and services **available, stable, and secure**.
2. Ensuring they're **consistent and meet high standards of quality** in Veteran-centered user experience and technical approach.
3. Providing shared tools, software, support, and technical infrastructure to **accelerate their development**.



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# High level strategy

## How are we doing?



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# High level strategy

## 4 phase plan

### Phase 1:

**Create foundation for successful deployment to VA.gov**

- ✓ Open source docs repo
- ✓ Reliable infrastructure
- ✓ CI/CD pipeline w/daily deploys
- ✓ 24/7 monitoring and on call
- ✓ Design system
- ✓ Feature toggles
- ✓ Analytics services
- ✓ Orientation
- ✓ Hands-on support

### Phase 2:

**Optimize for Platform scalability and VA.gov quality.**

- 🌀 Platform website
- 🌀 Scalable support model
- 🌀 Containerization and isolation
- 🌀 Automated quality checks
- 🌀 Flexible governance
- 🌀 Anytime, rapid deploys
- 🌀 Vulnerability prevention
- 🌀 KPI dashboards
- 🌀 CMS content scaling

### Phase 3:

**Provide tools for accelerated VA.gov iteration**

- Demo + preview capability
- A/B testing tools
- Frictionless analytics
- New MVP environment
- Customer support tooling
- Performance transparency

### Phase 4:

**Acquire new customer types**

- Extend + iterate on feature set to meet needs of additional customer types
- Actively collaborate with OCTO's larger VA platform vision



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# High level strategy

## Summary

To date, we've really risen to the challenge of our mission. We've facilitated a doubling in the size of the VA.gov ecosystem, and have empowered VFS teams to do good work - such that VA.gov user satisfaction has improved over time.

However, this doubling of the ecosystem comes with a cost: we're experiencing bandwidth challenges, our platform stability and security are increasingly at risk, and VFS team satisfaction is trending downward.

These are all normal challenges that come with growth. And it puts us solidly in the second phase of our 4 phase plan: optimizing for Platform scalability and VA.gov quality. To overcome our current challenges, we have to invest in work that'll make our systems and teams more scalable and easy to use, and will keep VA.gov's performance and quality high. Our 2021 objectives reflect the desired outcomes we're prioritizing over the next year that we bet will have the largest impact on the Platform's ability to deal with this growth and continue executing on our mission.



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# High level strategy

## How we'll measure success

### Leading metrics (causes)

- ↑ VFS team engagement w/ SS tools
- ↑ Production deployment rate
- ↑ Detection of vulnerabilities

- ↓ Support volume
- ↓ Build failures
- ↓ Build time

### Mission

**Available, stable, and secure platform.**

**Consistent VFSs meeting high standards of quality**

**Accelerate VFS team development**

### Lagging metrics (affects)

- ↑ Uptime
- ↓ Incidents

- ↑ VA.gov satisfaction
- ↓ Quality standards issues

- ↑ VFS team satisfaction
- ↓ Avg time from kickoff to production, by initiative complexity

# 2021 OBJECTIVES

# 2021 Objectives

## **A note before we dive into the details**

These objectives are not comprehensive of everything we do, or want to do, as a Platform. Rather, they represent the 4 things that are our top priority to achieve this year.

# 2021 Objectives

## Objective 1 (of 4)

Info for all common VFS needs are findable in Platform Website

We'll know we're successful when canonical, easy-to-understand information is available for the top 70% of customer needs.

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#### **Examples of possible related initiatives**

Polished, professional, public-facing website  
How-tos guides and training videos  
Clear quality standards

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#### Metrics

↑ VFS team engagement with SS tools  
↑ VFS team satisfaction  
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# 2021 Objectives

## Objective 2 (of 4)

VFS setup and deployment experience is autonomous

We'll know we're successful when VFS teams can get their environments set up within minutes, can deploy to any environment at any time without the aid of Platform personnel and without causing significant risk to the build or to the site.



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Code isolation for VFSs

Content and app build separation

Scaling content capacity and deploy speed

SS content management with guardrails

“One click” dev setup

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#### Examples of possible related initiatives

- Code isolation for VFSs
- Content and app build separation
- Scaling content capacity and deploy speed
- SS content management with guardrails
- "One click" dev setup

#### Metrics

- ↑ Production deployment rate
- ↑ VFS team satisfaction
- ↓ Support volume
- ↓ Avg time from kickoff to production, by initiative complexity
- ↓ Build failures

# 2021 Objectives

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Platform security and stability approach is comprehensive, on par with industry leaders

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- Security + stability audits and reviews

- Security improvement plan

- Audit trail for Fraud, Waste, & Abuse team

- Move to loosely coupled services

- Comprehensive resource monitoring + alerting

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### Metrics

- ↑ Detection of vulnerabilities
- ↑ Uptime
- ↓ Incidents

# 2021 Objectives

## Objective 4 (of 4)

VFS testing suite is comprehensive, on par with industry leaders

We'll know we're successful when VFS teams can independently run manual, automated, and experimental tests on their products using dynamic (i.e. non-mock) data.

# 2021 Objectives

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### **Examples of possible related initiatives**

Staging test user dashboard

Easy preview and demo functionality

Development CMS environments

A/B testing tools

# 2021 Objectives

## Objective 4 (of 4)

### VFS testing suite is comprehensive, on par with industry leaders

We'll know we're successful when VFS teams can independently run manual, automated, and experimental tests on their products using dynamic (i.e. non-mock) data, and measure the impact of their work.

#### Examples of possible related initiatives

Staging test user dashboard  
Easy preview and demo functionality  
Development CMS environments  
A/B testing tools  
Easy data access

#### Metrics

↑ VFS team engagement w/SS tools  
↑ VA.gov user satisfaction  
↑ VFS team satisfaction  
↑ Production deployment rate  
↓ Avg time from kickoff to production, by initiative complexity



# 2021 Objectives

## **These are lofty goals**

If we are to achieve them, we're going to have to be ruthless about prioritization and keeping scope narrow.

- Have convos about trade-offs
- Clearly demonstrate Objective progress and blockers
- Escalate early and often

# NEXT STEPS

# Next steps

1. Look at your team's mission, products, and services.
  - a. How can your team help the Platform Crew achieve our 2021 Objectives?
  - b. What might you need to cut, or reduce the scope of, to make room for Objective-related work?
2. Participate in crew-wide activities to determine how your team can collaborate to meet these objectives.
  - a. Are there initiatives that your team could complete sooner to unblock another?
3. Work with your OCTO-DE Lead to turn those ideas into KRs and initiatives, and prioritize them into the Platform Crew roadmap.



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**Merci! Time for Q&A**



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# High level strategy

## Principles

1. Service design, not bureaucracy.
2. Work in the open.
3. Assume competence and best intentions.
4. Trust, but verify.
5. More trust can be earned.
6. Carrots, not sticks.
7. Don't make perfect the enemy of the good.
8. Ask for forgiveness, not permission.
9. Be kind to each other.

From [Platform Principles document](#) in GitHub



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