

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Vet Center Dashboard Usability Study

**Research Readout** | December 3, 2021

**Sitewide CMS team**

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# Background & Goals

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# Background

The Sitewide CMS team designed and implemented a dashboard for Vet Centers in Q1 2021. The design intent was to:


1. Provide access to everything a Vet Center editor might need to do in one place.
2. Help Vet Center editors orient to their top tasks through cards that use icons and descriptions.
3. Bridge the gap between the content model and users' mental model through action links in cards that jump link to relevant parts of a form.
4. Allow editors to review satellite locations and their operating statuses at a glance so they can see what might need updating.

# The Dashboard

## Fairbanks Vet Center

[Home](#) » [Veterans Health Administration](#) » [Vet Centers](#) » [District 5](#) » Fairbanks Vet Center


### Fairbanks Vet Center



#### Visitor information

Provide info that helps Veterans prepare for their visit.


[Go to visitor info >](#)



#### Services

List the services that Veterans can receive at your facility.


[Go to services >](#)



#### Featured content

Highlight up to two Vet center activities, such as events or programs


[Go to featured content >](#)



#### Operating status

Flag temporary changes to hours and operations for the main location.


[Update operating status >](#)



#### Main Vet Center page

Manage all main location page content.

[View >](#) [Edit >](#)



#### Locations page

Manage the page introduction and select nearby locations.

[View >](#) [Edit >](#)

## Top Task Cards



### Satellite locations

Update the operating status and facility photo for Community Access Points (CAPs), Outstations and Mobile Vet Centers.

[+ Create new community access point](#)

## Satellite Location Section

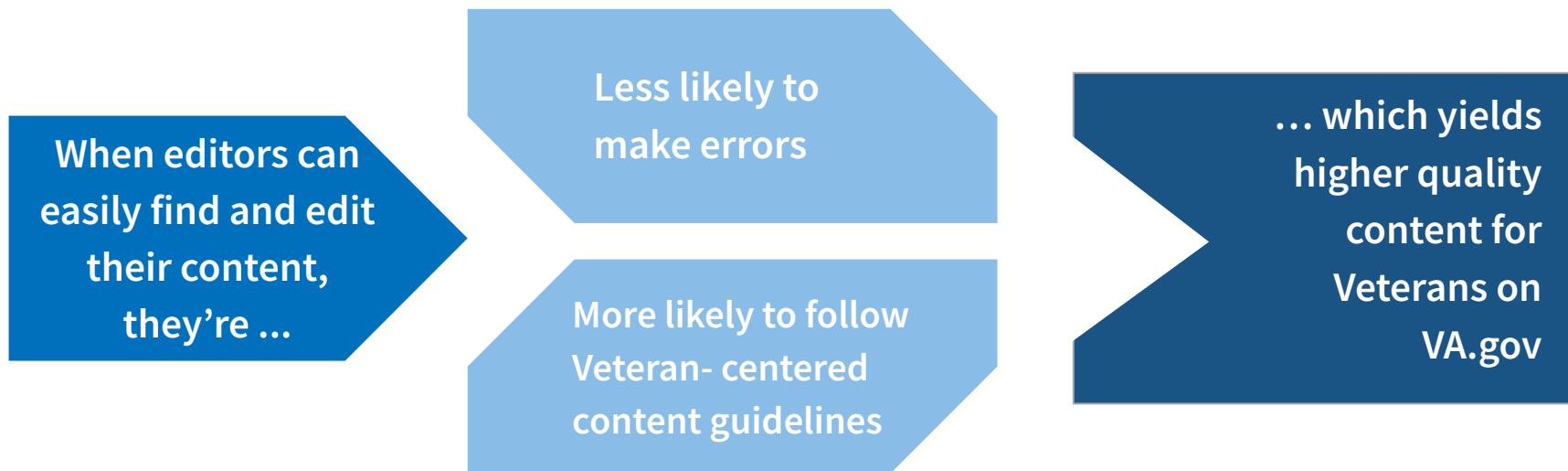


TITLE		OPERATING STATUS
	Fairbanks Vet Center - Fort Greely Alaska Community Center	Limited services and hours <a href="#">Edit</a>

# Purpose

This user study supports OCTO-DE objective #3:

**Increase the quality and reliability of VA services.**



# Study Goals

## Goal #1

Validate design ideas to inform upcoming work on a VAMC product dashboard.

## Goal #2

Generate recommendations for improving the Vet Center editorial experience.

# Hypotheses

- 1 The dashboard covers editor's main tasks
- 2 The dashboard makes it easier for editors to do their work, but may not account for all workflows
- 3 The dashboard helps bridge the gap between editor's mental model of the website and the content model
- 4 The Vet Center dashboard is a useful model for organizing editor workflow for other products

# Research questions

- Does orienting editors with “top tasks” align with how editors actually work?
- Does the dashboard help editors bridge the gap between how the content model structures information, and their own mental model for their site's content?
- Do the cards help editors understand where their content will end up on the website?
- Once editors have saved changes to content, how do they get back to the Vet Center dashboard to find other tasks?
- Is the satellite location operating status dashboard useful?



# Methodology


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# Method

- We conducted remote interviews via Zoom during October 2021.
- We spoke with Vet Center editors from District 5 who:
  - Were not involved in the initial MVP user study
  - Were already familiar with working in the CMS
  - Work on a Vet Center site that had recently launched or was about to launch
- We tested the usability of the dashboard and conducted a semi-structured interview about their top tasks.
- During the testing process we asked editors to use the dashboard to walk us through their editorial workflow process.

# Participants

- 5 editors, including Veteran Outreach Specialists and other supporting staff
- Worked at the VA for 4-17 years
- 3 were former service members
- Favorite part of job: working one-on-one with Veterans



“I like being out in the community and meeting face-to-face with folks.”

# User context quotes

**"I have a hard time with being on the computer. I like being out there with Veterans and helping them access resources."**

**"I'm not 100% fully comfortable with this thing."  
(the CMS)**

**"Working with Veterans is the easy part. Other things can be complicated."**

**"In the beginning I had fears that I was going to mess something up. I had never done this kind of work before. There's definitely some fear in there."**

# User context

- Vet Center editors are great at engaging with Vets in person
- Outreach is what they see as their job. Building the website feels “extra.”
- 4 of 5 participants have little experience with websites or with content creation, and describe themselves as “not tech savvy.”
- They want to “get in and get out” of the CMS.

# Key Research Findings

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# 1. Dashboard cards work (but could be improved)



## Visitor information

Provide info that helps Veterans prepare for their visit.

[Go to visitor info >](#)



## Services

List the services that Veterans can receive at your facility.

[Go to services >](#)



## Featured content

Highlight up to two Vet center activities, such as events or programs

[Go to featured content >](#)



## Operating status

Flag temporary changes to hours and operations for the main location.

[Update operating status >](#)



## Main Vet Center page

Manage all main location page content.

[View >](#)

[Edit >](#)



## Locations page

Manage the page introduction and select nearby locations.


[View >](#)

[Edit >](#)



"This is the content of the main pages. I use this to go to every page."

"I just want it as basic as possible."



This confirms that the dashboards are an effective tool for helping editors work on their sites.

## 1. Dashboard cards work (but could be improved)

- Participants used the dashboard with ease, and understood the relationship between the cards and the form.
- There was some confusion about the order of the cards. Cards for form sections aren't easily distinguishable from cards for pages.
- Slow page load on the form means the jump link functionality doesn't work smoothly in practice.



## Recommendation

# Keep the dashboard; iterate the design

- Explore reordering the dashboard cards for ease of use.
  - Consider separating "Main Page" and section jump links.
  - Consider surfacing the operating status for greater visibility.
- Remove the node link report from the edit page for faster page load.

## 2. The content workflow is unclear

**Edit Vet Center Fairbanks Vet Center**

[View](#) [Edit](#) [Revisions](#)

[Home](#) » [Node](#) » [Fairbanks Vet Center](#)

Revision log message \*

Briefly describe the changes you have made.

Save

Save draft and continue editing

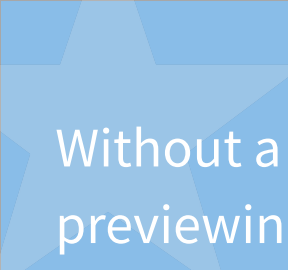
Unlock



“It is confusing to see how [my content] got added.”

“I wanted to go back and was confused.”

“Is it ok to just go to home?”



Without a clear path for previewing content, editors may be disinclined to check their work, resulting in lower-quality content.

Poor navigation requires more time and mental overhead, which adds to editors' frustration with the CMS.

## 2. Content workflow is unclear


- Participants were unsure of how to preview their work.
- There was no clear path to return to the dashboard. No user returned to the dashboard the same way.

## Recommendation

# Clarify content workflow

- Create a clear path for users to return to main dashboard from edit page.
  - Consider accurate breadcrumbs or return to dashboard button
- Build an intuitive way to preview saved content
  - Consider a preview button near the editorial workflow and/or on the dashboard.
  - Consider how best to draw attention to new content


### 3. Operating status & satellite locations are a mysterious tangle



**Operating status**

Flag temporary changes to hours and operations for the main location.


[Update operating status >](#)



**Main Vet Center page**

Manage all main location page content.

[View >](#) [Edit >](#)



**Locations page**

Manage the page introduction and select nearby locations.

[View >](#) [Edit >](#)


#### Satellite locations

Update the operating status and facility photo for Community Access Points (CAPs), Outstations and Mobile Vet Centers.

[+ Create new community access point](#)

TITLE		OPERATING STATUS	
	Fairbanks Vet Center – Fort Greely Alaska Community Center	Limited services and hours	<a href="#">Edit</a>
	Fairbanks Vet Center – Fort Wainwright Alaska	Normal services and hours	<a href="#">Edit</a>

“I feel like it should be from a higher authorization to actually close the Vet Center”



The operating status is critical info for a Veteran planning a visit. If it's not accurate, Vets will lose trust in the VA.

### 3. Operating status & satellite locations are a mysterious tangle

- Users lack clarity about what the operating status is, why it merits special attention, and what to do with it.
- None of the editors had experience with changing the operating status, and most had not used satellite locations.
- They weren't sure if they had permission to make changes.

## Recommendation

# Offer clear guidance & keep testing

- Provide clear guidance about how and when to update the operating status
- Surface operating status for all locations in one widget on the dashboard
- Do more user testing around operating status and satellite locations as people use the features more

# Summary of Findings

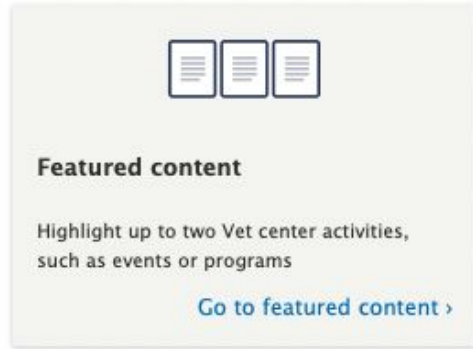
Does orienting editors with “top tasks” align with how they actually work?	<b>YES</b>
Does the dashboard help editors bridge the gap between how the content model structures information, and their own mental model for their site's content?	<b>Sort of</b>
Do the cards help editors understand where their content will end up on the website?	<b>YES</b>
Once editors have saved changes to content, how do they get back to the Vet Center dashboard to find other tasks?	<b>It varies</b>
Is the satellite location operating status dashboard useful?	<b>Not yet</b>



# Additional Insights

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# 1. Featured content is high value; events can help long term



Dashboard



Front End



## In the spotlight at San Bernardino Vet Center

### Find connection, find camaraderie, find community

Learn more about the confidential and comfortable environment you'll find at your local Vet Center.

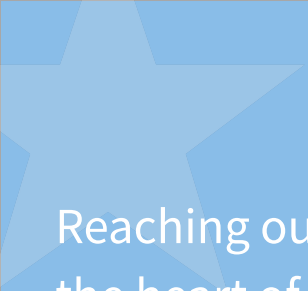
Hear what Vet Centers can do for you! >

### San Bernardino Vet Center - Medical Legal Partnership (MLP)

MLP's address certain legal needs that have a negative impact on a person's health. Please call for more information [909-801-5762](tel:909-801-5762).

"Everything I do is right here. Community events and new services... Anything special that we offer, I just go to featured content."

"It's really hard to fit everything into the field. I had to go back in a million times."



Reaching out to Veterans is the heart of editors' jobs, so the limitations of the featured content fields directly impede their work. As a result, editors feel like the website doesn't serve their needs, and are disinclined to update content regularly.

## 1. Featured content is high value; events can help long term

- Participants value the featured content section because it allows them some freedom to reflect local offerings, such as events.
- However, they chafe against restrictive character limits, which prevent them from providing adequate info about special programs to Veterans.
- Participants want better functionality for promoting events.


## Recommendation

# Build out events functionality

- Create a robust event listing feature that allow editors the space they need to promote local activities
- Short term: Consider how to enhance or possibly expand the featured content section to better serve local needs

## 2. There's a disconnect around localized content

- The point of the content creation process is to highlight local offerings, but editors feel that the system does not meet their needs.
- This leaves editors feeling resentful, unseen, and resistant to the task of creating and maintaining their website content.



"I get it, it's VA, everything has to be uniform, but the website is too basic."

"In reality, not one Vet Center is like the other...We're all created equal but you evolve to meet the population you're working with."

# Reactions to the content creation process

"It's presented as if it's easy [to update the site], but it's not."

"It felt like I was getting a D in this class."

"People on your end want to see more professional work."

"For people like me who aren't website designers, it's like doing homework. You get it back with red ink."

"My biggest fear is that I am going to be grammar checked or scolded."

## Recommendation

# Iterate on Vet Center onboarding

- For Vet Center websites to provide lasting value to Veterans, editors must be bought in.
- This is an opportunity to emphasize the value of the website for supporting local outreach efforts.
- More research around editors' experiences may be beneficial.

# Next Steps

Recommendation	Next Step
Iterate Vet Center dashboard design	Refine ACs for design ticket #6736
Clarify navigating to dashboard	
Clarify workflows for previewing work	
Ideate on VAMC dashboard	Start in Q1. #1447
More work on operating status	Updates on current tickets #6319 (field governance), #6816 (hours/op status)
Events functionality	TBD
Editor onboarding and change management	TBD



# Questions?

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