

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Vet Centers Discovery

**Discovery Readout**

# Background

As part of the larger discovery effort to understand the services offered by Vet Centers for the purpose of upgrading existing Vet Center facility detail pages, a series of stakeholder interviews was conducted with five Outreach Specialists. Outreach Specialists serve on the front line of Vet Centers connecting services to service members and were identified as a key persona in supporting the mission and purpose of Vet Centers

# Research Goals

## **The goal of this study was to:**

- Validate the official list of services offered at Vet Centers
- Identify knowledge gaps in preparation for deeper services taxonomy research

## **Prior to the study, we hypothesized that:**

- Services would vary widely between Vet Centers
- Extensive services taxonomy research would be required

# Method

**Hour long generative questioning sessions were conducted with five outreach specialists from across the country via Zoom.**

Who we talked to

- Bryan Doe - Springfield, MA
- Elizabeth Jackson - Orlando, FL
- Ken Milam - Escanaba, MI
- Austin Wilmarth - Colorado Springs, CO
- Troy Stormoen - Reno, NV

“When initially engaging that vet and finding if they are eligible, I am not immediately thinking, ‘Oh, are they eligible?’ I will get to that as I figure out what that service member is looking for.”

# Findings Summary

1. Vet Centers have great autonomy in how they tailor and deliver services to their clients.
2. Converting a service member into a client is a delicate art that can take multiple interactions.
3. Eligibility determination should not be a barrier to a service member contacting a Vet Center.
4. Individual counseling, groups and referral services were rated as the top three most used services at their Vet Centers.
5. Referral to external services is as important as those provided by a Vet Center.
6. Community Partners spread the word about Vet Centers.
7. The potential geographical reach of a Vet Center is powerful but not easy to communicate today.
8. Vet Center staff are often veterans themselves.
9. Vet Centers have limited resources to plan and promote outreach events.
10. Managing communication with clients is tricky and very manual.

# Recommendations Summary

1. Detail pages must feel distinct from VA Medical Centers and communicate Vet Centers' "welcoming environment and hospitable culture".
2. Calling the Vet Center should be the primary call to action on any Vet Center page.
3. Avoid describing official eligibility requirements in favor of a generic, 'just call, we'll help' message.
4. Services should be illustrated in a non-clinical manner.
5. Highlight and describe what "referral services" are in simple language with concrete examples.
6. Communicate a VC's potential reach via Mobile Vet Centers, Community Access Points and Outstations.
7. Highlight "Group" activities visually with real photos of Vets doing fun things that don't look clinical.
8. Incorporate staff summary, individual bios and photos.
9. Create an events listing or calendar tool for Vet Center staff to manage and publicize public events.
10. Create a contact form for potential clients to request information or refer a friend.
11. Consider social media for managing closed group events.

# Research Findings

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# 1. Vet Centers have great autonomy in how they tailor and deliver services to their clients.

A key differentiating factor in the value Vet Centers bring to the mission of helping service members in their readjustment journey is their ability to meet an individual wherever they are in that journey. Vet Center staff can offer services ranging from traditional counseling to more casual support through group recreational activities or refer out to other services.

*“Individual counseling, for us, can vary so much. You can get Veterans to come in to just talk. You have Vet come in and want different types of therapies [some] do cognitive therapy, EMDR (eye movement therapy), there are therapists that are certified in that. It can be as non intensive as just sitting down and talking about what's going on in your life or it can be an actual therapy modality.”*

*"We look at what clinicians we have at a Vet Center and then we determine their interests. Like one of our clinicians, he's a trained classical guitarist, he took the initiative to go and work with Guitars for Vets and this Vet Center became a chapter of Guitars for Vets and we would do two weekly guitar groups that he would run. And that's with established clients.”*

## 2. Converting a service member into a client is a delicate art that can take multiple interactions.

Service members in need of readjustment services are the target client for Vet Centers but aren't always ready to reach out. For example, a spouse may contact a Vet Center for help and while family members are also eligible to receive services, the service member must be the one to initiate services in order for them to be extended to the broader family. For this reason, Outreach Specialists stress the importance of going where Vets go to increase their visibility within their communities, establish relationships, and encourage Veterans and service members to contact their Vet Center.

*“We don't cold call. We want that vet to engage. We have to find a way. That's why we go out in the community and meet people, ‘Hey, I'd love to grab a cup of coffee with you’ alleviate that stress first, before even bringing them into a VC.”*

*“We have a lot of Veterans that may not want to sit one on one with a counselor. They might want to come to one of our BBQs that we do monthly at our Vet Center where it's free for Veterans and their families. They can grab a hamburger and chill with other Veterans. That might be the initial touchpoint that they need to get in for services.”*

### 3. Eligibility determination should not be a barrier to a service member contacting a Vet Center.

Since an Outreach Specialist's goal is to first identify a service member's needs, they prefer to hone in on a service member's potential eligibility delicately through casual conversation as they are assessing an individual's situation more holistically. Often service members misinterpret eligibility requirements and assume that they are not eligible for services when in fact they may be eligible. If a determination is not clear, an Outreach Specialist will help to interpret a Veteran's DD214. If the individual is not eligible for services at a Vet Center, Outreach Specialists connect them to other resources within their communities.

*"We are not just readjustment counseling: we are a referral service. You don't necessarily need to be eligible. So if vets are not eligible, we can refer them."*

*"When we say 'combat veteran' [as criterion for eligibility], they, even current clients, think it means [must have been] engaged in combat, the enemy was shooting at me, you're shooting back at the enemy."*

## 4. Individual counseling, groups and referral services were rated as the top three most used services at their Vet Centers.

Different types of clients tend to prefer different types of services. For example, Vietnam Veterans, the largest military population served by all five Vet Centers, tends to prefer “groups” for peer to peer support over individual counseling. Iraq/Afghanistan veterans, the second largest client grouping, tends to opt for individual counseling. MST (Military Sexual Trauma) clients, representing a smaller but growing percentage, may prefer individual counseling for privacy reasons at one Vet Center whereas at another Vet Center may be able to leverage a group therapy tailored to this demographic. Groups form organically around a clinician and client’s needs and interests and the approach can vary from traditional group counseling to purely recreational. Some Veterans remain long term clients of Vet Centers for the camaraderie that it provides them. Other services, like medical screenings or substance abuse assessments, may begin at a Vet Center and transition to a VA Medical Center for diagnosis.

*"We have Vietnam vets who've been coming to our VC since the 1980s."*

*"We have Equine therapy that we offer through the Air Force academy. A lot of female MST clients respond to that."*

## 5. Referral to external services is as important as those provided by a Vet Center.

Outreach specialists connect Veteran and service members to a wide variety of resources within the broader VA network and within their communities and consider this benefit on par with the services provided by the Vet Center in fulfilling the mission of helping them in their readjustment. Outreach Specialists have a broad understanding of all VA benefits and help both their internal teams and service members navigate other VA facilities and can even liaise on behalf of service members. Additionally, since networking and building relationships with community partners is integral to their role, Outreach Specialists connect service members with resources beyond those available at a Vet Center, even those who are not eligible to receive Vet Center services.

*“My job is to get the person in the right place.”*

*“A vet might not be able to easily explain what is going on with a referral. We can help the VAMC understand what the vet wants and needs.”*

## 6. Community Partners spread the word about Vet Centers.

Outreach Specialists spend at least 50% of their time networking and building relationships within their communities with law enforcement, state agencies, universities, businesses and other VA entities. These partnerships play a key role in educating and referring Veterans and service members to Vet Centers.

*The state may put on a job fair where an employment rep may be “working with someone who meets our eligibility and if they feel like seeing a therapist will help with sustaining gainful employment, they might refer [them] to [our] Vet Center. We partner with them pretty regularly.”*

*“I work on building those community partnerships - making sure I'm working with organizations that are likely to be in contact with Vets. Law enforcement; giving presentations, being available to work with them on Vets that are having difficulty. We have a Veterans court here in our state, so Justice Involved Veterans.”*

*“We have established a relationship with this local donut shop where every week, they donate to us, at no cost, they go out of their way and make extra stuff, donuts and pastries, so we can provide that to our vets... it's Vet coming to a nice, comfortable environment, having a coffee and a donut...”*



## 7. The potential geographical reach of a Vet Center is powerful but not easy to communicate today.

Mobile Vet Centers are Vet Center branded trucks with space for a small office or two in the back that can be leveraged by Vet Centers within their designated “catchment area” which can span hundreds of miles. They can be used for outreach events, emergency response, or to bring clinical services to underserved communities. Some outreach specialists feel MVCs are underutilized. And yet they can be leveraged to build up enough of a caseload to create a Community Access Point, one of around 1000 temporary locations that run within a donated office space, like a church or YMCA. If these locations grow they can become Outstations which are scaled down versions of a Vet Center. These nimble delivery mechanisms have the opportunity to reach Veterans, service members and their families in rural areas hundreds of miles away.

*After advertising to VFW and American Legion that they would be coming to this community an hour away from a main VC and offering appointments on a monthly basis, "the MVC created so many new clients, so much interest that it created a CAP and moved to once a week. Could be as little as needed or every day of the week. If a CAP moves to every day of week, it would become an outstation, a mini Vet Center"*

## 8. Vet Center staff are often veterans themselves.

5/5 Outreach specialists we spoke to had a military background and find this to be an asset to connecting with Vets. In fact, nationwide 70% of staff at Vet Center are Veterans.

*“I think sometimes initially when Vets come in to get behavioral health services, there is a lot of anxiety built around that. If I could get on [a website] and see a picture of what he looks like, read about his background in the army, I think that would calm the anxiety.”*

*[walking by where homeless Vets live downtown] “I wear my veteran hat. Give them my card. Ask them if they need services. ‘Have you heard about the VC?’ If reluctant, I talk to them about what branch of service they were in. Talk to them about what they did in the military. Just talk to them as if I was talking to any other veteran, as if I was in the VFW on my day off and I was talking to a veteran. It doesn’t work to say ‘Hey, I work at the VA...’”*



## 9. Vet Centers have limited resources to plan and promote outreach events.

Vet Centers must be very resourceful when planning and promoting events, often piggy-backing off of other community events, with help from community partners and leveraging free online tools.

*"It would be helpful to have some type of calendar, a way to promote our own events, things we are doing locally without having to go through other channels. It would be helpful if we had the ability to do some outdoor activities and they were created by VCs so it's not us tagging along after the community partners. We don't have the means to do that on our own."*

*"I know I mention Eventbrite alot but it's a really good, free, easy way to promote stuff. [We] could use a good way to promote stuff and keep up with event counts. Also, manage data afterwards. How many people said they were coming versus how many people came. So if we could have something like that, a Vet Center page, with a link to eventbrite, link to [VA's] Medical Center social media page."*

*"we piggyback on advertising that hosting org is doing, "Hey VC is going to be here as well, MVC will be there as well", since it's not free"*

## 10. Managing communication with clients is tricky and very manual.

The process of converting a contact to a client often requires many steps and can start with a handwritten contact card before making it into the Vet Center's client database. Once a contact becomes a client and starts leveraging services, such as a counseling group, a clinician would begin to manage communication about group meetings and events. Closed group events cannot be publicized broadly because attendees must first be engaged officially as clients. This puts the onus on the team to cross promote each other's events verbally or by creating paper flyers and calendars to be snail mailed to Veterans. Outreach Specialists expressed the need to communicate more efficiently with their clients.

*"just being able to get the data to RCSnet and to counselors as fast as possible, it's way down the road but... you collect the data, you put it in the computer, it goes to a... it touches so many hands before it gets to where it needs to be. So just being able to streamline that process I think."*

*"We don't have a way to use social media. The public affairs director at the VA will put our stuff on VA Facebook, but that is not really helpful because they are closed events."*

# Recommendations

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# 1. Detail pages must feel distinct from VA Medical Centers and communicate Vet Centers' "welcoming environment and hospitable culture".

A recent [study conducted by Aptive Resources](#) found this attribute to be especially important to clients, referencing their family-like atmosphere almost twice as often as any other attribute. Their data also suggested that it is the predominant differentiator between Vet Centers and VA medical centers. Maintaining this differentiation is important to reach Veterans who do not trust VA Medical Centers. Vet Centers are often cited as the first touchpoint in a Veteran or service member's readjustment journey and can serve as the bridge to connect them to other VA services and benefits. Conversations with Outreach Specialists in this study support this recommendation. Ideas to strike the appropriate tone include: Use aspirational photography that highlights the more casual side of the counseling services available, for example, a group of Veterans fishing or at a BBQ. Prioritize an approachable welcome message over eligibility information. Add client testimonials.

## 2. Calling the Vet Center should be the primary call to action on any Vet Center page.

Vet Center staff is highly skilled at talking to hesitant Veterans and service members. All content on the website should be positioned in such a way as to eliminate any mental and physical barriers that would impede a potential client from contacting a Vet Center.

### 3. Avoid describing official eligibility requirements in favor of a generic, 'just call, we'll help' message.

Let the intake process do the heavy lifting of determining eligibility. A Vet Center can still offer non-eligible individuals referral services and connect them to other resources.

## 4. Services should be illustrated in a non-clinical manner.

A first impression of a Vet Center should address the stigma many Veterans feel toward mental health. Towards the top of the page, services could be illustrated with words and imagery that reflect the various non-threatening ways in which counseling could be delivered. A photo of a fishing group or BBQ could better illustrate “Group Therapy” than a serious photo of clients sitting in a circle. A photo of two individuals drinking coffee may do a better job of bringing a Veteran in for individual counseling than a strict definition and would more accurately reflect the experience that a Veteran feels once engaged in services. The page should still make clinical modality examples available by progressively disclosing the more clinical details of each service type so that users and search functionality could still leverage the information and search terms.

## 5. Highlight and describe what “referral services” are in simple language with concrete examples.

Referral services will vary across Vet Center’s but giving concrete examples of the types of resources available, such as the availability of a food pantry, would help communicate the broad scope of help available to Veterans and service members and further highlight what makes a Vet Center such a valuable resource.



## 6. Communicate a Vet Center's potential reach via Mobile Vet Centers, Community Access Points and Outstations.

This needs to be made clear to potential clients and community partners on a Vet Center detail page. While a unique detail page may not be necessary or feasible for all delivery mechanisms, communicating which areas are serviceable should be incorporated in every detail page and how a Facility Locator search produces results.

## 7. Highlight “Group” activities visually with real photos of Vets doing fun things that don’t look clinical.

This is what makes Vet Centers special and different from other VA facilities. Promoting groups is very tricky because you can’t just drop in. You have to be an established client to participate but they are what provide the unique flavor of a particular community. Clinicians initiate the formation of groups and have lots of freedom. They’re centered around shared interest, military service era and/or because a clinician has a unique theme to offer.

## 8. Incorporate staff summary, individual bios and photos.

Outreach specialists believe that being able to read about the military background that most Vet Center staff share, would reduce anxiety and remove a mental barrier to making contact. This is a good hypothesis that should be tested with Veterans.

## 9. Create an events listing or calendar tool for Vet Center staff to manage and publicize public events.

Outreach specialists struggle with finding ways to promote events and activities to the public. Vet Centers would benefit from being provided with a tool that they can self manage to list public events and post related brochures and flyers. When appropriate, this tool could also be used for the promotion of Mobile Vet Center and Community Access Point events and availability to enhance their visibility.

## 10. Create a contact form for potential clients to request information or refer a friend.

Recent [research conducted by Aptive Research](#) concluded that current clients are a powerful untapped resource for spreading the word about Vet Centers. In their focus group study, the vast majority of clients responded the highest score in willingness to recommend or promote Vet Centers. They quote a client who has “recommended Vet Centers to friends and colleagues for years by using social media channels to ‘tell folks about the effectiveness of Vet Centers.’” A simple form could be offered on Vet Center detail pages that could be used to refer a friend or request information. This could also help improve some of the inefficiencies that some Outreach Specialists described in getting contact information routed to the right person without having to exchange so many hands.

## 11. Consider social media for managing closed group events.

Outreach specialists expressed many challenges in managing and publicizing private group events and activities. A private Facebook group, as an example, could solve many of the challenges of scheduling, promoting and assessing the attendance of closed group events. Outreach Specialists varied in their desire to take on the maintenance of social media from hesitation to feeling that it would be a “no-brainer” to leverage for this use. Allowing willing and able Vet Center’s to manage their own accounts could also further their ability to meet their clients where they are, tailoring communication according to group needs, as some client populations have higher technology adoption than others.

# Next Steps & Appendix

# Next Steps

## Upcoming sprint

- Present findings and recommendations to stakeholders.
- Create low fidelity wireframes of an updated Vet Center detail page.
- Present wireframes to stakeholders for input and refinement.

## Future sprints

- Refine ideas and create medium/high fidelity prototype.
- Test prototype with Veterans and service members.



# Appendix

**[Conversation guide](#)**

**[Interview transcripts](#)**

**[Synthesis Spreadsheet](#)**

**[Research Findings on GitHub](#)**

**[Aptive Resources Brand Analysis Report](#)**