

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# VA.gov Search Usability Study

## Discovery Readout

# Background

This research was to better understand veterans' needs and expectations around search so we can improve their ability to find information.

# Research Goals

- Where do users look for information if they don't find it via VA.gov search?
- In what scenarios do users use VA.gov search?
- What, if any, pain points do users experience when using search?
- Do users see or utilize the “More VA search tools” right rail?
- How effective is VA.gov's search tool at providing the information people are seeking?
  - Relevancy
  - Scanning behavior
  - Best Bets / "Top Recommendations"
  - Advanced search features (typeahead/filters)

# Method

- This study was a remote, moderated usability test on [staging.va.gov](https://staging.va.gov). Staging was tested in order to ensure typeahead was enabled.
- Zoom and GoToMeeting were used to facilitate a set of tasks to test global search as well as other search features and participants were encouraged to talk aloud.
- Participants were also asked about their past experience looking for VA-related information as well as sharing a search experience outside of VA.gov that they thought worked well.

# Who We Talked To

- 10 participants
- 9 Veterans
- 1 Service Member

Benefits that participants looked for previously	Requested	Tested
Education	2	3
Health	2	2
Disability	2	2
Family !	2	1
Burial	2	2

Sampling Requirement	Requested	Tested
Total	10	10
Desktop	5	5
Mobile !	5	4
Tablet	0	1
Screen reader !	1	0
Identified cognitive impairments and/or functional disabilities	5	6
High School or Below	5	5
Urban !	4	3
Rural	6	7
Women !	3	2
Men	7	8
Not White	3	4
18-34	2	2
35-54	2	6
55 or older	2	2

## Research Findings

# Key Finding #1

When asked about their past experience looking for information, most began their journey on **eBenefits** and **VA.gov**.

A current service member mentioned asking other military members about benefits available to him. A few veterans mentioned calling the VA.

Other sites mentioned:

- Google
- Blogs
  - Military.com
- Reddit
- Facebook Groups
  - Vets mentoring Vets



“It was complicated at first because it would send you somewhere else. I had to go to eBenefits from My HealtheVet. It sent me to VA.gov, then it sends you to eBenefits to print the certificate.”

## Key Finding #2

When asked to look for information, most participants **did not immediately utilize the search feature**. Participants usually went to the navigation dropdown or scanned the homepage for relevant information.

In past experiences, many participants mentioned looking for information on eBenefits first.

*“Normally I don’t go to the search”*

*“I would personally use the search bar for everything. Especially because I’m not familiar with the forms. I’m new to all of this.”*



*How many search results do you typically look at?*

“Two to three, then I would be like, ‘what is this?’ and then I would just not search. Because, it’s not just you guys, a lot of these sites, when you search, it **doesn’t give direct answers** and then you would just **go to Google** because they have system better than others.”

*After not finding what you were looking for,  
would you look on another site?*

“I would stay on this site and call someone  
for help. I wouldn't trust another site.”

## Key Finding #3

Most participants only looked at the first few results, focusing on the keywords in the titles. They were **not always shown relevant results** for their search terms.

If a participant did not **type a form exactly** as it appears on the title, both global search and Find a Form would fail to provide a direct link to the form.

One participant stated her next step would be to call when she could not locate a form because she typed “**1010 EZ**” on global search.

If Best Bets / "Top Recommendations" were shown, the participant usually found what they were looking for.

Showing 1-10 of 999 results

*“I don’t know if the results could be narrowed down so it doesn’t pull up everything.”*

*“They put every form **but** 1010ez on the first page. That’s weird.”*

“From a user experience model the layout is great, the location, all of that is fine, but the **indexing is poor**. The search feature seems to be **good for simple things but not difficult things**.”

## Key Finding #4

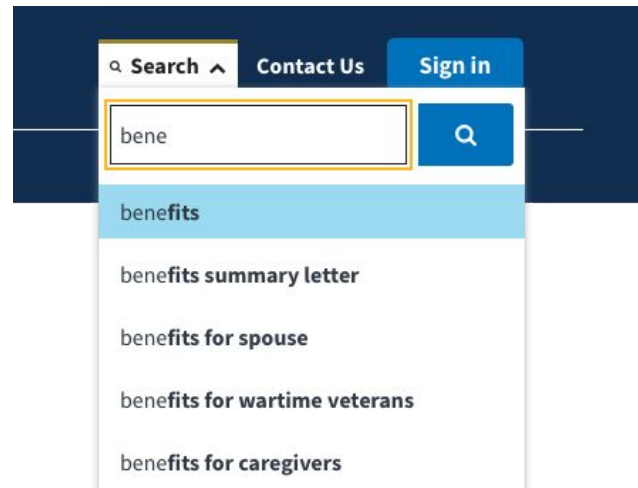
### Advanced search features

Most participants did not click on a typeahead suggestion. **8** were shown **typeahead suggestions**.

- **3** out of **8** clicked on a suggestion
- **5** out of **8** did not clicked on a suggestion

**6** out of **10** said they would like to **filter results** in some way.

- One participant stated she would want to filter by 'new applicant'.
- One participant wanted to add another search term within their initial search.



## Research Findings

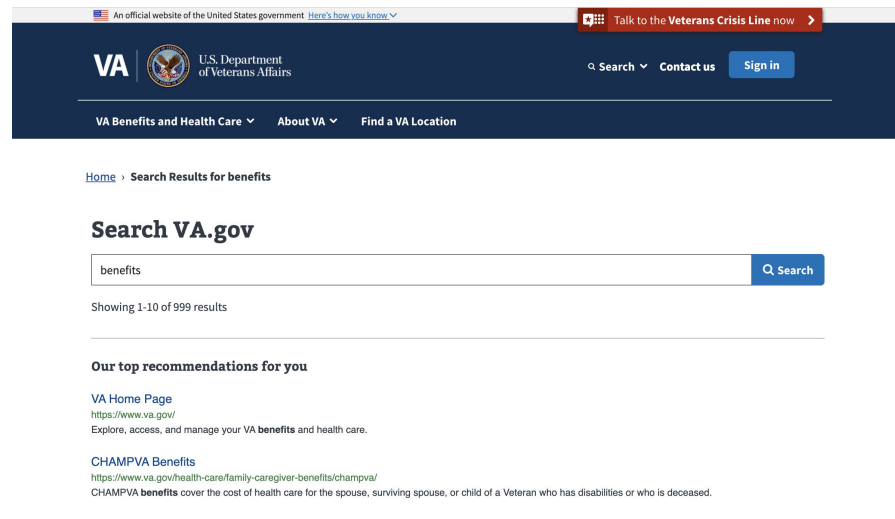
# Key Finding #5

7 out of 10 participants did not see the right rail with **"More VA search tools"** because of browser width or mobile use.

Participants were more likely to see **Find a Facility** than **Find a Form** because of its location on the header.

8 out of 10 were able to find and use **Find a Facility**.

3 out of 10 were able to find and use **Find a Form**.



*Browser width of 1199px does not show right rail.*

## Key Finding #5 (cont.)

**Find a Facility** and **Find a Form** on mobile.



### About VA health benefits | Veterans Affairs

<https://www.va.gov/health-care/about-va-health-benefits/>

...about the VA health **benefits** in your VA medical **benefits** package. Get details...details on Veterans medical **benefits**, like which services we cover, who will care...In this section About VA health **benefits** If you qualify for VA health care,...Learn more about your health care **benefits**. What care and services does VA health



Powered by Search.gov

### More VA search tools

[Look up Board of Veterans' Appeals \(BVA\) decisions](#)

[Search VA reference materials \(WARMS\)](#)

[Find a VA form](#)

[VA handbooks and other publications](#)

[Explore and apply for open VA jobs](#)

## Additional Insights

- Veterans who have been out of the military might have issues finding information on VA.gov due to "**military jargon**".
- A few participants commented on “Top Recommendations”. One stated it was "**what VA recommends**", another stated it is "**what people use the most**".
- If a Top Recommendation was shown, the participant usually clicked on one of the links.
- One participant stated that the **type was too small**.
- Four participants stated that the search results page was **user friendly**.
- Two participants on iOS devices (iPhone and iPad) had **loading issues** on all search feature pages. This may have been a bug on staging.
- One participant realized they made a **typo** only after their search went through. Several utilized **spell check features** that their operating system offered.



# Additional Insights from Other Search Experiences

- A participant mentioned that they liked that they **didn't have to type the whole word** (typeahead).
- When asked, a participant stated they utilizes the Rich Results feature on Google so they **doesn't have to click into the site**.
- A participant liked the **filter features** on Kayak.com
- A participant stated they wished there was a way to look for forms because they could not locate a form using global search. Later, they **found Find a Form by using Google**.

# Recommendations

- Work with Search.gov to improve **search result relevancy** so it is a **one stop shop**
- Include **Caregivers, Family Members**, & Veterans who were discharged **10+ years** in future usability studies to find further pain points related to "**military jargon**"
  - Investigate adding more **information to acronyms and forms** for those who are not familiar with them
- **Increase visual hierarchy** on search results page, emphasize link titles
- Update search results page based on **style guide** to improve legibility and consistency with the rest of the site

## Recommendations (cont.)

- Improve **search result descriptions** to be more succinct and helpful
- **Category filters**: What can we do now to optimize filters when Search.gov is ready to enable this feature?
  - “People also search for” feature?
- Improve "**More VA.gov Search Tools**" section (Can this become a “Refine” feature?)
- QA search features on iOS to ensure the **loading** bug was only on staging

# Next Steps

- **Update Search Results Page**

- Implement design recommendations
- Make improvements to "More VA Search tools"
  - Audit links and text
  - Request data on click rates
  - Look into alternative placement
- Make global search more of a one stop shop
- Work with Search.gov to improve search result descriptions

- **Increase Search Results Relevance**

- Increase Best Bets ("Top Recommendation") usage
  - Cons: Labor intensive and must match the search phrase exactly so it is not capable of catching every search term
- Work with Search.gov to help improve indexing and relevancy

# Next Steps (cont.)

- **Help Users Before They Call**

- Get a better understanding of how/when Veterans and Caregivers reach out for help outside of finding information on VA.gov
  - This is where we can focus on adding Best Bets to increase search results relevancy
- Look into adding a step between search and a phone call to answer users' questions

- **Spell Check**

- Utilize features that allow better error handling
  - Typeahead
  - Spell check

Questions?