

# Round 2 of Home Page Redesign Usability Testing

## Research Readout

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# Research Goal & Focus

**Goal:** Get user feedback on the *newly revised version of the redesigned VA.gov home page* and assess whether the design changes have improved the usability of the home page

## Areas of focus:

Everything between header & footer–

- Benefit promo (PACT Act\*)
- *Create account* button
- New search box
- *Other search tools*
- *Popular on VA.gov*
- VA News promo (Pathfinder\*)
- Benefit hubs

**NOT:** header, footer, banner alerts


*\*This was the promo content at the time of research, but the intent is that the content will be rotated.*





# Research Questions


## Research Questions:


1. Are participants **able to complete tasks from the home page** without getting stuck?
  - a. For tasks that are the same as those from the first round of testing, how do success rates compare?
2. **Which parts of the home page do participants use** to complete tasks?
3. Do participants know when to use the *Sign in* vs. *Create account* buttons?
4. Is there **anything unclear/confusing with a smartphone or screen reader?**
5. What are participants' **impressions of the 2 new promo sections?**


**Health care**  
Apply for VA health care and manage your prescriptions, appointments, and care online.


**Disability**  
File and track your service-connected claims and manage your benefits over time.


**Education and training**  
Apply for and manage your GI Bill and other education benefits.


**Careers and employment**  
Get support for vocational rehabilitation, your small business, or other job-related needs.


**Pension**  
Apply for monthly payments for wartime Veterans and survivors.


**Housing assistance**  
Find out if you're eligible for VA-backed home loans and disability housing grants.


**Life insurance**  
Explore life insurance options for you and your family and manage your policy online.

**Burials and memorials**  
Plan a burial in a VA national cemetery, request memorial items, and apply for survival benefits.

**Records**  
Apply for a Veteran ID card, get your benefit letters and medical records, and learn how to apply for discharge upgrade.


**Service member benefits**  
Learn when and how to apply for benefits during service and as you transition out of service.

**Family member benefits**  
Find out which benefits you may be eligible for as a dependent, spouse, survivor, or family caregiver.

**VA department information**  
Learn more about the VA departments that manage your benefits and health care programs.

Want the latest VA updates? Sign up with your email address.

Sign up



**Veteran programs and services**  
[Homeless Veterans](#)  
[Women Veterans](#)  
[Minority Veterans](#)  
[LGBTQ+ Veterans](#)  
[PTSD](#)  
[Mental health](#)  
[Adaptive sports and special events](#)  
[VA outreach events](#)  
[National Resource Directory](#)

**More VA resources**  
[VA forms](#)  
[VA health care access and quality](#)  
[Accredited claims representatives](#)  
[VA mobile apps](#)  
[State Veterans Affairs offices](#)  
[Doing business with VA](#)  
[Careers at VA](#)  
[VA outreach materials](#)  
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[All VA social media](#)

**In crisis? Talk to someone now**  
[Veterans Crisis Line](#)  
**Get answers**  
[Resources and support](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
**Call us**  
[800-698-2411](#)  
[TTY: 711](#)  
**Visit a medical center or regional office**  
[Find a VA location](#)

# Methodology

## Remote moderated usability sessions

via Zoom (**October 2022**)

- Asked about VA benefit experience
- Gave **tasks as wayfinding prompts** to explore the redesigned home page
  - Some tasks had links under *Popular on VA.gov*; others didn't
- **Recorded success yes/no**, and participant's ease rating (1-5)

## Tasks:

1. Message your doctor
2. Show you're a Veteran (benefit letter or Veteran ID card)
3. Find mental health counselor/therapist
4. Find recent changes in benefits/services (VA benefit promo)
5. Learn what else is new from the VA (news stories)
6. Add spouse (Review/update dependents)
7. Check current disability compensation rates
8. Compare education benefits by school
9. File for disability increase

VA

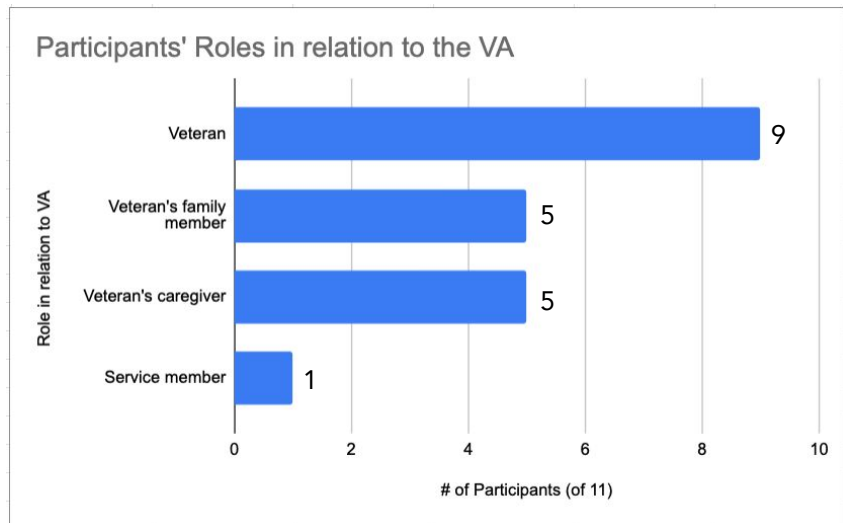


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# Participant Demographics

## 11 participants were recruited by Perigean:

- **8 on a smartphone**, 3 on desktop
- 4 screen reader users but didn't use them during the sessions; **2 used screen magnifiers**
- All had VA.gov accounts
- All but 1 had experience with VA health care



## Demographics highlights:

- **7 female**, 4 male, 1 also non-binary
- **4 older (55+ years)**
- 5 with a cognitive disability
- 4 live in a rural/remote location
- 6 without any post-high school degree
- 3 Hispanic, 1 Black, 1 Biracial, 1 Asian, and 1 Native, 7 White

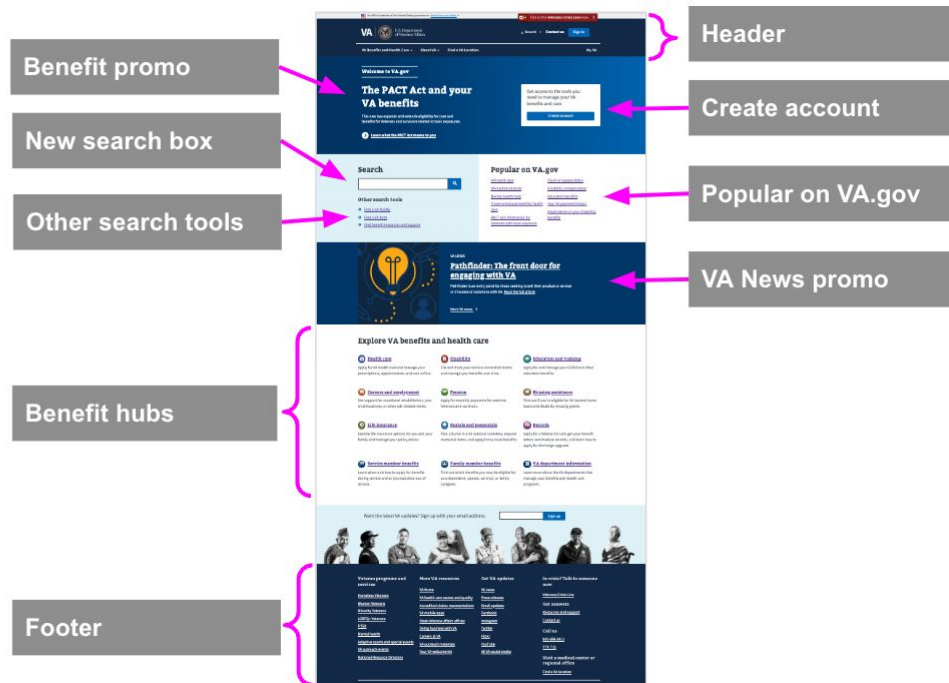
# Key Finding #1: Some participants focused on a specific part of the home page, while others scrolled more

## 5 of 11 participants focused their attention on a specific part of the page:

- Header  
(2 people on phones, 1 on desktop)
- *Popular on VA.gov*, *Search*, and *Other search tools*  
(2 people on phones)

## 6 of 11 scrolled up and down more fluidly

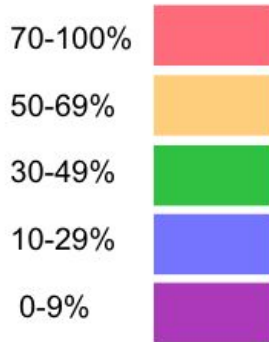
No differences by amount of experience using VA.gov (3 people had less experience than the others)



# Key Finding #1: Where people clicked on the home page

% of 11 research participants who clicked in each area

Key:



11 participants = 8 mobile + 3 desktop  
(screenshot shows desktop version but includes both mobile & desktop click data)



Where people clicked:

1. Popular on VA.gov (73% = 8/11)
2. Header (64% = 7/11)
3. Benefit hubs (55% = 6/11)
3. Footer (55% = 6/11)
4. Other search tools (45% = 5/11)
5. VA News promo (36% = 4/11)
6. Benefit promo—top of pg (27% = 3/11)
6. New search box (27% = 3/11)
7. Create account button (0%\*)

\*0% is OK because all participants already had accounts to sign into VA.gov, and there weren't any tasks related to this

**Most participants  
(8 of 11)  
used the links in  
Popular on VA.gov**

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# Key Finding #1: Where people clicked—across 3 studies

Compare  
home  
page  
usage  
across  
research  
studies

Key:



(screenshots show desktop  
version but include desktop  
& mobile participants together)



**Home page usability round 2**  
(10/2022 with 11 participants)



**Home page usability round 1**  
(8/2022 w/19 participants)



**Baseline Wayfinding**  
(5/2021 w/13 participants)

***Participants are  
scrolling farther down  
the redesigned home  
page (on the left)--  
so making better use  
of the entire page,  
which is shorter***

Note: More specific direct  
comparisons should be  
avoided because of  
differences between the  
studies in terms of tasks and  
participant numbers.



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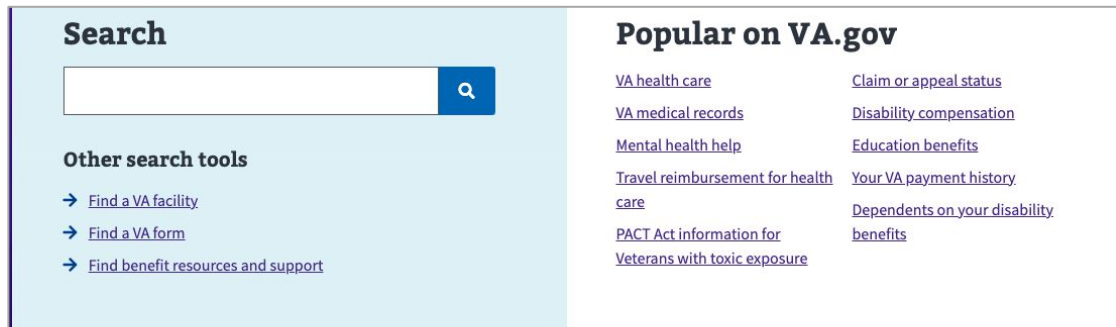
## Key Finding #2: Many participants got stuck, and most didn't try search

One design idea in the home page redesign was to reduce the number task-based links on the home page, and provide easy access to a new search box to help.

However, we found in the [last round of usability testing](#): **most people prefer to browse links, not search.** So we added more task-based links and some topic-based links into *Popular on VA.gov* to try to help.

Findings from this round of testing:

- **10 of 11 participants got stuck** on some task(s)
- **5 of 11 people used search** (3 used the new box, 2 used it in the header)
- **4 of the 5 people who used search did so when they said they were stuck**



The screenshot displays the search functionality on the VA.gov website. On the left, under the heading "Search", there is a text input field and a blue search button with a magnifying glass icon. Below this, the section "Other search tools" lists three links: "Find a VA facility", "Find a VA form", and "Find benefit resources and support". On the right, the section "Popular on VA.gov" lists ten links arranged in two columns: "VA health care", "VA medical records", "Mental health help", "Travel reimbursement for health care", "PACT Act information for Veterans with toxic exposure", "Claim or appeal status", "Disability compensation", "Education benefits", "Your VA payment history", and "Dependents on your disability benefits".

*So, most people (7 of 11) didn't use search when they were stuck, but a few did*

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## Key Finding #3: Compared to the previous round of testing, 5 tasks performed better and 1 fared worse

Of the 9 tasks in this study, 6 of them can be directly compared with the previous round of testing.

- **Success rates improved for all except *Message your doctor*** (55% now vs. 83% before)

**5 of 9 tasks were successfully completed by at least 70% of those who tried them**

- 4 tasks had lower success rates (55-63%), though 2 had improved slightly from previous round

Task #	Task description	Participant Ratings (1 = difficult, 5 = easy)			# participants who attempted this task	Successfully completed task w/o assistance	Comparison w/previous round of usab testing	Previous round of usability testing (8/2022)
		Avg	Min	Max		% Success		
11 participants; some didn't have time for all the tasks								
3	Find mental health counselor/therapist	4.0	1.0	5.0	10	100%	Improvement from	90%
8	File for disability increase	4.4	3.0	5.0	6	100%	Improvement from	50%
2	Show you're a Veteran (benefit letter or Veteran ID card)	3.8	2.0	5.0	10	90%		
6	Check current disability compensation rates	3.7	2.0	5.0	8	88%	Improvement from	60%
4	Find recent changes in benefits/services	3.3	1.0	5.0	11	73%		
7	Compare education benefits by school	2.6	1.0	5.0	8	63%	Improvement from	56%
4A	Learn what else is new from the VA (news stories)	3.3	1.0	5.0	10	60%		
5	Add spouse (Review/update dependents)	3.5	1.0	5.0	10	60%	Improvement from	56%
1	Message your doctor	2.8	1.0	5.0	11	55%	WORSE than	83%

## Key Finding #3: What made the 2 most difficult tasks challenging?

Tasks with lowest success rates	Why difficult
<i>Message your doctor</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Couldn't find by browsing</b> (missed link on health care page)</li><li>● <b>Used to doing from MHV</b>, not VA.gov</li><li>● Description for <i>Health care</i> benefit hub looked like it was for applying/creating account and not for managing health care (though this page has a secure messaging link)</li><li>● Unfamiliar task because they don't use VA health care (1 person)</li></ul>
<i>Add a spouse (review/update dependents)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Couldn't find by browsing</b> (tried <i>Disability</i> hub page, megamenu, <i>benefit hubs</i> &gt; <i>Family member benefits</i>)</li><li>● <b>Couldn't find by searching</b></li></ul>

# Key Finding #4: Some participants didn't click on either of the promos

Many participants (5 of 11) didn't think that the PACT Act article was about a **change in benefits** (the task) and scrolled down past it

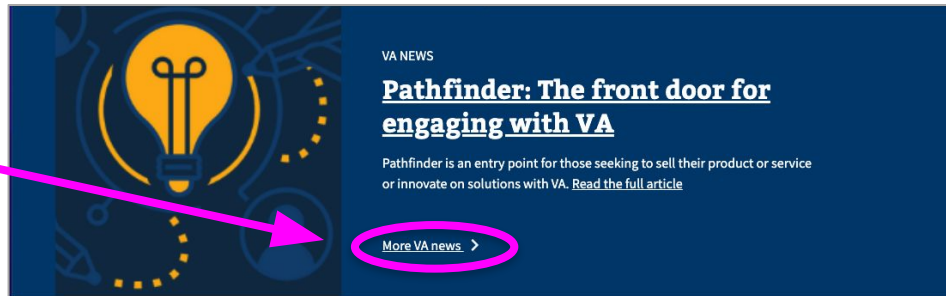
## The PACT Act and your VA benefits

This new law expands and extends eligibility for care and benefits for Veterans and survivors related to toxic exposures.

[Learn what the PACT Act means to you](#)

*"Don't know what this is [PACT Act]...doesn't apply to me" (p4).*

4 participants didn't notice the **More VA News** link



*VA News is "just taking up space and not helping with a task...[Pathfinder article] sounds very corporate, talking about soliciting to Veterans, and I don't like it" (p11).*

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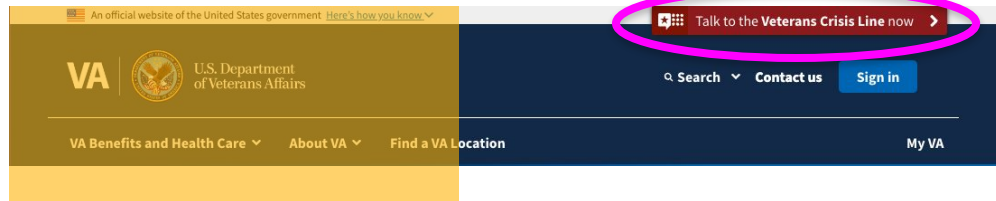


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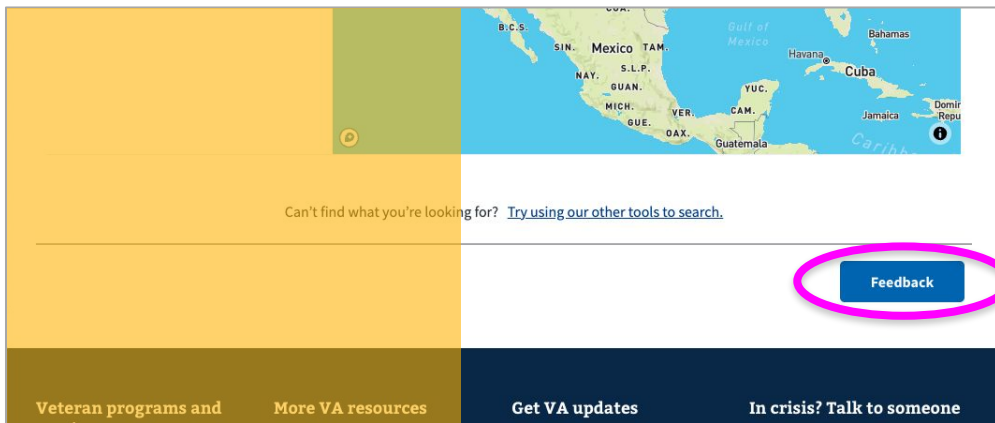
# Key Finding #5: Potential accessibility issue for screen magnifier users

One participant using a screen magnifier was **unable to see 2 buttons on the right side of VA.gov pages:**

- *Veterans Crisis Line* button in header
- *Feedback* button on *Find VA locations*



Yellow shading shows the portion of the page that p7 saw with his screen magnifier = the left half



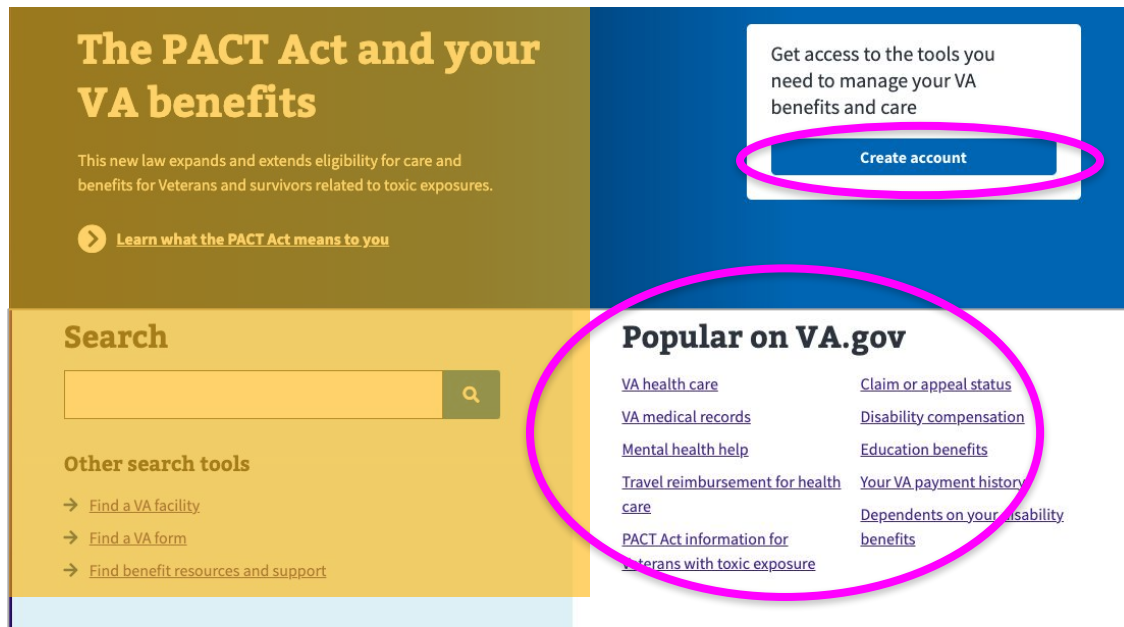
"When you have a screen enlarger, that's way over on the side...it's out of the screen to me" (p7).

Also **unknown** whether **Sign in, Search, My VA, Footer links** are similarly invisible; **needs more user research**

# Key Finding #5: Potential accessibility issue for screen magnifier users–on the home page?

Potential implications for the VA.gov home page:

1. **Popular on VA.gov links–visible to p7 because of the background color change** (from light blue to white), so he knew something must be to the right
2. **The Create account button on the home page–unknown** if the dark blue background is enough of a cue; didn't ask p7; **needs more user research**



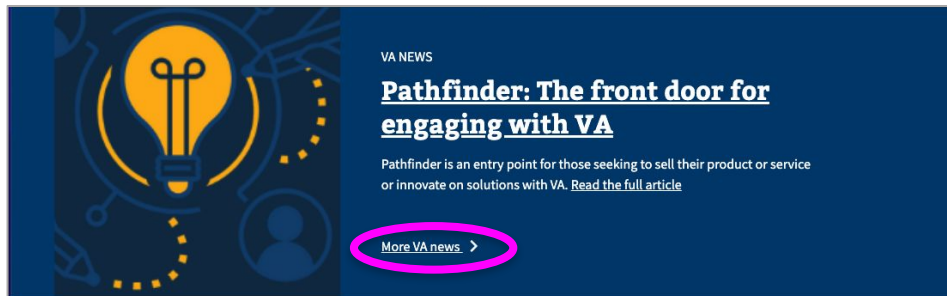
# Key Finding #6: Recruiting surprises

- 1. Participants recruited as screen reader users don't always use screen readers when web browsing**
  - NONE of the four people in this study used a screen reader at all during the research session, although they do use screen readers sometimes (i.e., to read a long article, when they use their tablet to browse, when they feel physically or mentally unwell).
- 2. People recruited to join the research session using a specific device (e.g., smartphone) may not be comfortable browsing websites with that device**
  - One participant said he was struggling to navigate on a phone instead of his usual computer: *“Most of it is getting used to using a phone instead of a computer when you’re used to using a computer on a regular basis”* (p5).
- 3. Asking for people who don’t have an account on VA.gov doesn’t necessarily get you people without accounts or who are unfamiliar with VA.gov**
  - Everyone recruited already had an account on VA.gov, even though Perigean said that some didn't. One created an account very recently.



# Key Recommendations: For home page redesign

1. Since valuable real estate at the top of the home page (benefit promo and *Create account* button) wasn't used much by people who have accounts on VA.gov, **consider whether more of the top of the home page could have the most used and useful items** (e.g., *Popular on VA.gov*, *Search*, *Other search tools*, and maybe the benefit hubs).
  - **Monitor usage by ALL users after launch via analytics**—both experienced and not experienced users, and as the promo content changes. *IN PROCESS*
2. **Make links under *Popular on VA.gov* more task-oriented with destinations that are distinct from the benefit hubs** *IN PROCESS*
3. **Make the *More VA News* link more visually prominent** because it's not noticed by many people.



# Key Recommendations: Beyond the home page

4. Consider suggestions for **additions to the megamenu, hub pages, search autocomplete suggestions, and search top recommendations in collaboration with the Sitewide Content/IA team.**
  - E.g., Add "View or change dependent" to the *Family Member Benefits* page, as a search autocomplete suggestion, and a search "top recommendation" for "spouse" and "dependent".  
*REQUESTED updates to top recommendations (Best Bets)*
5. **Consider more intuitive ways to help people manage their VA health care in collaboration with the Health Apartment, Content/IA, and Authenticated Experience teams.** Monitor their progress in integrating health care tasks into VA.gov, including the home page.
6. **Investigate screen magnifier challenges with buttons on the right side** of the page by conducting additional user research. Do this in collaboration with **Accessibility Specialists and the team that works on the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL).**
  - The VCL button would likely be more visible if *aligned with the left side of the page*, or if it extended all the way across the desktop version like it does on mobile.

# Next Steps

- **Present results** to the Sitewide Public Websites team and any other interested teams
- **Follow up with other teams** (Sitewide Content/IA, Health Apartment, Authenticated Experience, Veterans Crisis Line, and Accessibility) about some of the findings and recommendations
- **Monitor analytics and Medallia feedback** for the redesigned home page to inform future design iteration:
  - The new search box, *Create account* button, and engagement with both promos
  - Task completion initiated from the home page
  - Repeat usage of the redesigned experience via opt-in during soft launch before full launch
- **Potentially plan more usability testing** with people who...
  - Don't have an account on VA.gov so we can get user feedback on the *Create account* button
  - Always or frequently use screen magnifiers when browsing the web
  - Always or frequently use screen readers when browsing the web
  - Always or frequently use smartphones when browsing the web



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# Questions?

Link to [full research report on GitHub](#)

Reach out to Cindy Merrill on Slack

# Appendix

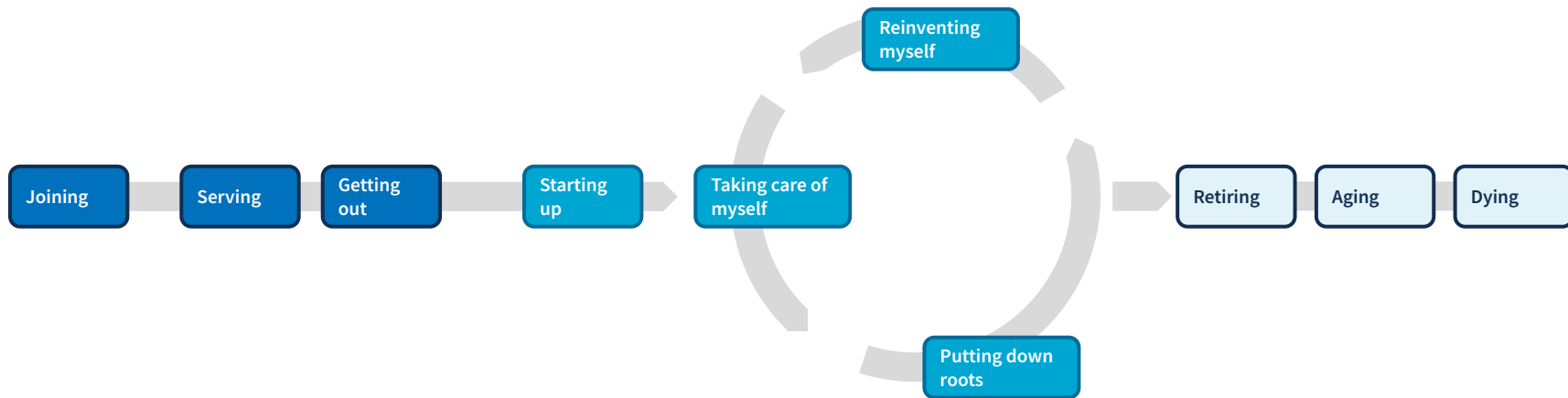


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# How this research maps to the Veteran journey

Veterans and others (caregivers, family members, survivors, and service members) use the VA.gov home page throughout

- Serving and separation
- Living civilian life
- Retiring and aging



For a fully detailed Veteran journey, go to

<https://github.com/departement-of-veterans-affairs/va.gov-team/blob/master/platform/design/va-product-journey-maps/Veteran%20Journey%20Map.pdf>

Serving and separation

Living civilian life

Retiring and aging

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# OCTO-DE goals that this research supports

Supported

Not supported

Veterans and their families can apply for all benefits online

Veterans and their families can find a single, authoritative source of information

Veterans and their families trust the security, accuracy, and relevancy of VA.gov

Veterans can manage their health services online

VFS teams can build and deploy high-quality products for Veterans on the Platform

Logged-in users have a personalized experience, with relevant and time-saving features

Logged-in users can update their personal information easily and instantly

Logged-in users can easily track applications, claims, or appeals online

Measures to increase

Completion rate of online transactions

Percent of applications submitted online (vs. paper)

Veteran satisfaction with VA.gov  
Benefit use and enrollment, across all business lines

Benefit value (in \$) delivered from online applications or transactions

Number of VA.gov users as a function of total Veteran population

Usage of digital, self-service tools

Measures to decrease

Time to successful complete and submit online transactions

Time to process online applications (vs. paper)

Call center volume, wait time, and time to resolution

Time from online benefit discovery to benefit delivery

VA



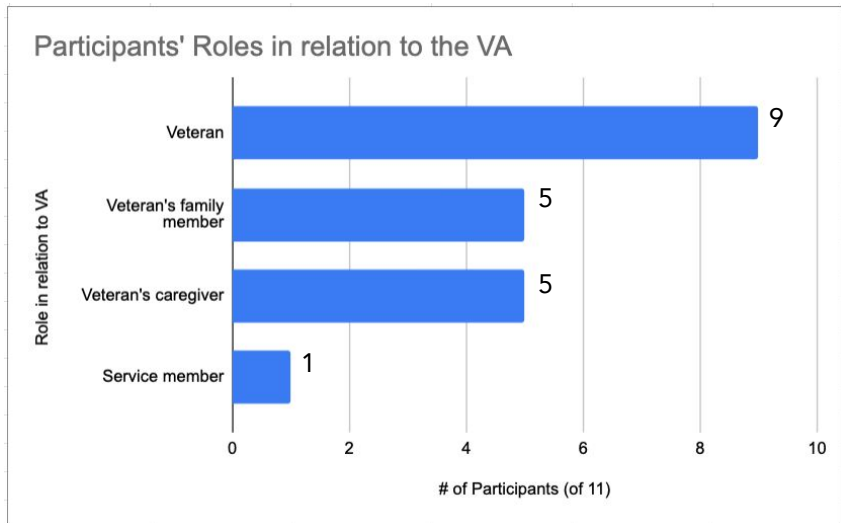
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## Participant Demographics

## 11 participants:

- **8 on a smartphone**, 3 on desktop
- 4 screen reader users but didn't used them during the sessions; **2 used screen magnifiers**
- All had VA.gov accounts
- All but 1 had experience with VA health care

[illegible]

Underserved Veteran groups we didn't talk to:

- LGBTQ+
- Other than honorable discharge
- Immigrant origin
- Expat (living abroad)