

Common problems in VA.gov CMS alt text to inform alternative text guidelines

Background

A recent audit of alt text in the VA.gov CMS revealed quality issues with alternative text that CMS editors are adding to image content. Currently neither the VA.gov Content Style Guide nor the VA Web Governance docs provide VA-specific guidelines on how to approach alt text. Establishing alt text standards specific to VA's content may help improve alt text quality and accessible experiences for Veterans and caregivers.

Because most of VA.gov image content appears within highly-structured content types, there are opportunities to provide context-specific guidelines. Guidelines written specifically for facility photos, staff profile pictures, stories, etc., may help editors write quality alt text with more consistency.

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Alt text examples in structured content

Facility photos

Content types

VAMC facility, Vet Center

Examples of common problems

Problem	Image	Alt text
Image should show what the facility building looks like Alt text isn't descriptive enough	 A close-up photograph of a dark-colored building facade. A rectangular sign is mounted on the wall. The sign features the VA logo (a stylized 'V' and 'A') on the left, followed by the text "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs" and "VA Outpatient Clinic Portsmouth" below it. At the bottom of the sign, smaller text reads "VA Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network". The rest of the building's surface is dark and textured.	Portsmouth
Alt text focuses on details that might not be the most important to Veterans.	 A photograph of a single-story building with a light-colored, possibly stone or stucco, exterior. The entrance features a glass door and windows. Above the entrance, a sign reads "Madison County Veterans". There is a small American flag flying from a pole in front of the building. The sky is blue with some white clouds.	Photo of building trimmed with red, white and blue with flag flying at front.
Alt text uses abbreviations	 A photograph of a large, modern building with a tan-colored facade and a prominent arched entrance. The words "Outpatient Clinic" and the VA logo are visible above the entrance. The building has multiple stories and a clean, professional appearance. It is surrounded by a paved parking lot.	Stonybrook CBOC

Potential standards

If the goal is consistency and concision

- Simply use the name of the facility as alt text

If the goal is providing screen reader users with details that might help them navigate

- If the building has visible text, include it in alt text (see last example)

- Identify which side of the building is pictured
- If possible, identify major landmarks (e.g. a large flagpole out front)

Staff profiles

Content types

Staff profile,

Biggest opportunity area

Establish standards for headshots to create consistency.

Examples of common problems

Problem	Image	Alt text
Alt text includes title information that's usually repeated in the content.		Rebecca Stackhouse, Executive Director, Salem VA HCS
Alt text includes title, but no name		Assistant Medical Center Director

Alt text uses only first name (or sometimes only last name)		Michael
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Potential standards

- Use the person's first and last name
- Don't duplicate other information that's already on page content, such as their title

Stories

Content types

Story (for VAMCs)

Biggest opportunity area

Make the relationship between alt text and caption content more clear to editors.

Problem	Image	Alt text
Editor copied the caption into alt text, which creates a repetitive experience for screen reader users.		Carey Bolt, Laurens County Veterans Service Officer, poses for a photo in the Laurens County Courthouse Hall of Heroes.

<p>Another caption example – Using the caption as alt text redundant in this case. It also doesn't provide an accurate and equivalent description of what's pictured.</p>		<p>Nurses decorate Serenity House as part first in a series of "virtual" vacations for its residents.</p>
<p>In cases where editors haven't simply duplicated the caption, often they use a placeholder phrase instead of trying to provide an equivalent description.</p>		<p>Women</p>

Facility maps

Content types

VAMC detail page (usually linked from VAMC Facility “Prepare for your visit” section)

Biggest opportunity area

Editors should identify maps when possible. This may help people using screen readers, who could show the map to others to help them navigate.

Problem	Image	Alt text

Although the map cannot be fully represented with alt text, it should at minimum indicate that it's a map



James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital

Alt text should indicate what image can help the user understand.

In this example, “Map showing trolley stops” may be more useful.



USCD Blue Line Trolley diagram

Events

Content types

Event (for VAMCs)

Biggest opportunity area

Encourage editors to provide equivalent alt text for logos with a lot of text. Consider guidelines about when logos are appropriate.

Problem	Image	Alt text
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Editors tend to upload logos for event images without providing equivalent alt text		Daisy
Another logo example		Blood drive

Program pages

Content types

VAMC Detail Page

Problem	Image	Alt text
Editors add graphics with text that's already represented on the page. In this case, the graphic serves no purpose other than visual appeal. (See this page for context)	Get your at-home COVID tests COVIDtests.gov or by calling 1-800-232-0233 (TTY 1-888-720-7489)  	How to order your at-home test

User centered guidelines for alt text

The VA Content Style Guide should provide the ultimate source of truth for standards on alt text content writing. The Knowledge Base can be leveraged to deliver those standards with further context specific to an editor's task. Once alternative text standards are established for the VA Content Style guide, the Sitewide CMS team should work with Sitewide Content to ensure the KB article provides guidance at the correct level and is aligned with those standards.

Below is the beginnings of a rough and partial draft of what we're thinking editors might need to understand. We can decide later what parts belong in the style guide, and what's better addressed in the KB.

How to write alternative text for VA.gov

Accurate, well-considered alternative text helps make VA.gov content accessible to everyone. Learn how to write alternative text for images.

What it is and why it matters

Alternative text (alt text) is a substitute for image content on a web page. Site visitors experience alternative text in a few different contexts, such as when:

- A screen reader announces the alternative text in place of an image. This helps people who have visual or cognitive disabilities perceive the meaning of the image in the context of the page.
- An image fails to load for someone accessing VA.gov on low bandwidth. When this happens, the browser will display alt text instead of the image.

Crafting well-considered alternative text ensures that all Veterans have access to the content they need on VA.gov. Vague or missing alternative text creates frustrating experiences and may prevent Veterans from accessing services and information.

General best practices

Consider whether alternative text is needed

Alternative text that's unnecessary can be just as frustrating as alt text that's missing. If the written page content already provides the same meaning as the image, alt text might not be necessary.

Example

TK

Convey the “why”

Well-considered alt text conveys the equivalent meaning of an image on the page. The description should focus on what's important about the image in the context of other content.

Example

TK

Provide the equivalent information

If the image contains text as part of a logo or graphic, the alternative text should also contain that text so screen reader users don't miss information.

Example

TK

Keep it succinct

Effective alt text is short and to the point, no more than 125 characters long. If you're finding that it's hard to convey the meaning within the character limit, it may indicate that you should find a way to represent the information in the written page content itself.

Example

TK

Avoid redundant “photo of” phrases

Screenreaders will automatically announce the word “image” before reading alt text. Therefore using phrases like “image of,” or “photo of” aren’t necessary, and will create a frustrating experience.

Example

“Image of a VA cemetery” would be read aloud by a screen reader as “image, Image of a VA cemetery.”

Use correct grammar

Capitalize the first letter and end whole sentences with a period to ensure screen readers will announce the alt text smoothly.

Example

Two Veterans embrace during a pride event.

Facility photos

Best practice

Use the name of the facility as the alternative text. If the photo is of a particular entrance or contains useful landmarks, include those in the description.

Example

TK

Staff profile photos

Best practice

Use the person's full name as the alternative text. Don't include their title, especially if it's already represented in page content.

Example

TK

Stories

Best practice

Don't duplicate the caption in the alt text. Focus on describing information or details in the picture that aren't included in the caption.

Example

TK

Facility Maps

Best practice

Indicate that the image is a map so people using screen readers understand what kind of information is in the image.

Example

TK

Graphics

Best practice

If the image includes any text, include it in the alternative text. If the image is too complex to be represented in 125 characters, be sure to provide an equivalent version of the text directly in page content.

Example

TK

Logos

Best practice

Use just the name of the organization represented by the logo. If there's a tagline as part of the logo, include that in the alternative text.

Example

TK