



How VA Improved the Veteran Experience in the Last 10 Years

Ten years ago, when the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) became one of the first agencies to elevate customer experience (CX) to top priority, leaders created a path toward better serving veterans and their families through improved communications, easier access to information and a focus on restoring veterans' trust in the agency. In doing so, it also created a path for other agencies to improve the experiences of their own customers.

In 2014, VA faced a new mandate following revelations that raised serious questions around access to veteran care. When then-VA Secretary Bob McDonald arrived at the agency, he instituted the first dedicated resources for customer experience and launched a multipronged digital modernization effort. McDonald's solution to the VA crisis included creating the Veterans Experience Office (VEO), aimed at streamlining veteran access to services and information and bringing the agency fully into the digital age.

"He really had this bold vision for VA, which turned into something for the government as a whole, and it was to put the veteran at the center," said Barbara C. Morton, deputy chief veterans experience officer in the VEO. "He stood up the office, and the very first, No. 1 thing VEO was charged with was to define what 'experience' meant across VA. So, there was this foundational common lexicon in communicating. I think that was a milestone itself."

The efforts tracked with similar initiatives at other agencies, where new White House policies and emphasis on digital-first services kick-started a focus on customer experience. A decade later, 10 key lessons drive the continued evolution of integration, measurement and improvement of CX measures at VA and across the government.

Centralize information: Meet your customer where they are — and bring them the info they need

VA's expansive footprint — serving millions of vets at thousands of facilities — created inherent challenges in centralizing core organizational services. One fragmented service of paramount importance to address: easy access to essential resources.

WHAT THEY DID

VEO's early goals centered on communications, starting with the definitions and metrics foundational to its mission. This work made way for a new, single, easily accessible front door to VA with a new website and ongoing, structured communications strategies to ensure veterans are aware of new benefits and tools.

HOW THEY DID IT

In 2015, VA's newly established offshoot of the U.S. Digital Service consolidated essential benefits information on one website and worked with veterans to ensure the site was useful and accessible, reducing the burden on veterans seeking care. Meanwhile, VA's Office of the CTO began restructuring digital customer access points — based on similar customer acquisition strategies used in the commercial sector — by including multiple entry points on the website where veterans could access VA services digitally. These communications help new and longstanding enrollees navigate complex bureaucratic processes through personalized, human-centered messages tailored to their specific journey.

“Veterans shouldn't have to feel the burden of trying to navigate VA. We know it's a hard organization to navigate, but they should just see one VA, and we inside of VA should be easing that burden,” Morton said. “Part of VEO's larger strategy is tied to ease of navigation, which is a pain point we hear over and over again. A huge pillar of that is integrated communications — clear and easy-to-remember front doors, both digitally and telephonically.”



Build trust: Establish trust as your most mission-critical metric for success

As VA's plans started to better take shape, VEO set out to strengthen trust in the agency, including by integrating the "voice of the veteran" into agencywide operations. That also meant coordinating messaging across VA to ensure the agency spoke with one authoritative voice.

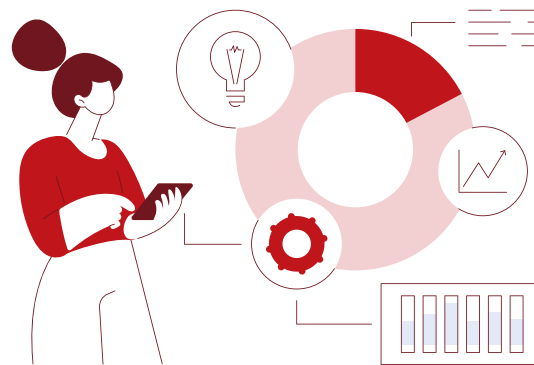
WHAT THEY DID

VEO's foundational goal is to help VA provide easy, effective, emotionally resonant interactions — core principles that underpin customer experience and directly impact trust. The agency launched the Veteran Signals, or VSignals, survey program in 2016 as a primary conduit for VEO to closely track sense of trust in VA — the office's chief measurement of mission effectiveness. The early VA-wide trust surveys hovered at around 55%, indicating a serious gap in how many veterans surveyed on their recent interaction with VA said they trusted the agency. By May 2024, the first-quarter fiscal 2024 VSignals survey revealed that veteran trust in the agency had risen to a record high 80.4%, offering remarkable proof of progress.

HOW THEY DID IT

The VSignals survey results reflect VA's continued efforts to reach veterans on their terms about the information they care about most. With trust established as their "north star," VEO leaders helped the agency connect digital communications, subscriber acquisition and veteran experience into a single concept. This allowed VA leaders across the organization to understand and integrate important feedback about the veteran experience and provided the resources and tools needed for the agency to speak with one voice.

"What's so powerful about that milestone is it proves the concept," Morton said. "When you have the leadership, vision, the staff devotion and a common purpose and common passion to really focus on how we best serve those that have served our country, their families, caregivers and survivors, when we really fixate on that as an organization, even an organization as large and diffuse as Veterans Affairs can move the needle on its most important metric."



Communicate outward: Tell stories that resonate and elicit a response with a variety of audiences

VA's success in strengthening trust in its commitment to veterans marks a critical benchmark. But all those efforts are for naught if the agency isn't able to communicate with veterans.

WHAT THEY DID

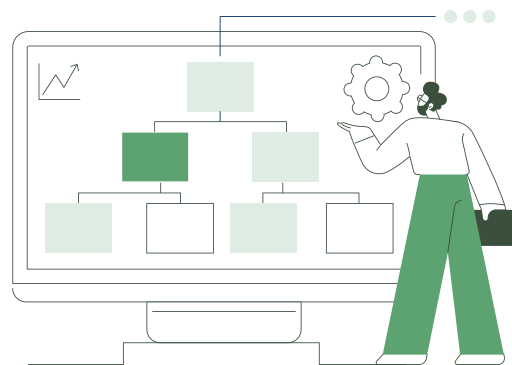
When Lynda Davis joined VA as the second chief of VEO in 2017, she instilled key practices around amplifying veteran feedback, leveraging real-time, short-loop surveys and data dashboards. She also championed the use of human-centered design in mapping veterans' journeys, which informed trust-building measures. Moreover, the agency used an enterprise digital campaign strategy to manage communications for major programs like preventing veteran suicide and helping service members transition to civilian life through the Solid Start program. Through this campaign strategy, VA was able to coordinate communications across multiple platforms — including email, SMS and social media — to speak with veterans through their preferred channels.

HOW THEY DID IT

The journey-mapping effort identified key “moments that matter” in veterans' interactions with VA to strengthen the agency's support beyond individual interactions. Today the agency uses “moments that matter” to improve its approaches to the entire experience lifecycle, in framing its messaging, and in communicating the unfolding story of CX at VA and elsewhere. By understanding the veteran's journey when interacting with VA, the agency can now deliver personalized messages at critical times in the process to ensure successful completion and a better experience.

“What is customer experience?”

You know, many people had not considered that before. Inside VA — and probably a lot of other places — people wanted to do the best job possible, but they didn't know how to measure that in the eyes of the customer. Just communicating has helped change the culture,” said Tim Hudak, VEO's lead for customer experience communications. “Fast forward: We're no longer explaining what customer experience is. Now, it's just about maturing that culture, and pushing us together in the same direction.”



Communicate inward: Fuel the mission by providing a powerful employee experience

The MyVA transformation initiative included employee experience as one of five core strategies. Without an improved employee experience, VA couldn't deliver improved services.

WHAT THEY DID

Recognizing that world-class customer experience cannot be delivered without the bedrock of world-class employee experience (EX), VEO integrated EX into its portfolio to complement the established CX mission and proven capabilities. In emphasizing the intersection between CX and EX, VEO underscored the agency's commitment to employees in its plans for organizational improvements. The spotlight on employee empowerment helped frontline staff provide better experiences through access to better capabilities.

HOW THEY DID IT

Once VEO integrated EX, leaders took several cues from CX strategies that provably improved veteran experiences, and vice versa. The agency created an employee experience journey map incorporating more than 11,000 employee insights and built a nuanced perspective of the employee lifecycle. The employee-centric efforts included several inward-facing communications tools built off a shared enterprise platform that enabled programs throughout the agency to gauge and improve employee experience and, in turn, provide data and lessons learned to improve the veteran experience.

“It was pivotal for us to understand the pain points, the bright spots, the moments that matter and then design new solutions on how to improve those processes — not only for veterans, but for employees too,” said John Boerstler, who left as VEO chief in September 2024. **“I think an important piece of what we've done is designing a lot of new training for employees on the benefits delivery side that can help empower them and give them the tools to then better serve veterans and their families.”**



Inform legislation: Work together to collaboratively — and iteratively — mandate progress

In December 2018, CX got legislative treatment under the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA), which provided a mandate and some guidelines for federal agencies to upgrade their constituents' experiences by modernizing digital services. VA played a substantial role in IDEA, helping inform the policy.

WHAT THEY DID

Buoyed by bipartisan support to codify digital customer experience in the federal government, IDEA called for digital formats and set requirements for federal websites and digital services to provide CX-friendly accessibility, design, security and usability. The legislation also moved to replace paperwork-heavy processes with online forms, enable digital signatures and make it easier to work with and across different departments. While this codified work was already underway at VA, it also provided additional support to agency efforts.

HOW THEY DID IT

With a significant digital modernization effort already underway, VA was well-positioned not just to align with IDEA but to help shape the policy. The agency was already building out more online self-service tools as part of broader CX initiatives at VA — some of which the office's leadership outlined in its "[CX Cookbook](#)" put together to share best practices and lessons learned. The Office of Management and Budget issued updated guidance in 2023, setting new standards, making new recommendations and calling out shortfalls and delays. The updates underscore the challenges in modernization — including for CX purposes — and reiterate some ground covered in the cookbook.

“Every agency is different, every culture is different; however, all the levers in the federal government are common in the sense of, how do you drive organizational change? How do you architect that?” Morton said. “Knowing your organizational culture, knowing your leadership priorities, knowing the organization’s readiness, knowing where you sit in the organization all these different factors ... that’s kind of what we captured in the cookbook.”



Respond to crises: Show up when you're needed most

VA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic leveraged an all-hands-on-deck approach to transform agency operations almost overnight, with VEO playing a key role. Telehealth access, virtual delivery of services and benefits, the buildout of a remote workforce to support a reimagined VA mission, an exemplar vaccine deployment and highly strategic and anticipatory communications operations are all examples of how the pandemic poured fuel on the VEO mission.

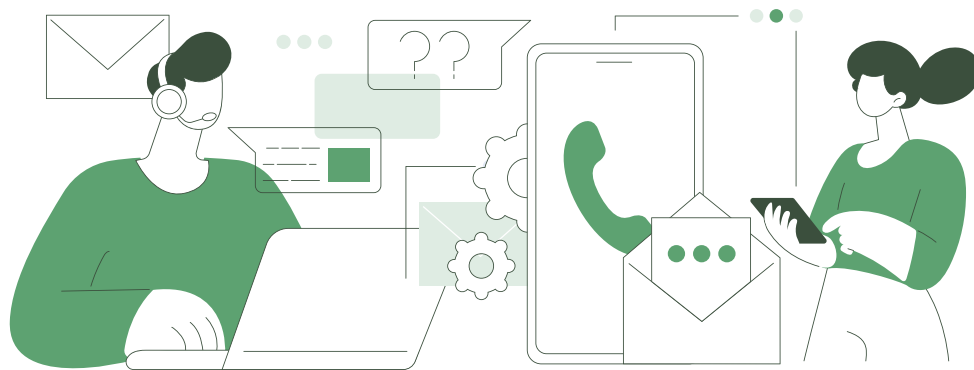
WHAT THEY DID

Across VA, proactive communication kicked into high gear, breaking new ground as a single point of truth in emergency management. The agency made a major push to reach all veterans, using digital tools and advanced audience strategies to grow its subscriber lists to more than 20 million. As the audience grew, VA worked to ensure messages centered on the information veterans needed most, which increased trust in those communications and the agency.

HOW THEY DID IT

In addition to frequent communications, VA also spoke extensively with stakeholders during the rollout of vaccines starting in December 2020 — an event that created a massive opportunity to bring in vets who previously weren't engaged with VA. That feedback was used to continually improve the enrollment process and access to information, which further increased trust and engagement required to make more improvements.

“That feedback was probably one of the biggest things that we needed to understand, so that we could learn from that experience and improve the process for the next time we inevitably would have to do it,” Boerstler said. “The vaccine deployment was just such an incredible success story in such a terrible time for our country. I really think that VEO ensured the voice of the veteran was at the decision-making table ... and by helping measure experiences, ensured the response was as frictionless as possible. That was pretty pivotal.”



Personalize communications: Use data to deliver the right information at the right time

While early efforts to improve the veteran experience included reaching more veterans with more information, leaders realized that too much or irrelevant information was detrimental to those goals.

WHAT THEY DID

Personalized messages that demonstrate an understanding of the recipient — including only relevant information, sent when they are most likely to be receptive and able to act, and through their preferred channels — were key to improving trust and the overall experience. For example, when a service member transitions to civilian life, at midnight they would receive as many as 17 emails from different programs across VA. Using data-driven insights, VEO was able to build coalitions and trust across VA's program, communications and IT leaders to centralize that outreach through the communications team within VEO.

HOW THEY DID IT

The agency leverages data from its digital and communications platforms to better understand interests, preferences and behaviors. This process often starts with just a name but matures over time as the agency collects relevant information about geography, demographics, personal preferences and unique needs to deliver more relevant content and an experience tailored to each veteran's needs. The agency also collaborates horizontally across various offices to bring to life its long-term vision of a communications experience centered on the veteran, not the agency's organizational structure.

“What are the moments that matter to you when you interact with VA?”

Whether it's a hospital experience or the benefits compensation experience or the National Cemetery Administration visitor experience,” Morton said. “What VA has done — and VEO has been an engine for that — is to help furnish the department with the ability to channel those insights and data points to understand [the veteran experience], first and foremost, and to utilize data to make process improvements, create new tools, develop different training, create a new website or a mobile app and anything in between to really enhance the experience based on what veterans are telling us.”



Get leadership onboard: Bring to bear the full strength of government support

Before and after COVID-19, non-pandemic efforts in VA CX continued, including presidential mandates and public-private partnerships that galvanized military transition support and delivery of government services. Those efforts underpinned whole-of-government CX practices and new White House directives.

WHAT THEY DID

The Executive Order (EO) on “[Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government](#)” (December 2021) and the earlier [Solid Start](#) Executive Order (December 2019) came from two different presidents with two different top-of-mind goals. The commonalities, however, serve as force-multiplying avenues toward veteran well-being.

HOW THEY DID IT

The sweeping 2021 Transforming Federal CX EO called for agencies to center their missions and efforts on the people they serve. The EO’s section on veteran care and benefits also directed support for military transition as well as easier, more effective and more straightforward access to digital services for vets and their caregivers and support teams.

“President Biden’s CX executive order

not only set out some really important requirements for us at VA, but for all agencies to raise the bar on customer experience and really invest more in it,” Boerstler said. “It validated a lot of what we had done at VEO and at VA writ large in the previous six to eight years at that point to really ensure that the customer was at the center of everything we do.”



The PACT Act ensures the commitment to vets continues

VEO is a place where the work is never done. That work was vaulted into the national spotlight when the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or PACT Act, passed in August 2022, expanding health care benefits for vets exposed to toxins. The implications of the PACT Act are likely years from being fully realized.

WHAT THEY DID

The landmark expansion of benefits provides care and compensation to huge classes of veterans sickened by toxic materials during their service. Touted by President Biden on its two-year anniversary as “one of the most significant laws ever helping veterans and their families,” VA has delivered close to \$7 billion in PACT Act benefits to more than 1 million veterans and their survivors. Some 740,000 vets have enrolled in VA care since the act’s passage, almost 6 million veterans have been screened for toxic exposures and VA has received record benefits claims applications, surpassing 4 million in the last two years.

HOW THEY DID IT

VA’s outreach is a lynchpin in the momentum. VA CX leaders recognized the PACT Act as an opportunity to serve exponentially more veterans and their families, given the charge to contact all veterans who might be newly eligible for services. In preparation, VA worked to ensure the website and other entry points offered a consistent experience and prompted veterans to sign up for targeted communications.

Boerstler credits Hudak and the communications team with much of that outreach success.

“It was really a massive opportunity for VA to ensure that we delivered a world-class experience to these new customers of all ages, and VEO was at the center of better laying out how veterans would find out about these expanded benefits and care,” he said.



Military transition journey undergoes revamp

VA, DOD, other federal agencies and countless external organizations all provide resources, programming, information and other forms of assistance for veterans separating from the military and transitioning to civilian life. The importance of this support has received resurgent attention in recent years amid high-profile coverage of poor transition outcomes, including suicide and homelessness. In response, VA is rolling out new efforts, starting in November 2024.

WHAT THEY'RE DOING

To help strengthen support to transitioning veterans, VEO is taking steps to begin more personalized outreach earlier in their journeys. The aim is to offer more opportunities for preparation and easier access to integrated resources. It's a multipronged effort that includes and supports elements VA is working on collaboratively with DOD and as part of the President's Management Agenda, tackling a range of areas such as education, career, housing, financial planning, health and more.

HOW THEY'RE DOING IT

To start, the VHA, VBA and VEO teams are reimagining ways they can support VA's Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which traditionally starts outreach to service members up to a year before they leave the military. Outreach includes emails with information on VA resources they'll soon be eligible for, such as health care, insurance, GI Bill, home loans and mental health support. Based on qualitative and quantitative customer feedback analysis and listening sessions, VA's new Military Transition Communications Journey caters to transitioning service members uniquely, tracking engagement with VA services to help ensure awareness of eligibility and deadlines for resources.

“This is really an amazing, holistic effort to address pain points and moments that matter through early and comprehensive communications,” Morton said. “I think it's a great acknowledgement of human-centered design to ask those that we serve what they need and design with and for and around them. And you're actually able to create tools that are pretty intuitive and pretty simple at the end of the day. Yes, it's digital. Yes, it's early email communication. But at the end of the day, it's keeping things simple so they can access the information at the time and in the manner they want it.”



For any veterans interested in using VA, please visit va.gov or call 1-800-MyVa411.