USDS Builds One-Stop Shop on the New VA.Gov

Backed by user research, real data, and ultimately, what veterans want.

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The U.S. Digital Service team at the Veterans Affairs Department is making it even easier for veterans to access their benefits and health information with a brand consolidation effort that puts Vets.Gov and VA.Gov on one site, set to launch on Veteran’s Day.

The team has been at this for years, since the creation of USDS in 2014. First, it built Vets.gov, an eBenefits online portal that consolidated the hundreds of websites, forms and passwords vets had to go through to access their benefits, and launched it on Veteran’s Day in 2015. The site has been iteratively progressing
through veteran-testing, user-centered design and feedback ever since.

In fact, it’s been progressing so well, that Marcy Jacobs, executive director of the Veterans Affairs Digital Service team, received a Service to America Medal for Management Excellence award on Oct. 2 for the team’s efforts in connecting veterans with benefits. Jacobs started in USDS and now works for the VA leading a team of VA employees and members of USDS detailed over to the agency.

“It would be great to not be in a model of forms and to be more in a model of, we’re using data to make it much easier for veterans to engage,” Jacobs said in an interview with GovernmentCIO Media.

But the team — and Jacobs — aren’t stopping there. They’re using research and data to continue to understand what veterans want, need and expect out of these online services, and then develop capabilities and designs from that. That’s why on Veteran’s Day, users can expect Va.gov to look differently, perhaps more in-tune with what they actually are visiting the site for.

What led the digital service team at VA to consolidate Va.gov and Vets.gov? Let’s start from the top.

**The Problem**

In order to understand user frustration, the team pulls from formative research, call center calls, one-on-one user research and simply talking to users. In short, veterans were confused and frustrated with the more than 400 veteran websites, dozens of forms, numbers of passwords, and a disorganized customer experience.

“Originally, the goal of building everything on Vets.gov was to make one single place for all of these transactions that veterans need to engage with, and there’s, right now, lots of places,” Jacobs said.

And while the team has seen lots of success with Vets.gov, as well as 1.8 million users a month, Jacobs said Va.gov still gets the majority of the traffic — about 10 million visitors.
“The next evolution of Vets.gov is to take all the goodness that’s been built over the last two and a half, close to three years, and put that where people are looking,” Jacobs said. Veterans should be able to visit one website and find what they need.

**The Capabilities**

When Jacobs took lead of the VA Digital Service team 2017, she said it was “very much in this posture of migrating functionality over from lots of other places, and we’re still doing that, we’re tackling a lot of the harder systems.”

Jacobs said there were a lot of forms that were migrated over to Vets.gov that weren’t as complicated. But right now, the team is working on modernizing the claims form, which is “enormous,” and has a bunch of children forms with it. The claims process is such a critical piece of the puzzle, and Jacobs said they hope to have a minimum viable product for that by the end of this year or early next year.

And notably, one of the things Jacobs said has gained a lot of traction and is a step in the direction the team is going with VA, is the personalization suit of products. “So, this is who you are, this is what we know about you, that’s a criticism that VA gets a lot, is its lack of transparency,” Jacobs said, “we have information in lots of siloes.”

This personalization is powered by an effort that the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) has been doing called Vet360, to bring together all this data on vets that live in different systems. For example, a veteran’s address and contact information lives in 87 different systems. So, if the contact information is updated at one medical center, it used to be that it was changed in only that medical center — not in their pensions portfolio, or for prescriptions, etc.

The Vet360 team pulled all that data together, as it’s connected to the various medical centers and providers, so that when a vet updates his or her contact information, it’ll propagate to all the places where it should — even the medical center a vet visits on vacation.
And in the nearly three months since this capability has been in place, 60,000 people have updated their contact information, reducing call center volume. Because what the team didn’t know at the time, was that updating contact information is the second most called about thing to the contact centers.

This will pull from more datasets in the future, too. It starts with contact information, but Jacobs said it’ll evolve into discharge status and other records pulled from the Defense Department to make it more transparent and easier for veterans to find.

Another part of this effort is the personal dashboard, which Jacobs compared to signing into a Bank of America or USAA account. When you log into these accounts, “you don’t hangout on the homepage . . . you come to a website to do something,” she said. Previously, a veteran would have to log in on the benefits side to see benefits information, on the health side to see health information, and so on.

Now, users can log in from the homepage and see everything related to them — benefits, claim status, if a document is needed for an appeal, a scheduled doctor appointment, if a prescription refill is in the mail, a message from the doctor, etc. “It just aggregates everything,” Jacobs said.

And people are using it. Jacobs said the dashboard receives 40,000 people a day. “All these things have been built in all these places, on Vets.gov. We’ve been building this functionality, and what the personalized dashboard does, is really curate that into much more of an experience,” she added.

Though many of these capabilities, including the personal dashboard, aren’t new, putting them on VA.gov makes them much more accessible.

**Customer Expectations**

The private sector sets the bar pretty high for citizens, but Jacobs said the government should be upping its game to be on par with it.
This personalization effort is important, because the VA knows so much information about a veteran because of their time in service, and it’s something the VA hears from its call center often. “They say, ‘why are you asking me all these questions, I was just in the military for two decades.’”

The hope is that this leads to a paradigm where the VA doesn’t ask the same question about a vet twice. And then, to be able to notify vets of the benefits they are eligible for based on all the information, so they can opt into whatever they want without filling our dozens of forms. Vets aren’t always aware of what’s available to them, especially since they have to look in various places to find out.

“We want to make that more visible and more transparent for people,” Jacobs said. Similar to Amazon’s model of alerting customers of what they might be interested in based on previous purchases or searches. “We have enough information, and we’re continuing to refine and improve that data to be able to do much more, kind of predictive recommendations with that.”

**Design With Users, Not For Them**

This happens to be one of USDS’ six values, and it’s particularly relevant to what the VA team is doing. Along with remote usability testing over the phone or Skype, online testing techniques and surveys, members of the team actually sat with vets in person to watch them navigate Vets.gov. Overall, they conducted some sort of usability testing with more than 1,700 people.

“We sat with people, we sat with veterans, in medical centers and watched and talked to them. Gave them a task and said, ‘schedule an appointment with your doctor or refill your prescription,’ and they were like, ‘I don’t know where to go,’ or they were like, ‘oh, this is totally easy,’” Jacobs said.

The VEO also uses a social customer engagement tool called Medallia that has a social media listening component. “We will be able to, hopefully soon, hear what people are talking about in Facebook groups or on Reddit or in other channels, which may inform problems that we should focus on, or things that aren’t working well,” Jacobs said.

This could be directed at specific veteran groups that the team doesn’t have access to. “If we can understand what the sentiment is, and have that analysis, that’s
really helpful,” she added.

And user research and understanding the customer are what’s driving the consolidation of Vets.gov and Va.gov. “I think what we’re doing is almost like scaling up the success that we’ve had on Vets.gov, to make that something that really impacts the 10 million people a month that come to our various properties,” Jacobs said.

**Brand Consolidation**

The new site will highlight the top tasks that 80 percent of vets are coming to the site to do, based on what the team has gathered and seen through data. Right now, that’s scattered across lots of different places, and the consolidation of Vets.gov and VA.gov to just VA.gov will pull that all in one place.

As is, Va.gov is designed administratively and around its organizational charts, so it feels very much for internal VA employees, Jacobs explained. This consolidation shifts focus onto customer experience, making it a customer-first website.

In the process, the team redesigned the VA.gov to make sure certain content wasn’t derailing vets from what they came to the site to do or find information on, like a giant PDF about scheduling appointments, “which doesn’t actually help people schedule an appointment,” Jacobs said. “We put that, maybe, in a different place on the site or potentially retire it if it’s not helpful.”

And this rebranding hasn’t been a solo effort. The Digital Service team leveraged its partners in Veterans Benefits Administration, Office of Information Technology, VEO, and other components with a vested interest in serving veterans.

“The buy-in has been kind of amazing and surprising,” Jacobs said. The VA Digital Service is running the VA.gov site and has been the convening body pulling in ideas from across the administration, ensuring that whether it’s content and functionality on Vets.Gov or My HealtheVet or on other sites, all the “goodness” that exists is easy for people to find.
But managing content with the brand consolidation is challenging. So, Jacobs’ team is working with the folks that provide content to VA.gov to figure out the best governance structure of either eliminating or adding content to the new site, and making sure it’s all in plain language.

And, of course, deciding what goes where on the new site is all based on user research, testing data and many, many iterations of designs to figure out what works, and what doesn’t.

**Security**

Users can login with any existing credentials they already have with the VA, like the My HealtheVet username and password, a DS Logon from DOD and the military ID.me login (the securist credential, as its government sanctioned). It’s similar to how websites allow users to login with multiple different accounts, like Facebook or Google. And if a user doesn’t already have one of these accounts, they can create a new account. And for accounts with more protected health information and personally identifiable information, users can upgrade from a basic account to the premium account.

A basic account allows users fill out forms and pick up where they left off, and a premium account provides much more “rich functionality,” as Jacobs put it. She said there’s also an option to add two-factor authentication, and the team is currently discussing with the VA where and when this should be enforced.

But still, credentials need a long-term strategy. “Does having three credentials forever make sense?” Jacobs asked, and “how do we make sure that the credentials you get when you join the military can ideally follow you all the way through?”

**The New VA.Gov and its Impact**

USDS is efficient. Another one of their six values is, after all, is to create momentum; to focus on delivery of better digital services above all else. And with the brand consolidation efforts, it shows. The VA team began in February and plan to launch Nov. 11.

But the site won’t be done. “There’s a long tail of this,” Jacobs said. “There’s a lot
more work that will have to happen,” especially in terms of determining what to keep or kill on the website, ensuring content fits the overall style, and that it’s understandable and written in plain language for visitors.

And making the VA.gov all about the veterans is working. “Somebody actually cried in a user research session,” Jacobs said. “It’s great to see the impact of what we’re doing, and to be able to help people . . . the scale of this is really potentially huge.”

Because ultimately, USDS is a people-first organization, not technology-first. “I think a lot of it is about our process. And our process is listening and working with the actual people who are engaging with those services,” Jacobs said.