

TTS IMPACT

Improving Veterans' trust in the VA through customer experience and human-centered design

Over the last four years, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Experience Office (VEO) has built a robust customer experience (CX) capability. This includes a human-centered design practice, real-time CX data analytics, and tangible CX tools to empower employees to deliver great experiences, as well as integrated, modern, and user-friendly technology enhancements across the digital and contact center space, and targeted community engagements across the nation.

An important early step in the VA's CX journey began with a key partnership with [Presidential Innovation Fellows](#) (PIF), a program within Technology Transformation Services (TTS) and GSA's Federal Acquisition Services (FAS). VEO partnered with PIF to create the VA's first-ever Veterans Journey Map, which enabled the department to re-envision how it might best serve Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors to increase their trust in the VA by focusing on their experiences.



VETERANS EXPERIENCE OFFICE'S STORY

The mission of VEO is to enable the VA to be the leading customer experience organization in government so that Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors choose VA. Over the last four years, VEO has established customer experience as a core business discipline at the VA, focusing on VA healthcare experience and other touch points across the department. VEO has built new CX data, tools, technology, and engagement practices as well as human-centered design methodologies to measurably improve the Veteran Experience.



THE CATALYST

The VA identified an extreme pain point in 2014, when Veterans experienced long wait times for care at the VA hospital in Phoenix, Arizona. The VA realized it needed to establish a centralized capability to listen to the voice of the Veteran and make sure that CX was a co-equal component in how the department measured performance, organized and operated; thus, the VA created the Veterans Experience Office (VEO).

Today, a core part of VEO capabilities centers around CX data, which includes two important dimensions: human-centered design and real-time CX survey feedback. Human-centered design provides insights about the moments that matter most to Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors, bright spots in their journey with VA, and pain points. Real-time CX survey feedback enables the VA to respond to individual concerns and system-wide trends for improvement. VEO has actualized these and other important CX capabilities and programs to "hardwire" customer experience into the fabric of the VA.

KEY SHIFTS



Focus on operational metrics to measure performance → Focus on operational and customer experience metrics to measure performance



CX as a start up at VA → VA as a government leader in CX



CX as a concept → CX as a core business discipline that produces tangible results



HOW HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN PAVED THE WAY

When VEO was just beginning, PIFs helped to create a transformational journey map to re-envision how the VA might best serve Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors based on their journey and life experiences. Instead of understanding VA as an organizational structure that customers needed to navigate, the journey map enabled the VA to see itself the way customers do and how the department fits into the Veteran's life stages.

Human-centered design drives empathy and understanding. It begins with observation and qualitative research from countless interviews to ensure all perspectives are represented. As experts in human-centered design and CX, PIFs collaborated and consulted on best practices while VEO conducted a broad qualitative research project to gain a picture of Veterans' life journeys. Using this then-new-to-VA methodology, the team created what is now known as the Veterans Journey Map.

PIFs co-designed and delivered this seminal journey map, which informed the VA's agency strategic plan. The plan tangibly illuminated a different orientation about how the department might serve Veterans' needs. The map covers 10 life stages any Veteran may encounter, from pre-service to end-of-life. These life stages are organized in three phases in which Veterans' goals and aspirations are distinctly different. Each life stage lists out moments Veterans typically experience, associated VA services, and key moments that matter which may have a significant impact on Veterans' experiences. With this knowledge, the VA could reimagine what personalized and trustworthy experiences could look like across the VA based on the Veteran's perspective.

In the last four years, VEO has enhanced and developed its human-centered design practice, hiring its first-ever permanent Chief Design Officer and team of in-house designers in 2020. They learned how to design a continuous loop of co-creating, learning, and sharing along with the value of building relationships with customers. Human-centered design is an iterative process. It is not just an event that happens once; rather, it is a rigorous methodology that starts with the customer's needs and continues to test and refine solutions based on customer insights.

The Veterans Journey Map marked an important first step in VA's CX journey and enabled the department to re-imagine how VA could understand its customers. The VA has continued to build on the practice of human-centered design, creating dozens of additional journey maps examining a variety of Veteran interactions with the VA, and finding opportunities for improvement in the services and experience provided.

DATA POINTS

25%

increase in trust, based on 5M+ surveys received, including 2M+ free-text comment responses

5K

Veterans and staff interviewed to create 37 journey maps identifying the moments that matter

100K

VA employees have completed VA's first national customer experience training program, "Own the Moment"

700K

VA Welcome Kits downloaded and distributed, which showcase how the VA fits into Veterans' life stages from the Veterans Journey Map

163

Community Veteran Engagement Board partnerships across the country, reaching Veterans nationwide



THE IMPACT

Since the VA began to hardwire customer experience into the department as a core business discipline driven by the VEO four years ago, the VA has seen a 25-percent increase in trust among Veterans. VEO continues to build and mature the VA's CX practice and has created a core set of CX capabilities and usable frameworks to enable the practical application of CX across the department. VEO has also spearheaded the department's efforts as lead agency partner in the President's Management Agenda (PMA) Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) Goal of [Improving Customer Experience with Federal Services](#). As part of this work, VEO shares best practices and lessons learned in standing up and maturing a CX capability in government, which includes leveraging partnership with the PIF program.

PIFs are unique assets to government in that they bring an endless set of creative possibilities informed by robust industry experiences that greatly complement the transformative change agents in government. They offer unique skill sets and perspectives that are of incredible value to the public sector. When we blend the expertise of PIFs and the expertise of public servants in navigating government to make it better serve the people, that is when the magic happens.

—Barbara Morton, Deputy Chief, Veterans Experience Office, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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