



**TEAM VA**

**IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS  
WITH VETERANS:  
*USER INSIGHTS***



# CONTEXT

# VA DISABILITY CLAIMS

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The Disability Compensation Program provides **monthly, tax-free payments** to Veterans, their families, and survivors in recognition of the effects of a disabling condition due to disease or injury **incurred or aggravated as a result of service.**

In 2019, VA will complete a projected **1.3 million** disability compensation rating claims, which take an average **107 days** to complete.

Disability claims can be filed **online**, by **mail**, in **person**, or via a **trained professional** such as Veterans Service Organization.

Over **50%** of all calls to the VA call center are to **check status** of claims/appeals.

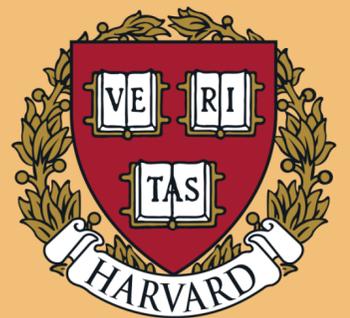
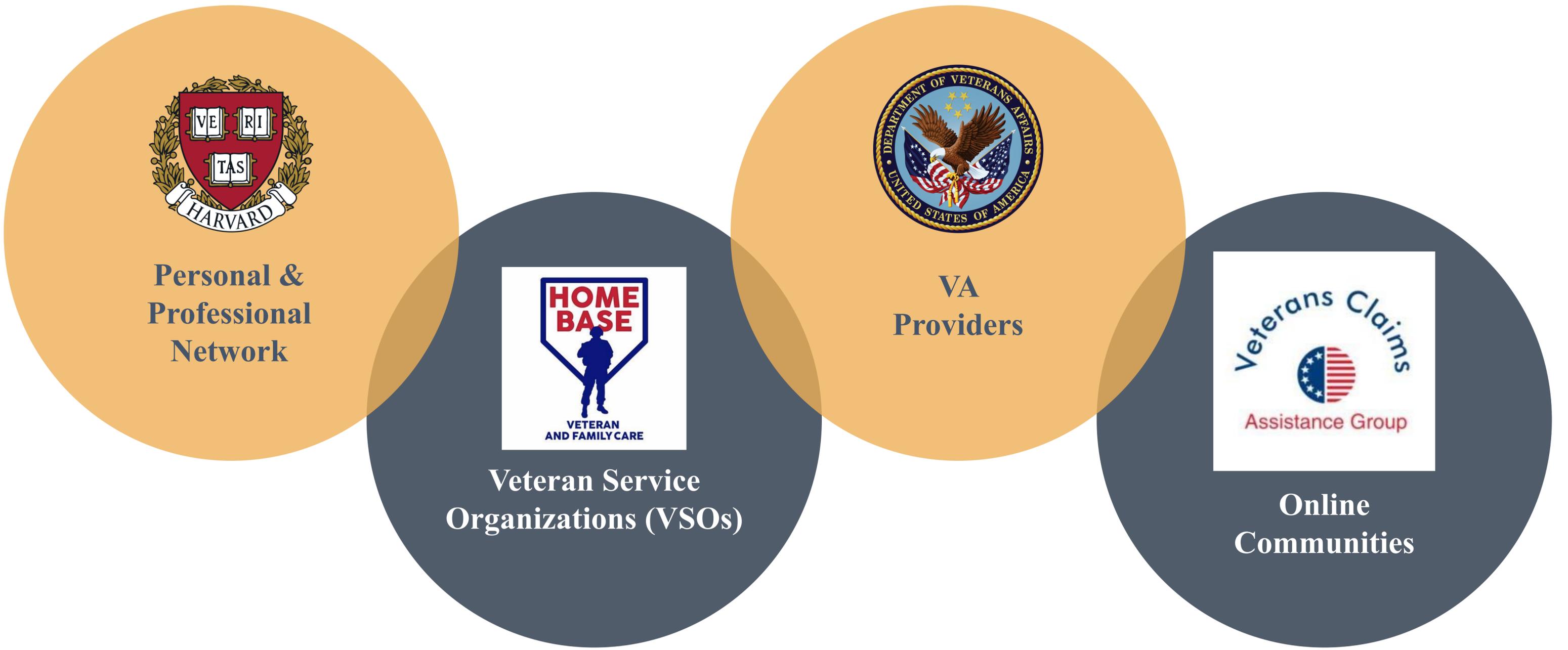
# PROBLEM STATEMENT

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How do we use communications (and notifications) to improve Veterans' satisfaction with the disability claims process?

# METHODOLOGY

# IDENTIFYING VA USERS



**Personal &  
Professional  
Network**



**Veteran Service  
Organizations (VSOs)**



**VA  
Providers**



**Online  
Communities**

# CONNECTING WITH VETERANS

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**In Person**

21 Interviews



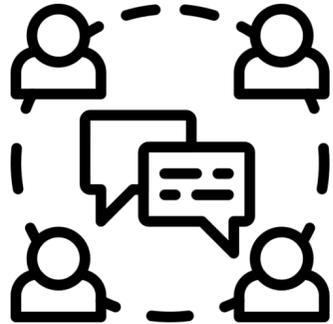
**Telephone**

8 Calls



**Online Survey**

15 Respondents



**Blogs & Forums**

2 Groups Joined

# SCOPE OF INTERVIEWS

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## User Information

- Age
- Gender
- Branch
- Years Served
- Technology Use and Comfort

## Interactions with the VA

- Nature
- Frequency
- Most Recent Example
- Outcome

## Disability Claims Experience

- Claim Type
- Outcome
- Best/Worst Part
- Process Notifications
- Rating of Communications

## Communication Preferences

- Best practices
- Method
- Frequency
- Milestone or Sensitive
- Other

# WHO WE SPOKE WITH

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## 44 Veterans

22 Army | 13 Marine Corps | 5 Air Force | 4 Navy

8 Women

20 aged 65+ | 11 aged 25-35

95% had filed a claim with the VA

65% of those were a disability claim

# USER STORIES



**No-fuss Nate**

- Male, 33, Marine
- Served in Afghanistan
- 2 months out of service
- Just wants his VA interactions to be convenient and efficient

*“I like the idea of doing most things digitally.”*



**Anxious Amanda**

- Female, 52, Army
- Served in Gulf War
- 4 years out of service
- Alone in her claims process; makes her feel anxious, frustrated

*“What’s confusing is you don’t know the process behind the scenes.”*



**Supported Simon**

- Male, 79, Navy
- Served in Vietnam
- 33 years out of service
- Thinks the only way to interact with the VA is to go around the VA

*“Letters were incredibly informative but incredibly difficult to read.”*



## No-fuss Nate

- Male, 33
- Marine Corps
- Served in Afghanistan
- 2 months out of service

### Does

- In process of moving across country for graduate school
- Always online; can't function without his iPhone
- Is used to getting real-time notifications from Amazon and Delta Airlines
- Got registered in eBenefits and filed disability claim during terminal leave; currently in process of completing medical evaluations

### Thinks

- Just wants his VA interactions to be convenient and efficient

### Says

- “I like the idea of doing most things **digitally**.”
- “If there is an **app**, I don't know about it. I would love to have an app.”
- “I understand that many vets, especially older ones, may not be as familiar with electronic mail, but the **option to opt out of paper mail** would seriously be appreciated for those of us who are.”
- “Once those appointments are complete you really don't hear anything until your final determination ... there is kind of an **emotional cost** as you sit and wait and see like what the hell is going to happen.”
- “I'll get ‘information for Vietnam Vets’ emails ... **why am I getting this?**”
- “The VA website is very **confusing**—and I'm pretty good with websites.”



## Anxious Amanda

- Female, 52
- Army
- Served in Gulf War
- 4 years out of service

### Does

- Takes care of her 13 year-old son as a single parent
- Relies on the income from her disability benefit
- Mainly uses her personal laptop for Facebook and online banking
- Received disability rating that she was not satisfied with and is 2 years into an appeals process
- Not familiar with eBenefits system; seeks advice from a closed Facebook group for female Veterans

### Thinks

- Interacting with the VA makes her feel anxious and frustrated
- She is alone in her claims and appeals process

### Says

- “The claim is your family’s main way of having an income; **you want to know, day-to-day, how that’s progressing**”
- “What is confusing is you don’t know the **process behind the scenes.**”
- “My first disability claim came back with a rating I was utterly **confused** by”
- “I actually had to **search outside the VA** for articles and videos to **explain ‘VA mathematics’** [for how the claim ratings add up]”
- “VA communications are certainly **not tailored** to female veterans.”



## Supported Simon

- Male, 79
- Navy
- Served in Vietnam
- 33 years out of service

### Does

- Checks the mail every other day; relies on his wife to check their joint email account every week or so
- Goes to his local Disabled American Veterans meeting every month, and has a beer at his local American Legion bar every other week
- Has received disability benefits from the VA for decades; his hearing loss has gotten worse in recent years and he is considering filing a new claim

### Thinks

- The only way to interact with the VA is to go around the VA
- Not sure he can be bothered filing a new claim because it will take years

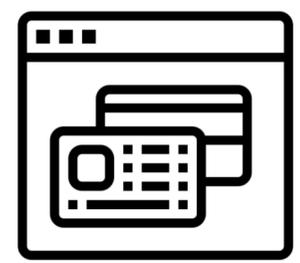
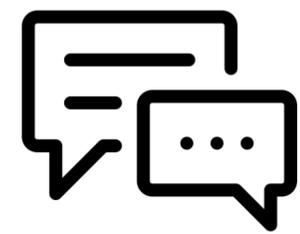
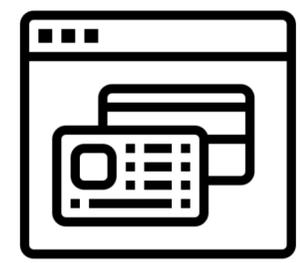
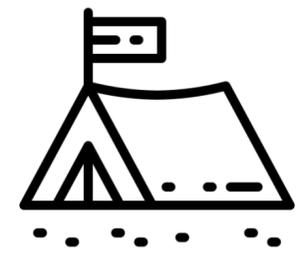
### Says

- “[The claim] took four years and I don't understand why it **took so long.**”
- “Whenever you process a claim with the VA, guaranteed you won't hear anything from them **for a year.**”
- “**Status updates** would help because when you don't hear anything you have to wonder. There's times I've wondered if they even got the information.”
- “If someone wants to get ahold of me, they have to **call me.**”
- “I am still of the generation where I **like to have a hard copy.**”

# CLAIMS EXPERIENCE DIFFERS

Filing & validating claim

Awaiting claim outcome

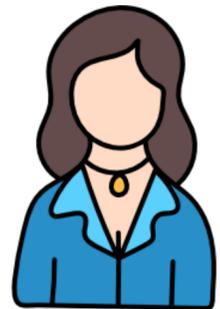


# HOWEVER, SOME SHARED PAIN POINTS



*“It would have been helpful to have notifications [about progress]”*

*“[Re: VA communications] In one word: spam”*



*“Letters were incredibly informative but incredibly difficult to read”*

*“It is not tailored to the customer in any way, shape or form”*



# INSIGHTS & NEXT STEPS

# INSIGHTS: CONTENT

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Veterans feel a **lack of control** over the claims process

*“The big black hole ... that's the way I feel with the V.A. when I send them something relative to claims”*

*“It's more a loss of sense of control rather than any notion that the VA is doing its job poorly.”*

**Sufficient or clear justification** for disability rating not given

*“I'd love to know how [the disability rating] is calculated ... and what the percentages mean.”*

When **expectations are set**, Veterans are more likely to have a **positive experience**

*“The biggest thing is for the VA to respond that they've received information and give a timeframe. I may not be happy with the timeframe but at least I know when to expect the next communication.”*

Claims process notifications are **not informative enough**

*“An ideal email would say: You just passed step 4 or step 5, here's what that means, what's happening going forward”*

*“I've had correspondence from Mississippi, from Wisconsin, from Boston ... and I'm not sure why.”*

# INSIGHTS: DELIVERY

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The letter is **not dead**, and text is not the (only) **answer**

*“For a lot of people like myself I like having both a hard copy along with the digital one.”*

Notification infrastructure exists that Veterans just **aren’t aware of**

*“You have to be aware that you can go check [your claim status] online.”*

*”If you got notified [about changes], the online version is actually pretty good.”*

Many Veterans receive claims process info from **non-VA sources**

*“I’d say the DAV [communicates best with me] because they give you so much information, you know? We get information all the time.”*

Overwhelmed by **promotional content**, not by updates to **claims status**

*“I would have an important e-mail come in then I would then be hit with literally, this is not exaggeration, 32 V.A. e-mails about all of these additional programs.”*

*“[The claim is] your family’s main way of having an income ... you want to know, day-to-day, how that’s progressing.”*

# NEXT STEPS

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## Discover

- Conduct user research
- Synthesize findings to define user needs
- Formulate statement of the problem to solve

## Design

- Generate potential solutions
- Translate ideas into prototypes
- Conduct tests with users
- Refine based on feedback

# THANK YOU

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**Daniela  
Jozic**



**Isaac  
Yoder**



**Raina  
Davis**



**Dirk  
Adams**



**Menaka  
Narayanan**