



VA

**U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Policy Research Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Policy and Planning's Veterans Policy Research Agenda (VPRA) is a list of research priorities for multidisciplinary research and analysis to develop ideas and solutions for addressing issues affecting VA and the Veteran community, as well as help VA achieve its strategic goals. The VPRA is intended to:

- Produce and disseminate research to assist VA and its federal and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners in improving service delivery and linking complimentary programs that serve the Veteran community;
- Encourage and support research that looks at the broad spectrum of programs and services available to Veterans; and
- Foster more collaborative Veteran-centric research across federal agencies, academic institutions, and think tanks.

BACKGROUND

VA is responsible for a timeless mission: To fulfill President Lincoln's promise –to care for those “who shall have borne the battle” and for their families and survivors – by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's Veterans. VA is built around three guiding principles: people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking. These principles compel VA to consider new realities dictated, in part, by a changing population of Veterans, their needs, and expected outcomes. VA's strategic goals and objectives will guide the Department's efforts in this effort to improve services to the Veteran community:

Goal 1

Empower Veterans to Improve Their Well-being

Objective: *Improve Veteran Wellness and Economic Security*

Objective: *Increase Customer Satisfaction through Improvement in Benefits and Services Delivery, Policies, Procedures, and Interfaces*

Goal 2

Enhance and Develop Trusted Partnerships

Objective: *Enhance VA's Partnership with DoD*

Objective: *Enhance VA's Partnerships with Federal, State, Private Sector, Academic Affiliates, and Non-Profit Organizations*

Objective: *Amplify Awareness of Services and Benefits Available to Veterans through Improved Communications and Outreach*

Goal 3**Manage and Improve VA Operations to Deliver Seamless Integrated Support**

Objective: *Make VA a Place People Want to Serve*

Objective: *Evolve VA Information Technology Capabilities to Meet Emerging Customer Service/Empowerment Expectations of Both VA Customers and Employees*

Objective: *Build a Flexible and Scalable Infrastructure through Improved Organizational and Design Enhanced Capital Planning*

Objective: *Enhance Productivity and Improve the Efficiency of the Provision of Veteran Benefits and Services*

Objective: *Ensure Preparedness to Provide Services and Protect People and Assets Continuously and in Time of Crisis*

OVERVIEW

The VPRA covers four priority research areas: Reintegration, Veterans' Families and Children, Public-Private Partnerships, and Veterans Benefits and Federal Disability Compensation. These research areas were identified as most relevant to priority Veterans' issues, and when paired with potential research questions, are designed to encourage collaborative research on policy issues affecting the Veteran community. The potential research questions provided in this agenda are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative.

OPP hopes that the American people, including researchers and the Veteran community, will use this agenda to help guide their decisions about current and future investments in research surrounding Veterans issues for FY 2016. The VPRA will be reviewed on an annual basis, and the outputs from the VPRA, which may include independent external research, will help to inform strategic, tactical, and operational decisions with the ultimate goal of enhancing programs and services for Veterans. It will also better enable VA to improve Veterans' outcomes by effectively addressing current and future challenges and capitalizing on opportunities to better achieve our mission.

PRIORITY RESEARCH AREAS

Reintegration

In 1956, General Omar Bradley's Commission on Veterans' Pensions affirmed that our Nation's primary objective is the reintegration of our Veterans into useful economic and social life (The President's Commission on Veterans' Pensions, 1956). Yet 60 years later, the reintegration of Veterans and their families remains a priority challenge facing our Nation's leaders and the American people. Fifty-four percent of Veterans serving in Post-9/11 conflicts have some prevalence of at least a little difficulty reintegrating from military to civilian life (Sayer, et al., 2014). A number of Veteran groups, such as homeless, women, rural, disabled, and LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] Veterans face unique challenges (Institute of Medicine, 2011; Szelwach, Steinkogler, Badger, & Muttukumar, 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011; Washington, Yano, McGuire, Lee, & Gelberg, 2010). Furthermore, the difficulties facing Veterans and their families during and after reintegration, such as homelessness, suicide, the effects of traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma, and unemployment are not necessarily the result of insufficient resources and programs, but rather the lack of optimal implementation (Hassan, Flynn, & Astor, 2012).

Research Area

Definition of "reintegration" and identifying a framework for reintegration, to include size, scope, and stakeholders.

Research Questions:

1. What is the process by which a Servicemember and his or her family transitions from military to civilian life?
2. Who are the stakeholders in the reintegration process and what roles do they play?
3. How do different stakeholders define reintegration, and what, if any, are the effects that multiple definitions of reintegration have on the Veteran and his or her family's ability to achieve successful reintegration outcomes?

Research Area

Comprehensive model for evaluating Veteran reintegration across VA and partner organizations that make up the Veteran community.

Research Questions:

1. What outcomes define a successful reintegration and how are they measured?
2. How should long-term outcomes be measured to evaluate a successful reintegration, and at what points should outcomes be examined (e.g. six months, two years, five years)?
3. What are best practices across the federal space, private sector, NGO's, and other nations for evaluating Veteran reintegration?

Research Area

Specific issues facing Veteran groups, such as homeless, women, rural, disabled, and LGBT Veterans during reintegration.

Research Questions:

1. How is the reintegration process different for [homeless, women, rural, disabled, or LGBT] Veterans, and what unique outcomes define their successful reintegration?
2. What are some best practices and system approaches by federal, NGO's, or Veterans agencies in other nations for addressing needs and enhancing outcomes of these specific Veteran groups?
3. How do reintegration outcomes differ between groups of Veterans with differing needs?

Veterans' Families and Children

Researchers and policy-makers continue to recognize the importance of family participation in the rehabilitation and improvement of Veteran well-being. VA benefits and services continue to be expanded to family members and children of Veterans. For example, the Post-9/11 GI Bill allows some Veterans to transfer educational benefits to spouses and dependents. Family members caring for a service-disabled Veteran may be eligible for career counseling through the VA Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance program.¹ VA also continues to recognize the value of family participation in Veteran rehabilitation (Pietzrak, Harpaz-Rotem, & Southwick, 2011). However, reintegration and post-military life can be a difficult time for Veterans' families and children. Many Veterans living with family members report emotional difficulties. Furthermore, stress and anxiety faced by some children of Servicemembers deployed on active duty may not lessen over time (Chandra, et al., 2011).

Research Area

The effects that the expansion of certain benefits to Veterans' families have on Veteran outcomes in addition to VA capabilities and strategy.

Research Questions:

1. To what extent are VA benefits and services currently extended to Veterans' families impact Veteran outcomes?
2. What is the impact of changes in family structure on Veteran outcomes?
3. How does family engagement during the reintegration process affect Veteran outcomes?

¹ For more information on the programs, services, and benefits VA offers to the families, children, and survivors of Veterans, please visit: <http://explore.va.gov/spouses-dependents-survivors>.

Research Area

The effects and outcomes of the reintegration process and post-military life on Veterans' families and children.

Research Questions:

1. What are the effects of transitioning from military to civilian life on the Veterans' family members, including spouses/partners, and children?
2. How do Veteran reintegration outcomes relate to the outcomes of the Veteran's family?
3. How does a spouse or partner's ability/inability to find gainful employment affect the Veteran and family outcomes and what role does the time it takes to find gainful employment play in the outcomes of the Veteran's family?

Public-Private Partnerships

As of May 2015, there are more than 41,000 registered non-profit organizations that serve the military and Veterans (The Urban Institute, National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2015). Furthermore, federal agencies beyond VA, such as the Department of Labor and Small Business Administration, offer a wide variety of programs and services to Veterans and their families. VA interacts with our federal and non-federal partners through public-private partnerships, which is "a voluntary, collaborative, working relationship between VA and one or more NGOs in which the goals, structures, governance, and roles and responsibilities are mutually determined to deliver the best possible services" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). As VA continues to enhance relationships with its strategic partners, systems of evaluation and metrics for performance measurement become increasingly important to ensure that VA maintains meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships to best serve Veterans and their families.

Research Area

Insight into the design, management, and evaluation of public-private partnerships.

Research Questions:

1. What are best practices across the federal space, private sector, international, and multi-lateral organizations for evaluating, prioritizing, and monitoring public-private partnerships?
2. What are best practices for defining and measuring partnership success and outcomes?
3. How can VA use public-private partnerships to enhance communication to Veterans and their families and caregivers about VA benefits, services, and programs?

Veteran Benefits and Federal Disability Compensation

Federal disability programs across government remain fragmented and require improvement and modernization (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015). The Government Accountability Office reported that the current system relies on outdated methods of evaluation and does not take into account advances in medical treatment and technologies that have impacted the lives of the disabled community. As a result, Veterans must navigate a complex system of benefits and services that is not

always accessible. Adding to the complexity is the proliferation of Veteran-centric programs by multiple federal agencies, the overlap of Veteran-centric services with non-service-related disability programs and benefits offered to all citizens, and the different criteria for disability compensation programs. For example, VA offers supplemental disability compensation, known as individual unemployability, for Veterans deemed unable to work due to a service-connected disability, regardless of age, while the Social Security Administration offers disability benefits to those unable to work due to disability until the full retirement age.

Research Area

Interaction of Veteran programs and benefits with other federal disability compensation programs and benefits.

Research Questions:

1. What policy implications must VA consider to improve and modernize its current system of Veteran disability benefits?
2. How do the different criteria amongst federal disability compensation programs affect the programs' ability to provide services to Veterans?
3. What evaluation criteria are most effective in assessing the maximum productivity of Veteran benefits in relationship to other federal disability compensation programs?

Research Area

The extent to which federal disability policies are keeping pace with changes in society.

Research Questions:

1. How have advancements in medical treatment and technology affected disabled Veterans' ability to become or remain economically self-sufficient?
2. How do other industrialized nations with similar labor markets and mature social protection systems evaluate disability policies and keep disability policies at pace with changes in society?
3. In the context of federal disability programs, what are the ways that the definition of individual unemployability are evolving, and what are the policy implications to Veterans, families, and caregivers?

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