

# REFERENCE MANUAL: Building ACORN Resource Guides

*Kathleen M. Mitchell, MPH, Lauren E. Russell, MPH, MPP, Alicia J. Cohen, MD, MSc, FAAFP & Meaghan A. Kennedy, MD, MPH*

This manual provides guidance on how to compile resources and create high-quality guides for Veterans for each social risk domain in the **Assessing Circumstances and Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)** screening tool.

## ACORN BACKGROUND

ACORN aims to systematically identify and address unmet social needs among all Veterans to improve health and advance health equity. ACORN's Veteran-tailored social risk screener identifies unmet social needs across nine domains: food, housing, utilities, transportation, education, employment, legal, social isolation/loneliness, and digital needs (device/internet access and digital health literacy).

The objectives of ACORN are to: 1) systematically screen Veterans for social needs across the nine social risk domains; 2) provide clinical care teams with real-time information about Veterans' unmet needs; and 3) address identified needs by offering resource guides, support navigating resources, and/or referrals to Social Work or other relevant VHA and non-VHA services. By alerting a Veteran's clinical care team to their unmet social needs, ACORN provides a broader understanding of the social and economic contexts impacting individual Veterans.

## ACORN RESOURCE GUIDES

***Connecting Veterans with VA and community services is an essential step in addressing unmet needs.*** ACORN resource guides provide Veterans with one-page, geographically-tailored lists of VA and other federal, state, and community services for each of the social risk domains included in the ACORN screener.

The guides are intended to be short and comprehensive, but not exhaustive, lists of high-yield programs and services. These guides can be used in combination with referrals and more intensive interventions, such as social work case management or patient navigation, to address a wide range of needs.



*ACORN is a national Veterans Health Administration (VHA) quality improvement initiative conducted in partnership with the Office of Health Equity and the National Social Work Program, Care Management and Social Work Services.*

## IDENTIFYING AND COMPILING THE RESOURCES

### Developing an Action Plan

Resource guides can serve as an effective tool to support Veterans in identifying, connecting with, and receiving assistance from VA and community services. Developing and maintaining high-quality resource guides requires both an up-front and long-term investment from your ACORN implementation team and partners.

Teams using resource guides as part of their ACORN workflow should begin by developing a plan of action using the following considerations:

- **Existing Resource Materials:** Does your site have existing up-to-date lists of resources and services? Do they include a variety of quality programs at the VA, federal, state, and community levels? Using existing materials can be a valuable and timesaving starting point.
- **Staff Capacity:** Does your site have at least one staff member who can dedicate time to building and maintaining the resource guides? Who has expertise in VA and community services at your site, and are there opportunities to partner with them?
- **Site Catchment Area:** Does your site serve several geographic regions within your service area? Consider how this may influence the building of resource guides to best serve your Veteran population. Potential approaches may include: 1) focusing on VA and state-level resources; 2) highlighting only the highest-yield local resources; or 3) creating different versions of guides for each region in your catchment area.

### Building Partnerships

Active collaboration with VHA clinical social workers, non-clinical staff, and community program contacts is important to create effective guides. VHA social workers have expertise in local supportive services and can provide recommendations on VA, federal, state, and community programs that have a history of being responsive to Veterans' expressed needs.

Non-clinical staff such as Peer Specialists (Veteran employees trained by VHA to support fellow Veterans) are equipped with the lived experience and knowledge of support services that are responsive to Veterans' needs. Assembling an interprofessional team to review available services can ensure the highest-yield resources are included on your guides.

Aligning with community programs is also critical to confirm the accuracy of program information, and regular contact with community organizations provides an opportunity to address capacity and workflow concerns that may result from increased referrals or staff turnover. Open



#### *Engage Key Partners*

Facilities are unique in both their staffing capacities and roles. Engage with an interprofessional team of clinical and non-clinical staff, such as those involved in programs to address food insecurity, housing instability, and transportation access, to identify and compile quality resources.

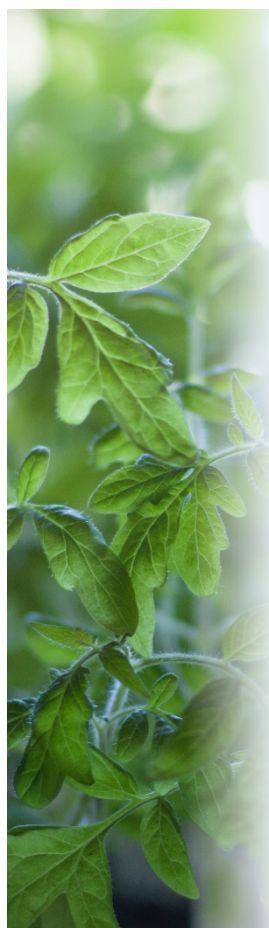
communication with various programs and services can also foster connections with additional organizations and resources in the area.

## Compiling Quality Resources

Resource guides are intended to be applicable to a broad range of Veterans expressing one or more social needs. It is helpful to avoid listing programs and supports with narrowly defined eligibility criteria that may not apply to the majority of Veterans served in your clinical setting.

ACORN resource guides are typically limited to one page in length for each of the social risk domains on the ACORN screener to provide Veterans with information on quality services and supports within the area. There may be local variation in the availability and accessibility of programs and services, and some social risk domains may have an abundance of resources and organizations at federal, state, and/or community levels.

To narrow the list of resources to the highest-yield programs, use the following selection criteria:



- ✓ How comprehensive are the state and community services compared to VA or other federal programs offering similar services? Does the program specifically cater to Veterans?
- ✓ How easy will it be for a Veteran to contact the service provider to apply, enroll, and receive services? What are their hours of operation and options for modes of contact? Did your team experience multiple failed attempts in connecting with a supportive service via phone or email?
- ✓ Are the services offered for free or at a reduced cost based on military history (Veteran status), income level, etc.?
- ✓ Does the service provider have a specific point of contact who may be willing to directly triage calls from Veterans?
- ✓ If it is a local community service, is it easily accessible by Veterans in the area? If service provision is in person, can Veterans reasonably access the service through public transit and/or rideshares?

## Selecting Quality Alternatives

Conversely, resources for some social risk domains may be limited in certain geographic areas, which can result in fewer resources listed on a guide. In these cases, virtual alternatives, such as online programs or phone apps, can also be included. It is important to recognize that not all Veterans will have the necessary access to Wi-Fi, a cellular network and/or an internet-capable

device, such as a computer, tablet, or smartphone, to use these resources. Your team should carefully determine the appropriateness of including these alternatives and plan accordingly.

## MAINTENANCE OF GUIDES

Resource guides should be updated approximately **every six months** to reflect any changes in program and service information, such as points of contact, hours, location, virtual services, and eligibility requirements. If programs close or their services offered become more limited, this scheduled review offers an opportunity to add new or alternative programs in their place.

Maintenance also facilitates relationship-building and connections with VA and community service providers. In a sense, resource guides are living documents; on-going communication with designated program points of contact affords sites developing resource guides the opportunity to build relationships, improve presentation of evolving program information, and learn about additional programs in the service area.

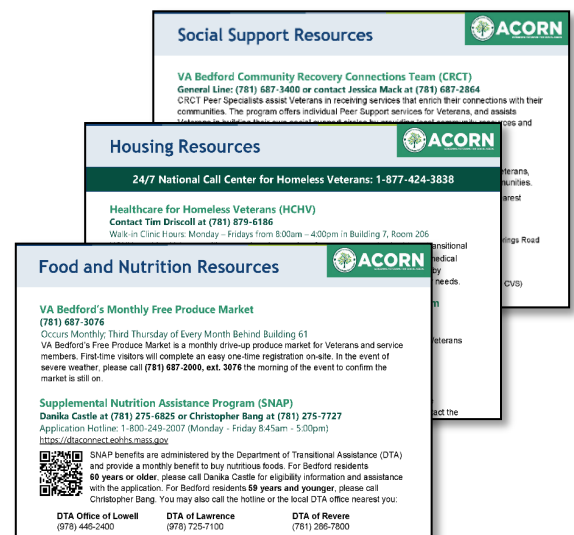
## BUILDING THE RESOURCE GUIDES

### Content Considerations

While each resource guide may have a unique layout to best utilize the available space, there are key elements that should be included on each guide and in the program descriptions. Use the **Resource Guide Completion Checklist** on page 7 as a reference when building your guides.

Resource guides should include the following key pieces of information for each listed resource:

- Full program title and acronym
- Program location (with hours of operation, if applicable)
- Website link
- Primary point of contact, including phone number and/or email address
- Concise, informative program description with:
  - General program information and services offered
  - Eligibility criteria
  - Application requirements and deadlines
  - Alternate contacts and/or locations, as relevant



Each resource guide should also include a dedicated section listing contact information for a designated VHA social worker or another VHA staff member who can be reached should Veterans desire further assistance connecting with resources.



## Optional Additions

Additional elements can be included to help Veterans navigate the listed resources:

- **Quick Response (QR) Codes:** QR codes can be included next to program descriptions for Veterans to quickly access the program’s website by scanning the code with their phone or tablet. QR codes can be created for free on [www.qr-code-generator.com](http://www.qr-code-generator.com).



If you do choose to use QR codes, be sure that any generated code matches the website link listed on the guide. Test them with your own phone or tablet prior to disseminating guides to Veterans to ensure the QR codes work appropriately.

- **Subtitles:** Placed underneath the social risk domain title, subtitles can emphasize important information, including hotline numbers or general temporary notes (e.g., hotline numbers, COVID restrictions, whether all programs are virtual, etc.).
- **Sub-Headings:** If there are several programs that are high quality but provide similar services, it may be helpful to group them together with a sub-heading and a short introduction explaining the sectioned group. For example, if the resource guide includes several local food pantries, you can group them under an appropriate sub-heading such as “Local Food Banks and Food Pantries.”
- **Notes:** If you wish to highlight an important point in a program description (e.g., application deadlines, if the program has temporarily changed operating procedures or hours, etc.), mark this information in a note for the Veteran to quickly locate.



### *KEEP IN MIND:*

#### **VERIFY PROGRAM INFORMATION**

Reach out to all listed resources directly to verify the availability of programs and services, eligibility criteria, location(s), and point-of-contact information, including phone number, email address, and website link.

## Formatting Considerations

Visual consistency plays an important role when building the guides. We recommend limiting the length of guides to a single-sided, one-page handout comprising the highest-yield resources. The following are some tips on layout and design elements to maximize space and enhance usability:

- Color-coordinate the program titles, contact information and website links – use the same font color for each one to visually separate the information.
- There is creative freedom when choosing page layouts for each guide. Design unique layouts that best display resources in a way that is visually appealing and easy for a Veteran to use.
- At the bottom of each guide, visually separate the contact information for the VHA social worker or other VHA staff member so that Veterans can quickly locate this information.



**KEEP IN MIND:**

**FINAL REMINDERS WHEN BUILDING GUIDES**

- Confirm all program and contact information is correct and proofread summaries. Use the same colors and fonts when differentiating resource names and contact information.
- The guides should be updated about every **six months** to ensure accurate and up-to-date information.

**THE RESOURCE GUIDE IN ACTION**

Below is an example of a housing resource guide built for VA Bedford Healthcare System with corresponding highlighted sections that demonstrate use of the guidance provided in this manual.

**Title and Subtitle**  
Identifies the social need that the included resources address, as well as highlights any important high-level information for the Veteran.

**Visual Consistency**  
All phone numbers and website links have their own matching colors. For handouts with several resources, it is important to visually separate the contact information.

**Program Description Layout**  
Depending on the content to be included, descriptions can have unique layouts to best present the provided information.

**QR Codes**  
QR codes are used for faster access to the resources by scanning the provided code.

**Social Work (or VHA Staff) Contact**  
Visually separate this section in the same dedicated place on each guide.

**Housing Resources**

**24/7 National Call Center for Homeless Veterans: 1-877-424-3838**

**Healthcare for Homeless Veterans (HCHV)**  
Contact Tim Driscoll at (781) 879-6186  
*Walk-in Clinic Hours: Monday - Fridays from 8:00am - 4:00pm in Building 7, Rooms 206 and 209*  
HCHV provides Veterans with comprehensive services from emergency to short-term transitional housing. Services include case management as well as clinical support in the areas of medical care, mental health, and substance use. HCHV's walk-in clinic can also serve Veterans by providing individualized resources and referrals to VA and community programs for their needs. No appointment is necessary.

**Supportive Services for Veterans and their Families (SSVF)**  
1-877-4AIDVET (1-877-424-3838)  
SSVF aims to improve the housing stability of Veterans' families through outreach, case management, and assistance with obtaining benefits. For more information, please call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans hotline or call a local office closest to you:  
Vietnam Veterans Workshop, Inc. 1-800-365-3665 or [SSVF@NECHV.org](mailto:SSVF@NECHV.org)  
Volunteers of America of Massachusetts, Inc. (617) 320-0232 or [veteran@voamass.org](mailto:veteran@voamass.org)  
Veterans, Inc. 1-800-482-2565 or [katherineperson@veteransinc.org](mailto:katherineperson@veteransinc.org)  
Veterans Northeast Outreach Center, Inc. (978) 372-3626 or [ssvf@vneoc.org](mailto:ssvf@vneoc.org)

**Lowell Transitional Living Center**  
(978) 458-9888  
[www.ltlc.org](http://www.ltlc.org)  
*Walk-in Intake Hours: 10:00am - 4:00pm at 205 Middlesex Street, Lowell MA 01852*  
 The Lowell Transitional Living Center offers emergency shelter to Merrimack Valley residents in need of accommodation. Case managers can provide individualized services and community referrals for housing, financial assistance, health and wellness, and more. You will need to bring a valid Massachusetts ID, Social Security card, or birth certificate for intake. Please call or visit the website for more information about the intake process and services provided.

**The Wish Project**  
(866) 947-4360 or email [info@thewishproject.org](mailto:info@thewishproject.org)  
[www.thewishproject.org](http://www.thewishproject.org)  
 The Wish Project provides free clothing, toiletries, and cleaning supplies to those in need. Toiletries and cleaning supplies are given once a month and clothing every 3 months. Please call or email the program to discuss your needs and schedule an appointment. A picture ID is required when picking up.

Updated April 2022

**QUICK NOTE** Please contact **Tim Driscoll** at (781) 879-6186 or **Bill Baerthlein** at (781) 382-5045 if you have any questions about the information on this page or need additional help with these or other resources.

**QUESTIONS OR FEEDBACK?**

Please contact the ACORN team at [VHAACORN@va.gov](mailto:VHAACORN@va.gov) with any questions or comments related to resource guide development or the content of this manual and templates.

# COMPLETION CHECKLIST: Building ACORN Resource Guides

## FOR THE FINISHED DOCUMENT

- Cover page with facility location listed  
(VA medical center or community-based outpatient clinic name)
  - *Particularly useful if creating location-specific guides for multiple counties in your clinic's service area*
- Table of Contents
- Color-coordinated program titles, contact information and website links
  - *Use the same font color for each line to visually separate information*
- VHA social workers or other VHA staff contact (full name and phone number) should be highlighted in the same place on each guide

## KEY COMPONENTS FOR EACH RESOURCE

- Full program title and acronym
- Program and primary point of contact information  
(phone number, email address, website link and physical address)
- Available contact hours and/or hours of operation
- Concise, informative description of available services
- Eligibility criteria and application requirements
- For any virtual programming or phone apps, include whether they are only available on certain phones or platforms (e.g., iOS, Android, requires email, etc.)

## OPTIONAL ADDITIONS

- QR Codes for applicable resources with website links  
([www.qr-code-generator.com](http://www.qr-code-generator.com))
- Alternate program contacts and/or locations, if applicable
- Subtitles and Notes can be used to emphasize information, including hotline numbers or general temporary notes (e.g., specific application deadlines, whether all programs are virtual, etc.)
- Sub-headings for grouped resources and quick summaries

Updated February 2023