

Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs



ACORN BACKGROUND

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.

ACORN aims to: 1) systematically screen Veterans for social needs in nine social risk domains; 2) provide clinical teams real-time information about Veterans' unmet needs; and 3) address identified needs through the provision of resources and referrals.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ACORN

Long a leader in the integration of medical care and social services, the VHA is well-positioned to address Veterans' unmet social needs. VHA routinely screens Veterans for food insecurity and housing instability but lacks a systematic screening process to broadly identify social needs. Building upon VHA's existing social risk screening processes and social needs interventions, ACORN enhances clinical care teams' capacity to understand and address the social and economic factors impacting individual Veterans.

ACORN aims to systematically identify and address unmet social needs among all Veterans to improve health and advance health equity.

THE ACORN MODEL

ACORN consists of two core components: 1) a standardized screening tool to identify social risks at the point of care and 2) provision of relevant resources and referrals to help address identified social needs.



ACORN screens across a range of social risk domains, including: food, housing, utility, transportation, education, employment, legal, social isolation/loneliness, and digital needs (including lack of phone/internet or technology access, as well as digital health literacy).

Veterans can complete ACORN screening prior to or during clinic visits as a self-administered screener on paper or as a staff-administered screener in the VHA electronic health record. Veterans who express unmet needs are offered referrals to Social Work or other relevant clinical services, support navigating resources, and/or geographically-tailored resource guides to VA and community services.

USE OF ACORN IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

ACORN has been implemented in a variety of clinical settings, including Primary Care, Women's Health, Mental Health, Geriatrics, Whole Health, and a range of specialty clinics, as well as in emergency departments and inpatient settings.

For more information on the ACORN initiative and implementation standards, the ACORN Team is available at VHAACORN@va.gov.



Veterans Health Administration
Office of Health Equity



- (1) In the past two months, have you been living in stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?¹**
- a. Yes – Living in stable housing
 - (1.1) Are you worried or concerned that in the next two months you may NOT have stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?¹**
 - i. Yes – worried about housing near future
 - (1.2) Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months?¹**
 - a. Apartment/House/Room (no government subsidy)
 - b. Apartment/House/Room (with government subsidy)
 - c. With Friend/Family
 - d. Motel/Hotel
 - e. Short-term Institution like Hospital, Rehab Center, Drug Treatment Center
 - f. Homeless Shelter
 - g. Anywhere outside (e.g. Street, Vehicle, Abandoned Building)
 - h. Other
 - ii. No – Not worried about housing near future
 - b. No – Not living in stable housing
 - Collect answer for the question “Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months?”¹**
 - *If respondent endorses either “not living in stable housing” OR “worried about housing near future” for (1):*
(1.3) Are you currently without a place to stay?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- (2) I’m going to read you two statements that people have made about their food situation. For each statement, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last 12 months.**
- (2.1) Within the past 12 months, you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more.²**
- a. Often true
 - b. Sometimes true
 - c. Never true
- (2.2) Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn’t last and you didn’t have money to get more.²**
- a. Often true
 - b. Sometimes true
 - c. Never true
- *If respondent endorses “often true” or “sometimes true” for either “food would run out” (2.1) OR “food didn’t last” (2.2):*
(2.3) Do you need help getting food for this week?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- (3) How often do you have trouble paying for your utilities (e.g., electric, gas, oil, water, or phone)?³**
- a. Often
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Never
 - d. Not applicable/I don’t pay for utilities
- *If respondent endorses “often” or “sometimes” for (3):*
(3.1) Has the electric, gas, oil, water or phone company threatened to shut off services in your home?⁴
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Already shut off
 - d. Not applicable/I don’t pay for utilities
- (4) How often has lack of transportation kept you from medical appointments, meetings, work, or from getting things needed for daily living?⁵**
- a. Often
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Never
- *If respondent endorses “often” or “sometimes” for (4):*
(4.1) Do you need assistance with transportation for an upcoming appointment?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

(Continued)

ACORN SCREENING TOOL QUESTIONS SOURCE TABLE

Table. Sources of the social risk domains used in the Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) screening tool.

When derived from the [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(CMS\) Accountable Health Communities \(AHC\) Screener](#), the original source is cited per [AHC guidance](#). Questions without citations were developed by the VHA ACORN Team and collaborators across multiple VHA offices and medical centers.

Domain	Question	Original Source	Citation
Housing	In the past two months, have you been living in stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – Living in stable housing • No – Not living in stable housing 	VHA Clinical Reminder	VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans. "Homeless Screener." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, September 2020. https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/resources/prevention/homeless-screener.asp
	Are you worried or concerned that in the next two months you may NOT have stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – worried about housing near future • No – not worried about housing near future 		
	Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apartment/House/Room (no government subsidy) • Apartment/House/Room (with government subsidy) • With Friend/Family • Motel/Hotel • Short-term Institution like Hospital, Rehab Center, Drug Treatment Center • Homeless Shelter • Anywhere outside (e.g. Street, Vehicle, Abandoned Building) • Other 		
	Are you currently without a place to stay? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 		
Food	Within the past 12 months, you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often True • Sometimes True • Never True 	VHA Clinical Reminder, based on Hunger Vital Signs	Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. E., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146.

Domain	Question	Original Source	Citation
	<p>Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn't last and you didn't have money to get more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often True • Sometimes True • Never True 	VHA Clinical Reminder, based on Hunger Vital Signs	Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. E., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146.
	<p>Do you need help getting food for this week?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	Developed by VHA ACORN Team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, October 2023. https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf
Utilities	<p>How often do you have trouble paying for your utilities (e.g., electric, gas, oil, water, or phone)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often • Sometimes • Never • Not applicable/I don't pay for utilities 	WellRx	Adapted with permission from Page-Reeves J, Kaufman W, Bleecker M, Norris J, McCalmont K, Ianakieva V, Ianakieva D, Kaufman A. Addressing Social Determinants of Health in a Clinic Setting: The WellRx Pilot in Albuquerque, New Mexico. <i>J Am Board Fam Med</i> . 2016 May-Jun;29(3):414-8. doi: 10.3122/jabfm.2016.03.150272. PMID: 27170801.
	<p>Has the electric, gas, oil, water or phone company threatened to shut off services in your home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Already shut off • Not applicable/I don't pay for utilities 	Children's Health Watch – Household Energy Security Screener (via AHC)	Adapted with permission from Cook, J. T., Frank, D. A., Casey, P. H., Rose-Jacobs, R., Black, M. M., Chilton, M., . . . Cutts, D. B. (2008). A Brief Indicator of Household Energy Security: Associations with Food Security, Child Health, and Child Development in US Infants and Toddlers. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 122(4), 867-875. doi:10.1542/peds.2008-0286.
Transportation	<p>How often has lack of transportation kept you from medical appointments, meetings, work, or from getting things needed for daily living?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often • Sometimes • Never 	PRAPARE	Adapted with permission from the national PRAPARE® social determinants of health protocol developed by the National Association of Community Health Centers, the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations, and the Oregon Primary Care Organization and their development partners. www.nachc.org/prapare . ©National Association of Community Health Centers. All Rights Reserved.
	<p>Do you need assistance with transportation for an upcoming appointment?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	Developed by VHA ACORN Team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, October 2023. https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf

Domain	Question	Original Source	Citation
Legal	<p>Do you currently have any legal matters you need help with (e.g., child support or custody, divorce, debt or credit problems, or need for a discharge upgrade)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	Developed by VHA ACORN Team in collaboration with VA Legal Services for Veterans Program	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, October 2023. https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf
Social Isolation and Loneliness	<p>How often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often • Sometimes • Never 	AARP Survey (via AHC)	Adapted with permission from Anderson, G. Oscar and Colette E. Thayer. Loneliness and Social Connections: A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older. Washington, DC: AARP Research, September 2018. https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00246.001
Employment	<p>Do you want help finding or keeping work or a job?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, help finding work • Yes, help keeping work • No, I don't want help finding or keeping work 	Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services - Accountable Health Communities Technical Expert Panel	Identifying and Recommending Screening Questions for the Accountable Health Communities Model (2016, July) Technical Expert Panel discussion conducted at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Baltimore, MD.
Education	<p>Do you want more information about educational benefits and resources for Veterans?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	Developed by VHA ACORN Team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, October 2023. https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf
Digital Needs	<p>Do you have access to any of the following devices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landline • Simple cell phone (flip phone) • Smartphone (a cell phone with a touchscreen and internet) • Computer (laptop, desktop, or tablet such as an iPad) • None 	Developed by VHA ACORN Team in collaboration with VHA National Social Work Program, VHA Office of Connected Care, VHA Office of Health Equity, and VA Homelessness-Modified ACORN Screening Tool Project Team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, October 2023. https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf
	<p>Do you have access to affordable and reliable internet where you live?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not applicable/I don't want internet access at home 		
	<p>Would you like help learning to use a smartphone, tablet, or computer to access VA healthcare online (e.g., video visits, medical record, secure messaging)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not applicable/I don't have any of these devices 		

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https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf

For more information on the development and initial piloting of ACORN:

Russell LE*, Cohen AJ* (*co-first authors), Chrzas S, Halladay CW, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Moy E, Lehmann LS. Implementing a Social Needs Screening and Referral Program Among Veterans: Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN). *J GEN INTERN MED* (2023).

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