

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs FY 2022-28 Learning Agenda

This is VA’s first standalone learning agenda document (although VHA for many years has used research agendas as evidence-building plans for its health care studies) and it summarizes the Department’s efforts to obtain evidence-based input and insights with findings across the Administrations and the entire enterprise. This Learning Agenda represents the views of self-identified practitioners of data analysis/science and program evaluations. [Submitter's note: It is presented as Appendix D on pages 132 - 162 of the VA's strategic plan.]

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking (EBP) Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-435, “Evidence Act”) requires cabinet-level agencies including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to create and use Learning Agendas, Annual Evaluation Plans and Capacity Assessments. In guidance documents, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) specified requirements for these deliverables.

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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Vision

Our objectives are more efficiently and effectively addressed

Mission

To establish an agenda for learning how better to achieve our objectives

Values

Prioritization: Topic Selection Criteria ~ Since the passage of the Evidence Act, VA viewed the opportunity of publicizing its most significant evaluation and research priorities as consistent with its vital mission on behalf of Veterans and their families and welcomes the chance to further advocate for them by focusing attention on important issues. ^ To maximize the value of implementing the Evidence Act provisions on behalf of Veterans and their families, the VA FEBPWG identified several criteria to determine issues appropriate for the Learning Agenda.

Ongoing Interest: Criterion #1: Existing Lines of Inquiry ~ VA's current efforts entail hundreds of program evaluations every year, conducted with a variety of means and for many reasons, including statutory requirements. In addition, VHA conducts hundreds of focused evaluations of clinical practices. For the purposes of the Evidence Act, however, this Learning Agenda and associated Annual Evaluation Plans focus on evaluations of policies and programs as defined by OMB guidance in M20-12. Evaluation practitioners, both in offices focused on research and in program offices responsible for program implementation, focus on existing lines of inquiry embodied in current programs and efforts. Practitioners believe that all areas of national importance currently are being addressed at some point in the evaluation lifecycle. ^ Moreover, VA seeks to leverage its existing, robust approaches to outreach and in reach about potential studies, data and findings with its many stakeholders, including peer experts within the Federal government (i.e., DoD, HHS and HUD), intergovernmental authorities, the private sector, VSOs and other advocacy and research-based organizations, including the National Academies. VA's Capacity Assessment documents, for example, VHA's existing lifecycle for investigations that maximize diverse inputs as to study topic priorities from across the VA enterprise and elsewhere and which result in effective dissemination of findings. Specific such requirements in the Evidence Act reflect VA's thought-leading approach which has developed over decades. ^ This initial criterion also highlights areas and topics of on-going interest and concern for which important questions remain to be addressed. Such topics present gaps in knowledge, processes and practices for which the Learning Agenda will focus attention within the VA enterprise, with stakeholders, Veterans and the public. ^ VA evidence-builders, researchers, evaluators and statisticians look forward to using the dissemination of this Learning Agenda to its many partners to deepen data sharing and topic identification activities documented in VA's Annual Evaluation Plan.

Mission Focus: Criterion #2: Mission-focus on Veterans and their Families ~ VA faces several challenges with respect to our direct mission-driven care and services, as well as our administrative functions. However, VA chooses to focus the initial effort under the Evidence Act on purely Veteran-facing topics. By doing so, efforts to address the requirements of the Evidence Act will stimulate internal VA interest and external stakeholder attention, on the most

important issues facing Veterans and their families. In future cycles, VA may choose to expand its focus to include administrative matters such as hiring, placement of facilities, or improving the efficiency of supply chains. ^ This Veteran-facing aspect requires VA to highlight important gaps regarding vital issues for Veterans, such as suicide, homelessness and opioid addiction – areas in which VA and the rest of government have made substantial progress. However, more needs to be done, but such action requires knowledge that has yet to be uncovered and confirmed. VA's Learning Agenda therefore focuses on critical gaps in understanding of critical issues for Veterans and their families. ^ As is further discussed in the FY 2023 VA Annual Evaluation Plan, evidence-builders and evaluators are frequently embedded in the same offices which are responsible for program execution. This characteristic helps to ensure that research priorities are rapidly identified and acted upon, and the findings can be used quickly to adjust practices, processes and policies to best serve Veterans. Also, in this way program offices can rapidly share results with their program and policy collaborators both within VA and elsewhere. This aspect is vitally important to effectively address urgent issues such as suicide prevention, opioid use disorder and homelessness. Those investigations necessary to serve oversight purposes, however, are conducted with greater independence, often by evaluators in different chains of command.

Equity: Criterion #3: Underserved and Vulnerable Veterans ~ Third, VA's Strategic Plan for FY 2022-28 encompasses myriad areas in which VA impacts Veterans—every aspect of the life journeys of our Veterans—requiring a focus on a meaningful subset of our strategic objectives. An immediate consensus emerged in the FEBPWG and across VA: To rally attention and effort to VA's public evaluation activities under the Evidence Act we must focus on the most compelling of our objectives which are enhancing care and services for underserved, vulnerable, at-risk and marginalized Veterans (e.g., those facing addiction, suicide or homelessness. In early deliberations, there was no second-place issue that presented so stark a priority.

Precedent: Criterion #4: Nomination Using Administration's Existing Prioritization ~ The FEBPWG decided that those individuals who were responsible for carrying out agendas and plans should use their existing, documented priorities (which align to VA's Strategic Plan) to nominate a set of questions and research topics for which critical gaps in knowledge exist. These gaps have been previously identified by VHA and VBA, as they note in the FY 2023 Annual Evaluation Plan. For the purposes of developing this Learning Agenda, the Administrations applied their own criteria and these criteria to prioritize them for inclusion. ^ Each Administration has its own strategy and business documents that link to the VA strategic plan, and they are familiar with the most significant issues they face that address the criteria. VHA enters the Evidence Act process already recognized as a thought leader in program evaluation and implementation sciences, while VBA begins with a substantial process-analytic foundation but not one focused heretofore on evaluation. Elsewhere in VA there are important pockets of strength in statistics and evidence-building, but there is currently no centralized focus on consistent standards and processes for their work. Therefore, the most coherent proposals for Learning Agenda topics are from VA's two major administrations which, although they are at different maturity levels in evaluation sciences, are the foci for impactful efforts. ^ This federated approach ensures that policymakers can obtain the most salient findings addressing the most significant issues they are likely to face, while the Administrations pursue questions, they can address in the timeframe of this Learning Agenda and the associated Annual Evaluation Plans using the current and likely state of knowledge, expertise and analytic capacity they encompass. VA seeks to ensure that findings from specific evidence-building efforts are available to policymakers as soon as they are available to effectively inform decisions, rather than waiting for more evidence to become certain. The federated approach across VA organizations and across evaluations and other evidence-building efforts provides multiple channels for findings to inform decisions. ^ For example, VHA's long-range plan goals are aligned with overall VA goals for improvement and modernization of Veteran health services and strengthening VHA as a high-reliability organization: · Make VHA the provider and care coordinator of choice for Veterans; · Deliver comprehensive and integrated whole health care; · Innovate as a learning and teaching organization; and · Increase the effective and efficient use of resources across the enterprise.

Transitions

Facilitate military-to-civilian transitions

Stakeholder(s)

Veterans Benefits Administration

VBA Learning Agenda ~ VBA’s Learning Agenda has a significant focus on military-to-civilian transitions due to the identification of significant research needs in this area. This need was identified by a recent literature review by VHA which included academic articles, Congressional testimony, VA project documentation from the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and reports from oversight organizations such as GAO, which focused on topics such as military-to-civilian transition; integration and reintegration into civilian social structures; transition stress; community reintegration and support structures; identity and military culture; engagement of Service members and Veterans; and user-oriented design.

VBA 1. Underserved & Vulnerable Veterans

Focus on underserved and vulnerable Veterans

Learning questions focused on underserved and vulnerable Veterans:

Stakeholder(s):

Underserved Veterans

Vulnerable Veterans

Performance Indicators

VBA 1 Focus Questions

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Answer questions about underserved and vulnerable Veterans	Target	Answered		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 2.3: (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility (I-DEA)) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a165256c-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA will enhance understanding of Veteran needs and eliminate disparities and barriers to health, improve service delivery and opportunities to enhance Veterans’ outcomes, experiences and quality of life.

VBA 1a. Pensions

Ensure equity in pension benefits for underserved communities

Equity Assessment—Advancing Equity to Underserved Populations ~ Are there observed differences in the access to and administration of Pension benefits for underserved communities?

Performance Indicators

VBA 1a1 Equity Assessment

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Assess equity to Underserved Populations	Target	Assessed		
	Actual			

VBA 1b. Climate Risks

Integrate climate-related financial risks into VA policies and financial management

Impact of Climate Change on VA Home Loan Program – identify climate-related financial risks to the VA Home Loan Program and integrate climate-related financial risk into program management and identify or make changes to the program to mitigate climate-related financial risk. ~ To what extent will climate change and the financial risks it introduces affect the Home Loan Program, and what changes would better integrate climate-related financial risks into VA policies and financial management to mitigate financial risks?

Stakeholder(s):

VA Home Loan Program

Performance Indicators

VBA 1b1 Climate Risks

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Identify climate-related financial risks	Target	Identified		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 4.4: (Evidence Based Decisions) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a165362e-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA will improve governance, management practices and make evidence-based decisions to ensure quality outcomes and experiences and efficient use of resources.

VBA 1c. DBQs

Improve data capture for tracking at-risk Veterans with a reported level of risk for suicide with a reported level of risk for suicide

Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs) ~ Can Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs) be updated to improve data capture capabilities for tracking at-risk Veterans with a reported level of risk for suicide?

Stakeholder(s):

At-Risk Veterans

Performance Indicators

VBA 1c1 At-Risk Veterans

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Update the Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs) to improve data capture capabilities for tracking at-risk Veterans with a reported level of risk for suicide.	Target	Tracked		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 2.1: (Underserved, marginalized and at-risk Veterans) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a1652314-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA emphasizes the delivery of benefits, care and services to underserved, marginalized and at-risk Veterans to prevent suicide and homelessness, improve their economic security, health, resiliency and quality of life and achieve equity.

VBA 2. Transition Process

Focus on the Military-to-Civilian transition process

Learning question focused on the Military-to-Civilian transition process:

Performance Indicators

VBA 2.1 Transition Process

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Answer questions about the Military-to-Civilian transition process	Target	Questions Answered		
	Actual			

VBA 2a. Needs

Support the transition needs of newly separated Veterans

Evaluation of Transition Assistance Program ~ To what extent is VA’s Transition Assistance Program supporting the transition needs of newly separated Veterans?

Performance Indicators

VBA 2a1 Transition Needs

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Support the transition needs of newly separated Veterans	Target	Supported		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 2.1: (Underserved, Marginalized and At-Risk Veterans): VA emphasizes the delivery of benefits, care and services to underserved, marginalized and at-risk Veterans to prevent suicide and homelessness, improve their economic security, health, resiliency and quality of life and achieve equity.

Supportive of Objective 2.2: (Tailored delivery of benefits, care and services ensure equity and access) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a1652440-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA and partners will tailor delivery of benefits and customize whole health care and services for the recipient at each phase of their life journey, including end of life, to ensure equity and address their unique needs, preferences, challenges and goals.

VBA 3. Service & Transitions

Focus on both underserved Veterans and the Military-to-Civilian transition process

Learning question focused on both underserved Veterans and the Military-to-Civilian transition process:

Performance Indicators

VBA 3.1 Veteran & Retiree Questions

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Answer questions focused on both underserved Veterans and the Military-to-Civilian transition process	Target	Answered		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 1.2: (Lifelong Relationships and Trust) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a165209e-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA listens to Veterans, their families, caregivers, survivors, Service members, employees and other stakeholders to project future trends, anticipate needs and deliver effective and agile solutions that improve their outcomes, access and experiences.

VBA 3a. MST Survivors

Optimally serve MST survivors

Understanding Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Survivor Experience ~ How can VBA, working together with VHA and other stakeholders, better understand when MST survivors are not optimally served and/or negatively impacted when interacting with VBA?

Stakeholder(s):

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Survivors

Performance Indicators

VBA 3a1 Service Deficiencies

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Understand when MST survivors are not optimally served and/or negatively impacted when interacting with VBA	Target	Understood		
	Actual			

Health

Pursue evidence on health-related topics

Stakeholder(s)

Veterans Health Administration

VHA Learning Agenda ~ VHA will pursue five Learning Agenda questions/topics with focused studies for each. The questions are:

VHA 1. Timeliness & Places

Ensure Veterans have access to timely care in their preferred settings

What are the ways VA can ensure Veterans have access to timely care in their preferred setting? (Access to Care pursuant to VA Strategic Goal 2, Objectives 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3.)

Performance Indicators

VHA 1.1 Timeliness & Settings

Description	Type	Questions	Start Date	End Date
Answer questions about access to timely care in preferred settings	Target	Answered		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 2.1: (Underserved, marginalized and at-risk Veterans) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a1652314-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA emphasizes the delivery of benefits, care and services to underserved, marginalized and at-risk Veterans to prevent suicide and homelessness, improve their economic security, health, resiliency and quality of life and achieve equity.

Supportive of Objective 2.2: (Tailored delivery of benefits, care and services ensure equity and access) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a1652440-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA and partners will tailor delivery of benefits and customize whole health care and services for the recipient at each phase of their life journey

Supportive of Objective 2.3: (Inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility (I-DEA)) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a165256c-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA will leverage research studies, innovation and partnerships to enhance understanding of Veteran needs and eliminate disparities and barriers to health, improve service delivery and opportunities to enhance Veterans’ outcomes, experiences and quality of life.

VHA 2. Pain

Provide clinically appropriate pain management to Veterans while simultaneously decreasing dependence on opioids

What are the ways VHA can provide clinically appropriate pain management to Veterans while simultaneously decreasing dependence on opioids? (Pain Management & Opioids pursuant to VA Strategic Goal 2, Objective 2.4.)

Performance Indicators

VHA 2.1 Pain Management

Description	Type	Questions	Start Date	End Date
Determine how to provide clinically appropriate pain management while simultaneously decreasing dependence on opioids	Target	Answered		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Implementing Strategy Objective 2.4: (Innovative care) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a16526b6-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA will improve understanding of Veteran specific illnesses and injuries to develop and adopt innovative new treatments that prevent future illness and enhance Veteran outcomes.

Supportive of Implementing Strategy 2.4.4 for Opioid Use Disorder - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_d5393720-eaca-11ec-ad90-b2172d83ea00: VHA Learning Agenda Question 2 (Pain Management and Opioids) aligns to one strategy in the VA FY 2022-28 Strategic Plan. Implementing Strategy 2.4.4 for Opioid Use Disorder. “VA partners to identify Veterans and Service members vulnerable to opioid use disorder and develops personalized interventions to prevent or address adverse outcomes from opioid-related dependency and improve Veterans’ health and quality of life.” This strategy was written specifically to complement VHA’s efforts to address pain management and opioid abuse disorder and improve outcomes for at-risk and vulnerable Veterans.

VHA 3. Suicide

Prevent suicide among Veterans

What strategies work best to prevent suicide among Veterans? (Suicide Prevention pursuant to VA Strategic Goal 2, Objectives 2.1 and 2.4.)

Performance Indicators

VHA 3.1 Suicide Prevention Strategies

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Identify strategies work best to prevent suicide among Veterans	Target	Identified		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 2.1: (Underserved, marginalized and at-risk Veterans) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a1652314-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA emphasizes the delivery of benefits, care and services to underserved, marginalized and at-risk Veterans to prevent suicide and homelessness, improve their economic security, health, resiliency and quality of life and achieve equity.

Supportive of Objective 2.3: (Inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility (I-DEA)) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a165256c-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA will leverage research studies, innovation and partnerships to enhance understanding of Veteran needs and eliminate disparities and barriers to health, improve service delivery and opportunities to enhance Veterans’ outcomes, experiences and quality of life.

Supportive of Objective 2.4: (Innovative care) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a16526b6-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA will improve understanding of Veteran specific illnesses and injuries to develop and adopt innovative new treatments that prevent future illness and enhance Veteran outcomes.

Supportive of Implementing Strategy 2.1.1 - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_c27b4446-e9e6-11ec-9cf1-e1510983ea00: “VA engages Veterans and Service members and delivers services and practices that promote lifelong well-being and resilience to improve mental health, reduce Veteran suicide and empower and equip them to achieve their life goals.” This strategy describes implementation of three specific strategies to connect with vulnerable Veterans at-risk for suicide.

Supportive of Implementing Strategy 2.3.1 (Inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility (I-DEA)) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_d538fe90-eaca-11ec-ad90-b2172d83ea00: addresses persistent, systemic inequity and barriers to benefits, care, memorialization and services for marginalized and underserved communities to strengthen the experience and improve outcomes for all Veterans. VA conducts equity assessments, identifies data and defines measures to recognize barriers to health outcomes, gaps in benefits, care, memorialization and services and risks to underserved and marginalized Veterans to implement this strategy.

Supportive of Implementing Strategy 2.4.2 - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_d5392bae-eaca-11ec-ad90-b2172d83ea00: “VA incorporates emerging and innovative methods and technologies to better understand needs and improve the delivery of benefits, care and services to Veterans, Service members, their families, caregivers and survivors.” This strategy describes formal and informal partnerships and research efforts to develop innovative community-based interventions that identify highrisk Veterans and connect with them in the communities where they live.

VHA 4. Environmental Exposures

Determine the extent to which military environmental exposures have harmed Veterans

To what extent have military environmental exposures during their period of service harmed Veterans, especially regarding latent or chronic adverse health effects? (Environmental Exposure pursuant to VA Strategic Goal 2, Objective 2.4.)

Performance Indicators

VHA 4.1 Environmental Exposure Harms

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Determine the extent to which military environmental exposures have harmed Veterans	Target	Determined		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Objective 2.4: (Innovative Care) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_a16526b6-e8d6-11ec-b595-b4c11b83ea00: VA will improve understanding of Veteran specific illnesses and injuries to develop and adopt innovative new treatments that prevent future illness and enhance Veteran outcomes.

VHA 5. Airborne Hazards

Provide effective care for Veterans exposed to toxic burn pit smoke and other military-related airborne hazards

What are the best strategies to implement state of the art evaluation and care models to provide effective care for Veterans exposed to toxic burn pit smoke and other military-related airborne hazards? (Environmental Exposure pursuant to VA Strategic Goal 2, Objective 2.4.)

Performance Indicators

VHA 5.1 Evaluation & Care Strategies

Description	Type	Status	Start Date	End Date
Determine the best strategies to implement evaluation and care models to provide effective care for Veterans exposed to airborne hazards.	Target	Determined		
	Actual			

Relationships

Supportive of Implementing Strategy 2.4.: (Military Environmental Exposure) - https://stratml.us/carmel/iso/part2/VA2022wStrategies&Style.xml#_d5394300-eaca-11ec-ad90-b2172d83ea00: “VA and partners pursue research and implement studies to establish a holistic approach for military toxic exposure presumption and deliver benefits, care and services that improves quality of life for Veterans.”

Administrative Information

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