

Section 1: Planning

*“Strategic planning is worthless – unless there is first a **strategic vision**.”*
-John Naisbitt

Planning is the most important first step in developing an Engagement Group. Your planning should begin by exploring *why* you want to do this. What do you hope to change or improve by including input from Veterans and/or Veteran Stakeholders in the development, implementation, and dissemination of your research? Once you can answer this important question, your planning efforts should be organized to support these goals.

In this section we draw on the experience of VA research leaders who have created Engagement Groups – composed of Veterans and other stakeholders, such as care partners and VA providers – to provide consultation to VA Research Centers and individual research studies. We provide guidance on a common planning approach and concrete steps that accompany this approach. At the conclusion of this **PLANNING** phase, you should have an understanding of why you are engaging Veterans in research and how you will do it.

Key Planning Steps in this Section:

Form a Veteran
Engagement
Steering
Committee

Explore Purpose
of Veteran
Engagement

Select
Engagement
Model

Create Work
Plan to Develop
Model

Important
Regulatory
Considerations

1.1 Step 1: Form a Veteran Engagement Steering Committee

If you are developing an Engagement Group to support multiple researchers or a Research Center (hereafter referred to as Center), you will want to develop the approach collaboratively with others. Many Engagement Groups were developed and launched by a steering committee. Forming a steering committee has many benefits, including reducing the development workload on any one individual, increasing the range of ideas that inform decisions about organization and structure, and generating enthusiasm and buy-in across an organization. There are also some challenges, which include negotiating different ideas and opinions, bringing a larger number of people to consensus on key decisions, and scheduling meeting times that work for members. These challenges can be reduced with planning and leadership.

1.1.1 Steering Committee Members

Champion(s): Developing opportunities to engage Veterans in research takes time, organization, and commitment on multiple levels. Having one or two champions to lead the initiative will facilitate the planning process and help get your engagement efforts launched.

Many successful sites across VA have a co-leadership model. These could include:

- Faculty/Investigator + Program Manager
- Faculty/Investigator + Program Assistant
- Program Manager + Program Assistant

Important characteristics of the Veteran Engagement champions is that they are *passionate* about the initiative, have excellent *listening and facilitation skills*, and can *communicate* with individuals across all levels of the organization.

Having protected time to dedicate to the planning process is recommended. There is variation across VA Research Centers regarding how much time is supported. Some sites provide up to .40 FTE for a Program Manager or Assistant and .05 to .10 FTE for a Faculty/Investigator. Others provide no protected time and staff develop and implement engagement activities as a collateral duty. By and large, Veteran Engagement champions report that some protected time is important in order to ensure that engagement efforts gain traction and eventually launch.

Steering Committee Members: A second important decision to make early on in this phase is who you want to be on the Steering Committee. We found a range of successful practices with committee membership. These include:

- **“Open Call”** Send a general announcement out to all Center staff about joining an initiative to include Veterans in research conducted at the Center. Hold an initial informational meeting that provides staff with a chance to learn more about the idea. Invite those who remain interested to join the Steering Committee.
- **“Strategic Selection”** Initiative champions and/or Center leaders select individuals to be on the initial Steering Committee to assure that specific viewpoints are represented in the planning process, to create a more nimble workgroup, and/or to be more selective with staff resources.

1.1.2 Steering Committee Size

A third consideration is the size of your steering committee. This may depend on the size of your Center (i.e., how many staff could participate), the baseline level of interest in Veteran Engagement, or your timeline. There are benefits and challenges with steering committees of all sizes. Smaller steering committees may be able to make decision quicker, but there are fewer people to share the development and oversight workload. On the other hand, larger work groups have more ideas and more “hands on deck” to

CASE STUDY:

Forming a VE Steering Committee: Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research (CHOIR)

In 2015, two champions, a Senior Investigator and Project Manager, began a one-year planning process for Veteran Engagement (VE).

The champions worked with CHOIR leadership to identify major goals for Veteran Engagement. One goal was to create a Stakeholder Council to provide input on CHOIR’s strategic mission. The second was to create a network of Veterans who could join research teams.

They put out an open call to staff across its two campuses (Bedford and Boston) to join the Veteran Engagement in Research Group (VERG). The open call brought about 20 people together to discuss the initiative and brainstorm subcommittees that were needed to help launch the effort. These included:

- a) Stakeholder Council
- b) Veteran Consultant Network
- c) Guidelines for Working with Veteran Stakeholders
- d) Education, Communication & Training
- e) Leadership

The Stakeholder Council and Veteran Consultant Network subcommittees were responsible for developing a charter that had a mission statement, description of individuals involved, major roles and responsibilities, and compensation guidelines. The other subcommittees focused on developing recommendations for VE and creating supporting products or processes.

A volunteer was selected to lead each subcommittee. Each met regularly to carry out their respective tasks. The full VERG committee met on a monthly basis to discuss their recommendations, products, and processes and get feedback. Most decisions were made through consensus, excluding those with budgetary or policy implications that required approval from the CHOIR’s leadership team.

The VERG champions are responsible for keeping CHOIR center leadership informed of VERG milestones and progress. One member of the Executive Leadership Team was also appointed to be a liaison and to attend VERG meetings.

do the planning and development work but can get bogged down in decision-making, and inclusive meeting scheduling.

1.1.3 Organization of Meetings

Attention to meeting logistics ensures a smooth process and increased participation, and should include:

- **Scheduling to maximize participation.** A recommended practice is to set up standing meetings with the steering committee to generate and maintain momentum. Finding a time when everyone who is interested can make it will be challenging. Many sites use a “Doodle Poll” or similar application to identify times. Once the time is identified, send out a calendar invite to assure that it is everyone’s calendars.
- **A Clear, Useful Agenda.** The organization of each Steering Committee will depend on how you intend to approach the development work. This may depend on the size of your Steering Committee and the model of engagement you select (**see Section 1.3**, below). Assuming most development work will happen outside of Steering Committee meetings, the meetings are a good forum for providing updates on the progress towards development goals, review recommendations that are being formulated, and obtain guidance on challenges that come up during the process of strategic planning. Have an agenda for each meeting, which the lead or co-lead circulate in advance.
- **Facilitator & Recorder.** Other recommended practices include having a facilitator that is responsible for guiding the committee through the agenda and a note taker that can record a summary of the conversation and document key decisions made.

1.2 Purpose for Veteran Engagement

One of the first conversations you will want to have with your Steering Committee, Executive Leadership Team, or other interested individuals is about the purpose of your Veteran Engagement activities. You will want to explore why you want to engage Veterans in research studies and assess the range of perspectives. The following discussion points and questions may guide these discussions:

- What kind of input do you want from Veterans? This may range from strategic direction to the Center to input on individual research projects.
- How frequently should the Veterans and Researchers meet to achieve the type of input desired?
- Are you/your Center flexible in the level of Veteran engagement?

There are a couple of resources that may help during this phase. First there are [example mission statements and charters](#) included in the resources section of this toolkit that may help you gain an initial understanding of how VA researchers and Research Centers are currently engaging with Veterans. You may also want to review the **Levels of Engagement table**, in the introduction to this toolkit, to determine which level of engagement is right for you.

1.2.3 Mission Statement

As you begin to make decisions about purpose and goals, draft a Mission Statement that encompasses the types of input and levels of engagement determined by the steering committee (or other planning body). The draft Mission Statement will serve as an anchor to guide the next steps and initial formation of the Veteran engagement group. It can be used in regulatory documents such as MOUs that may be required before the group is formally implemented, in Veteran recruitment materials to attract potential Veteran members, and to educate and create buy-in amongst researchers in your Center. Note that once your Center has established a Veteran engagement group, the draft Mission Statement should be revisited by the Veterans to ensure it represents their voice and is modified if necessary.

TIP

Veteran Consultation on individual research studies: Many Centers have created opportunities for Veterans to provide input on individual research studies. An important question to ask up front is what stage of a research project you want Veterans engaged in. For example:

- Do you want them engaged in all stages of the project, from study conception to the end of study and dissemination of results?
- Will they review studies under development to give feedback and on proposed aims, measures, and methods?
- Will they review projects that are already funded to provide input on clarity of consents, surveys, and educational materials?
- Will they be involved in disseminating information about the study, providing input on content and/or presenting findings

Sample Mission Statements

Several VA Research Centers have provided permission to share their Mission Statements in this toolkit for others to review and adapt as appropriate.

- Philadelphia CHERP VCAB – Mission Statement and Bylaws
- Upstate New York COE-COI – Mission Statement and Bylaws
- Denver COIN MIRECC VREB – Mission Statement and Bylaws
- Durham COIN VetREP – Mission Statement and Charter
- Boston/Bedford CHOIR – Mission Statement and Charter

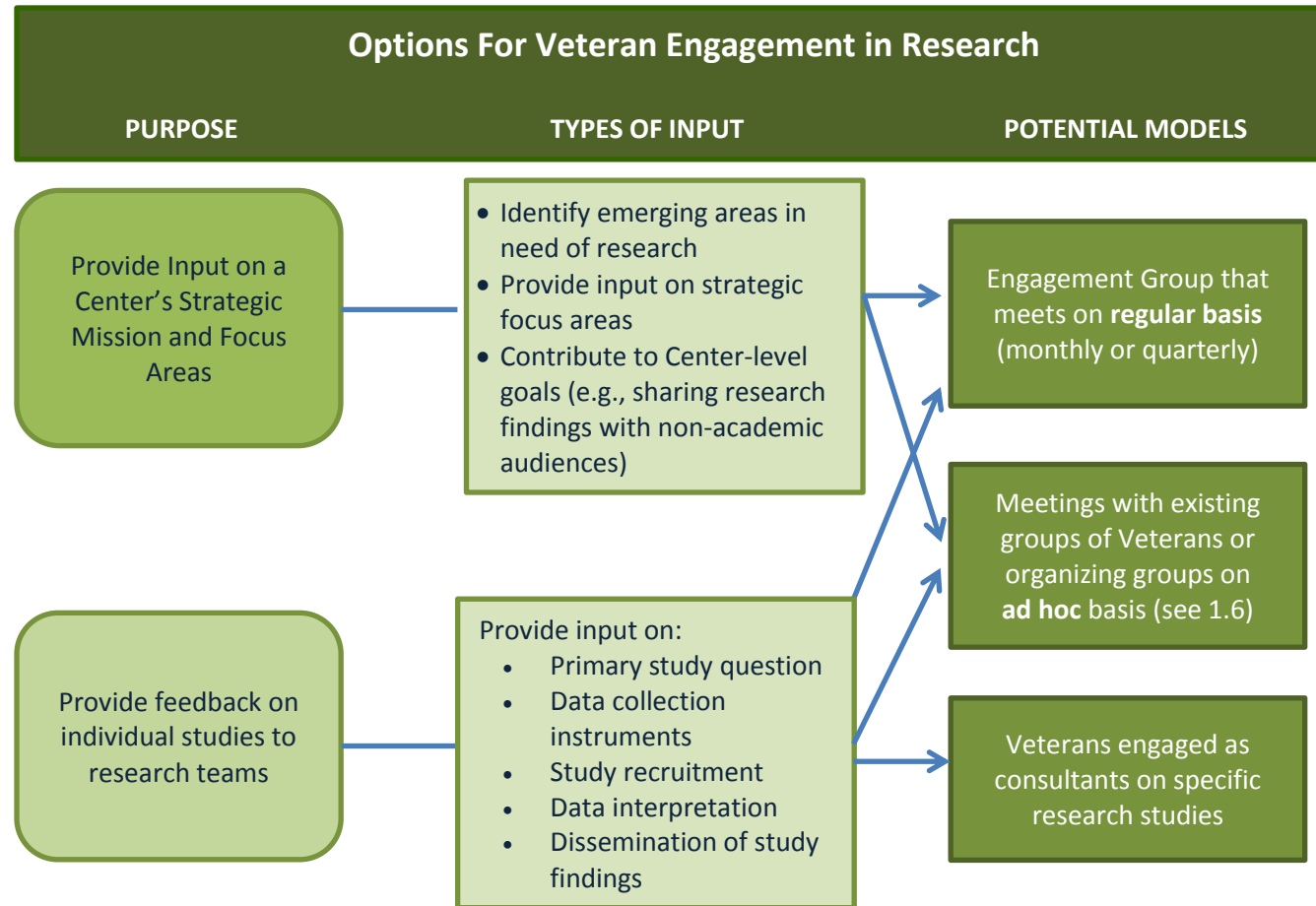
CASE STUDY: An Engagement Group without a Mission Statement

The CIVIC Veteran Engagement Group (VEG) in Portland, Oregon, decided early on that it did not want to invest time in this process initially, despite the Center's expectation that we would develop a Mission Statement collaboratively with the group. The VEG logic was that they wanted to jump into hearing about research and would revisit the task of developing a Mission Statement when they had a better idea of what was needed. As one Veteran summed it up, "We are all here as volunteers so you ask us to do something and, if we are willing and able, we will." The VEG decided its early mission was to make strengthen research by offering Veteran perspectives as needed. The CIVIC VEG operated for the first two-years in this manner and in the group's third year began to document a Mission Statement.

1.3 Review and Select the Right Veteran Engagement in Research Model

Having a draft Mission Statement will help you identify an **engagement model** that is best suited for your purpose. In 2016, the SERVE team conducted an environmental scan to identify the range of engagement models that are in place across VA. We identified three different organizational models with different purposes and types of input. A high-level overview of each of these models is provided below. Further information is in **Section 1.6**. In the resources section there are **case studies** that provide examples of what these different models look like in practice at a VA Research Center.

Options For Veteran Engagement in Research



CASE STUDIES of Each Model (See Section 6.1: Case Studies)

CHOIR's Stakeholder Council	CHOIR's Veteran Consultant Network
MIRECC's Veteran Engagement Group	IQuEST's Veteran Engagement Committee

1.3.1 Working with Established Groups

Among the models offered for Veteran Engagement in research (see 1.3 above) are options to work with established groups at your facility in an ad hoc or ongoing way. The following are Engagement Groups organized outside of research that you may find locally: Community Veteran Engagement Boards (formerly MyVA groups); Veterans Mental Health Councils; and Patient and Family Advisory Councils (PFAC).

Special thank you to the HSR&D Veteran Engagement Workgroup's Center-level Subgroup and Kelly H. Burkitt, PhD, Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, Pittsburgh, PA for contributing this information.

Community Veteran Engagement Boards (formerly MyVA Community Boards)

Overview: These boards were formerly known as the MyVA Community Boards, which were part of the VA Navigation, Advocacy, and Community Engagement (NACE). These groups are now affiliated with the Veterans Experience Office (VEO). VEO's objective is to implement solutions based on Veteran-centered designs and industry best practices, while aligning VA services with the Secretary's top 5 priorities. One method by which VEO achieves this goal is through community engagement to support Veterans through coordination and integration of local VA and non-VA services. As such, they developed the Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB) model. This model has emerged along two paths within communities across the country:

- identifying an already existing board in the community and educating them regarding the CVEB model, or
- providing a supportive framework for community leaders to coordinate locally with VA leaders to develop new community Veteran engagement boards.

VEO has compiled a list of over 250 of these **boards** that are listed by city and state, available [here](#). They also developed a **toolkit** with multiple resources for CVEB's, available [here](#).

Contacts: There is a CVEB Veterans Experience Office Point of Contact for each state, available [here](#).

Useful Information: In general, these groups are heavily Veteran-driven and are not usually linked to VA medical centers. They exist to support Veterans and are not designed to make policy recommendations. These boards serve as an opportunity for community stakeholders to discuss Veteran issues, develop collaborative relationships with VA, and identify opportunities to improve local Veteran experiences. Each board operates independently. Directors from Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery

Administration (NCA) serve on the Board. The Board and Co-chairs set the agenda for the meetings and the VEO provides highlights of national/local issues to generate ideas for the board to consider in their area.

Veterans Mental Health Councils

Overview: The purpose of the Veterans Mental Health Council (VMHC) is to provide input regarding local mental health structures and operations and to share information with Veterans, family members, and community representatives about local VA mental health programs and initiatives. Local VMHC's may also include representatives from community mental health agencies (National Alliance on Mental Illness, Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, and Veteran Service Organizations), and there is usually a mental health staff member designed to serve as a liaison to the council. A Veterans Mental Health Council Guide from 2009 provides an overview of the VMHC, training required, and specific steps to create a council, available [here](#).

Contacts: The VMHC was initiated out of the Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Services, Office of Mental Health, VA Central Office. The VMHCs appear to be facility-specific, although they may be affiliated with local MIRECC's. To identify whether or not a medical center has a Mental Health Community Council, we recommend checking with their local MIRECC, behavioral health, patient experience office, or Director's office.

Useful information: In general, these councils are established and run by Veterans to share information and give advice about local mental health services. The VA is not involved in the management, control, or selection of members. VA staff may help with recruitment but the emphasis is on the Veterans starting their own council. Any Veteran who wants to serve may serve unless they violate the Councils bylaws.

Patient and Family Advisory Council (PFAC)

Overview: The Patient and Family Advisory Council (PFAC) was initially established by the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation (OPCC&CT). OPCC&CT developed a [Veteran Advisors and Advisory Councils guide](#) that encourages inclusion of the "Voice of the Veteran" in the operations of the medical facility. The Palo Alto-based office established a two-day Patient Family Advisor Council Workshop for VAMC's from around the country to facilitate establishment of PFACs at other VAMCs. During this workshop they train new sites on selection of members, training and development, and how to get leadership support. They also encourage trainees to sit-in on a council meeting to see it in action. 12 sites that had "success moving their respective PFACs forward" were identified through initial information gathering.

Useful Information: PFAC's typically focus on any issue brought to them by a department within the medical center or that members may observe during 'walkabouts' at the facility. The Palo Alto VA had a need for including research in their PFAC and created a subgroup from the original 16 board members. They chose to create a subgroup to make sure they were working with the "passions and motivations: of the Veteran volunteer board members and to ensure that research did not take time away from other important foci."

1.4 Create a Plan for Development

Once you have identified the purpose of your Veteran Engagement initiative and identified a model(s) that will help you achieve this purpose, your next step is to develop a plan of action. This plan of action will vary from one model to another. Some common action items during this initial phase of development include:

- Refine or create a **vision and mission statement** for your initiative and a **charter** that outlines purpose, roles and responsibilities, compensation, and resource requirements.
- Develop a **communication strategy** to make others in the Center aware of the opportunity to engage Veterans in the research process
- Develop **strategies to recruit** Veterans for participation in your Veteran Engagement initiative, including who, how, and when to recruit.
- Identify and develop **trainings** Veterans and research teams to prepare them for collaborative work
- Develop recommendations for how to engage Veterans and mechanism to **compensate** Veterans for their time
- Develop **evaluation plan** to enable on-going learning and quality improvement

There may be other action items depending on your particular model and needs. One recommendation is to start small and get a few foundational action items accomplished and then move on to others. Establishing a timeline with clear expectations for each action is important to gaining and maintaining momentum.

Gift Card Compensation (non-VA funds)

In locations where there is a research foundation available to investigators, it may be possible to purchase gift cards as compensation for engagement activities using non-VA funds. This process will be specific to your local foundation and requires that there are funds available to be used for this purpose.

Direct Deposit into Participant Account with Research Vouchers (VA funds)

Some research centers work with their Administrative Officers to set up a Purchase Order (PO) used to compensate Veterans annually. Veterans must fill out necessary forms to set up direct deposits (FMS Vendor File Request Form 10091, Direct Deposit Form). Similar to vouchers issued for research participation, vouchers are issued for research engagement compensation with payment deposited directly in to bank accounts.

Cash Vouchers (VA funds)

Research Centers can open a line of accounting with their fiscal department and obtain pre-approved cash vouchers. Whenever a Veteran consultant contributes time to a research project or Center, a designated person at the Center fills out a cash voucher that can be taken to the hospital's agent cashier to exchange for cash.

Issuing Checks (VA funds)

Using the same mechanism to set up cash vouchers, there is also an option to have a check mailed to the individual, which they can cash at their own bank. This can take 2-3 weeks for receipt. This is a mode of compensation used for research participants in general (in some health care systems). It requires the completion of the **VA 10-7078 form: Authorization and Invoice for Medical and Hospital Services**.

Non-monetary Compensation

In lieu of cash or a cash equivalent, some locations opt to provide a meal voucher at the local canteen on the day of meetings. Possibilities for compensation through local facility services can be determined on a case by case basis.

Engagement Group as Service Organization (no compensation)

At least one site framed participation in the Engagement Group as being a volunteer activity. Members are considered free-agents and colleagues in this context, rather than employees or research subjects. This approach stems from an acknowledgement that Veterans may view their participation as service to other Veterans and is based on feedback from the group. It also reduces any potential coercion or sense of obligation related to participation and attendance.



Using ClinCards

This is one additional idea that continues to be explored. These are sometimes allowed for participant compensation in research. This has not yet been shown to be possible for non-study activities, but may be an option if you are looking at compensating at the individual study-level.