



***Strengthening Excellence in Research through  
Veteran Engagement (SERVE):***

***Toolkit for Veteran Engagement in Research***

*Version 1*



---

# Toolkit for Veteran Engagement in Research

## *SERVE Team and Acknowledgements*

“Key to understanding engagement is the recognition that it is inherently collaborative and iterative.”  
-Sarah Ono

### *Special thanks to:*

The SERVE Team would like to thank the HSR&D Veteran Engagement Workgroup for their questions and contributions. Kelly Burkitt leads the subgroup on Veteran Engagement outside of Research and contributed content on VA supported, non-research, Veteran and stakeholder engagement groups. Kenda Stewart, Katherine LaChappelle, and Lindsey Martin shared materials developed for their 2017 HSR&D/QUERI National Meeting panel (incorporated throughout the toolkit). Courtney Lyndrup, Miho Tanaka, Amy Kilbourne and David Atkins provided support and guidance throughout. Rachel Matsumoto provided administrative assistance. Portia Rivera provided internet development. Thank you to our Centers and colleagues for generously sharing local innovations, failed experiments, and example materials.

### *Support for this project came from:*

VHA Health Services Research & Development, SIP 17-152 (PI: Sarah Ono)

### *Suggested citation:*

Hyde J, Wendleton L, Fehling K, Whittle J, True G, Hamilton A, Gierisch JM, Ertl K, Fix G, Barker A, Wehler CJ, White B, Ritchie MF, Ono SS. Strengthening Excellence in Research through Veteran Engagement (SERVE): Toolkit for Veteran Engagement in Research (Version 1). Veterans Health Administration, Health Services Research and Development, 2018. Available at: [https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/for\\_researchers/serve/](https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/for_researchers/serve/)

*The views expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not represent the views of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States Government.*

*This Toolkit is the product of a collaborative effort by members of the SERVE Team (alphabetical by location):*

***BEDFORD, MA***

Center for Healthcare Organization & Implementation Research (CHOIR)  
ENRM VA Hospital, Bedford, MA  
Justeen Hyde, PhD (SERVE Co-Lead)  
Anna Barker, MPH  
Gemmae Fix, PhD  
Carolyn J. Wehler, RDH, MPH

***DENVER, CO***

Center for Veteran-centric and Value-driven Research (DiSCoVVR)  
VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System  
Kelty Fehling, MPH (Co-Site Lead)  
Leah Wendleton, MPH, MSW (Co-Site Lead)

***DURHAM, NC***

Center for Health Services Research in Primary Care  
Durham VA Medical Center  
Jennifer Gierisch, PhD, MPH (Site Lead)  
Brandolyn White, MPH

***LOS ANGELES, CA***

Center for the Study of Healthcare Innovation, Implementation & Policy (CSHIIP)  
VA Greater Los Angeles Health Care System  
Alison B. Hamilton, PhD, MPH (Site Lead)

***MILWAUKEE, WI***

Clement J Zablocki VA Medical Center  
Jeff Whittle, MD, MPH (Site Lead)  
Kristyn Ertl, BA, CCRC

***NEW ORLEANS, LA***

South Central MIRECC & Southeastern Louisiana VA Health Care System  
Gala True, PhD (Site Lead)

***PORTLAND, OR***

Center to Improve Veteran Involvement in Care (CIVIC)  
VA Portland Health Care System  
Sarah Ono, PhD (SERVE Co-Lead)  
Mary Frances Ritchie, MPH  
Rachel Matsumoto, MS  
Linda Ganzini, MD, MPH

# Contents

Overview	i
Section 1: PLANNING	1-1
1.1 Form a Veteran Engagement Steering Committee .....	1-2
1.2 Purpose for Veteran Engagement .....	1-4
1.3 Veteran Engagement in Research Model .....	1-6
1.4 Create a Plan for Development .....	1-10
1.5 What Does Success Mean.....	1-12
1.6 Regulations .....	1-12
1.7 IRB criteria Form a Veteran Engagement Steering Committee.....	1-14
1.8 Compensation for time.....	1-16
Section 2: CONVENING	2-1
2.1 Recruitment.....	2-1
2.2 Training.....	2-5
2.3 Initial Meetings.....	2-7
2.4 Reflecting on Process.....	2-9
Section 3: WORKING TOGETHER	3-1
3.1 Preparing for Meetings.....	3-1
3.2 Running Effective Meetings.....	3-3
3.3 Post-Meeting Follow Up .....	3-9
3.4 Keeping Board Members Engaged .....	3-10
Section 4: EVOLVING	4-1

4.1 Ongoing Reflection and Quality Improvement.....	4-2
4.2 Identifying New Opportunities .....	4-4
4.3 Shift in Roles .....	4-8
4.4 Ambassadors for VA Research.....	4-8
4.5 Identifying How and When to Share Research.....	4-9
4.6 Expand VA Research through Community Engagement .....	4-10
Section 5: EVALUATING 5-1	
5.1 Creating the “Big Vision” .....	5-2
5.2 Formative Evaluation.....	5-7
5.3 Process Evaluation.....	5-9
5.4 Outcome Measures .....	5-12
5.5 Disseminating your Evaluation Findings .....	5-15
5.6 Ethical Considerations .....	5-16
Section 6: RESOURCES	
6.1 Case Studies	
6.2 Governance	
6.3 Recruitment Materials	
6.4 Training Materials	
6.5 Templates	
6.6 Evaluation Materials	
6.7 Dissemination Products	
6.8 Cyberseminars	
6.9 Additional Toolkits	
6.10 Reports <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
6.11 Consultation Assistance	
6.12 Opportunities	
6.13 Literature	



## ***OVERVIEW:***

### ***Welcome to The SERVE Toolkit for Veteran Engagement***

---

The purpose of the **Strengthening Excellence in Research through Veteran Engagement (SERVE)** Toolkit is to support VA Research Centers and investigators in efforts to include Veterans and other stakeholders in the development, implementation, and dissemination of research studies. The Toolkit was developed through a collaborative process that included representatives from 7 VA hospitals where Veteran Engagement in Research is an established priority.

Our team-based approach was to learn about the range of successful practices that are currently in place across the VA system, to synthesize these practices and identify common themes or approaches, and then to organize the practices into stages for developing Veteran Engagement opportunities at a research center. ***The Toolkit provides specific guidance on the development of group-level engagement strategies with VA research centers as a primary audience.*** However, much of the information presented is relevant for other approaches to engagement, such as one-on-one consultation and for individual investigators seeking to involve Veterans in specific research studies.

## Goal and Organization of the Toolkit

The goal of this first iteration of The SERVE Toolkit is to provide guidance to VA Research Centers and investigators to support the development opportunities for Veterans to be engaged in the research that we conduct. There are many approaches to engaging Veterans. This Toolkit primarily focuses on the development of Veteran Engagement Groups (hereafter called *Engagement Groups*), which entails bringing together or leveraging existing groups of Veterans and other stakeholders to provide input or consultation on all phases of a research study. The Toolkit is organized by phase of development, beginning with **PLANNING** and then moving along the stages of implementation to **CONVENING**, **WORKING**, **EVALUATING**, and finally to **EVOLVING**. Additionally, there is a section of **RESOURCES** that contains sample documents, cyberseminar links, webpages, and other materials, and also a list of publications that may be useful. Each section can be accessed by clicking on the corresponding box below.

The Toolkit is designed so that you can access information relevant for the phase of implementation you may be in at any given point in time. There is no prescribed way to use this toolkit. Within each phase, we provide an overview of activities that are important to consider along with case examples and supporting documents. The example documents that are available in the **RESOURCES** section of the toolkit have been made available to you by your VA colleagues who believe strongly in the value of sharing knowledge and avoiding duplication of work.



### 0.1 What Do We Mean by Veteran Engagement in Research?

In this Toolkit we strive to provide guidance for *meaningful engagement* of Veterans and other stakeholders in our research processes. This means the development of bi-directional relationships between Veterans, stakeholders, and researchers “that results in informed decision-making about the selection, conduct, and use of research” (Concannon,

2012). There is a spectrum of engagement in research that varies in both purpose and intensity. Table 1 provides an overview of this spectrum.

Table 1: Levels of Engagement in Research					
	Participate	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Lead/ Co-Lead
Veteran's Role	To act as a participant in a research study	To provide feedback or input on specific research activities	To work directly with a research team throughout a study	Partner with researchers on all aspects of a research study	Leadership role with decision-making authority on studies
Researcher's Role	To conduct research in a respectful, ethical manner	Veteran(s) asked for input on specific aspects of a research study	On-going engagement of Veteran(s) throughout a research study	Veteran(s) join research team and act as team member	Shared leadership and decision-making
Examples	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods research	Meeting with existing or ad hoc groups; priority setting activities	Standing group dedicated to providing input on studies	Members of research steering committee	Veterans are research partners or co-investigators

*Levels of engagement in health research figure was adapted from the International Association for Public Participation's Public Participation Spectrum under the fair dealing provision of the Canadian Copyright Act for research.*  
<https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2017/02/14/spectrum-of-public-participation/>

It is important to note that this Toolkit focuses primarily on the creation of opportunities that fall in the middle of this spectrum: **Consult, Involve, and Collaborate**. We view the Participate level of engagement as the usual way that

Veterans are involved in our research. While this is important, our hope is that this toolkit helps move us beyond seeing

Veterans as solely participants in research. On the other end of the spectrum is the Lead/Co-Lead type of engagement which may be an approach to strive for, but may be challenging to pursue given VA rules and regulations. Therefore, we have focused The Toolkit guidance on these middle categories.

“Giving Veterans a Voice is important. Because sometimes Veterans feel like a number in a machine. But getting Veterans perspectives make you feel like you have a voice.”

*-Veteran Engagement Group Member*

## 0.2 Why is Veteran Engagement in Research Important?

---

Engaging Veterans and Veteran Stakeholders in the development, implementation, and analysis of VA research may help to:

- **Strengthen our understanding** of our data and the population(s) we hope to help
- Ensure we ask useful, **meaningful research** questions that can improve VA health services and the care provided
- **Improve the quality and relevance** of data collection instruments
- **Speed dissemination and uptake of innovations** to Veterans and those who care for them

“I think there’s no ways that it’s [engagement of Veterans] inappropriate. I think there’s only ways that it’s absolutely appropriate.”

*-HSR&D Investigator*

Several cyberseminars are available that provide an both an overview and specific details about Veteran Engagement. A list is provided [here](#).

## 0.3 How is Veteran Engagement in Research Aligned with VA Priorities?

---

In the Veterans Health Administration (VA), MyVA and the concepts of Veteran engagement and patient-centered care have been key drivers in efforts to redesign health care. MyVA places the Veteran at the center of everything we, as VA employees, do. Obtaining and including Veterans’ perspectives on health care and services have become a key focus area. In recent years, VA Health Services Research & Development (HSR&D) has increasingly emphasized engaging Veterans as partners in research. Veteran engagement in research is important in fostering a community and connection with those whom we are serving and aim to better through the VA research. It is a critical opportunity

to connect in “meaningful involvement of patients, caregivers, clinicians, and other healthcare stakeholders throughout the research process—from topic selection through design and conduct of research to dissemination of results,” (from PCORI.org: <https://www.pcori.org/engagement/what-we-mean-engagement>). This engagement is important as it influences healthcare research to be relevant and useful from patient perspectives, establishes trust, creates a sense of legitimacy with regard to the research findings, and encourages the uptake of research findings.

“Part of the experience of talking to the veteran group is you become aware of how much we say that doesn’t make sense to anybody outside of research.”

*-HSR&D Investigator*

#### 0.4 Veteran Engagement is Challenging, and You Are Not Alone

---

Our original goal with the development of this Toolkit was to synthesize “best practices” for engaging Veterans in research. What we found during the development process is that there are a range of successful practices that have been used across VA. This is not surprising given the diversity of our healthcare system. In this first iteration our goal is to share what we have learned from our own experiences and the experiences of others who are engaged in this work. This Toolkit does not address everything. We have included information that has been requested and that we identified as commonly needed for Centers and individuals interested in Veteran Engagement activities. We hope that the Toolkit makes it possible for others to engage in these efforts and contribute to our collective learning on how to cultivate the meaningful engagement of Veterans in our research.

# 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

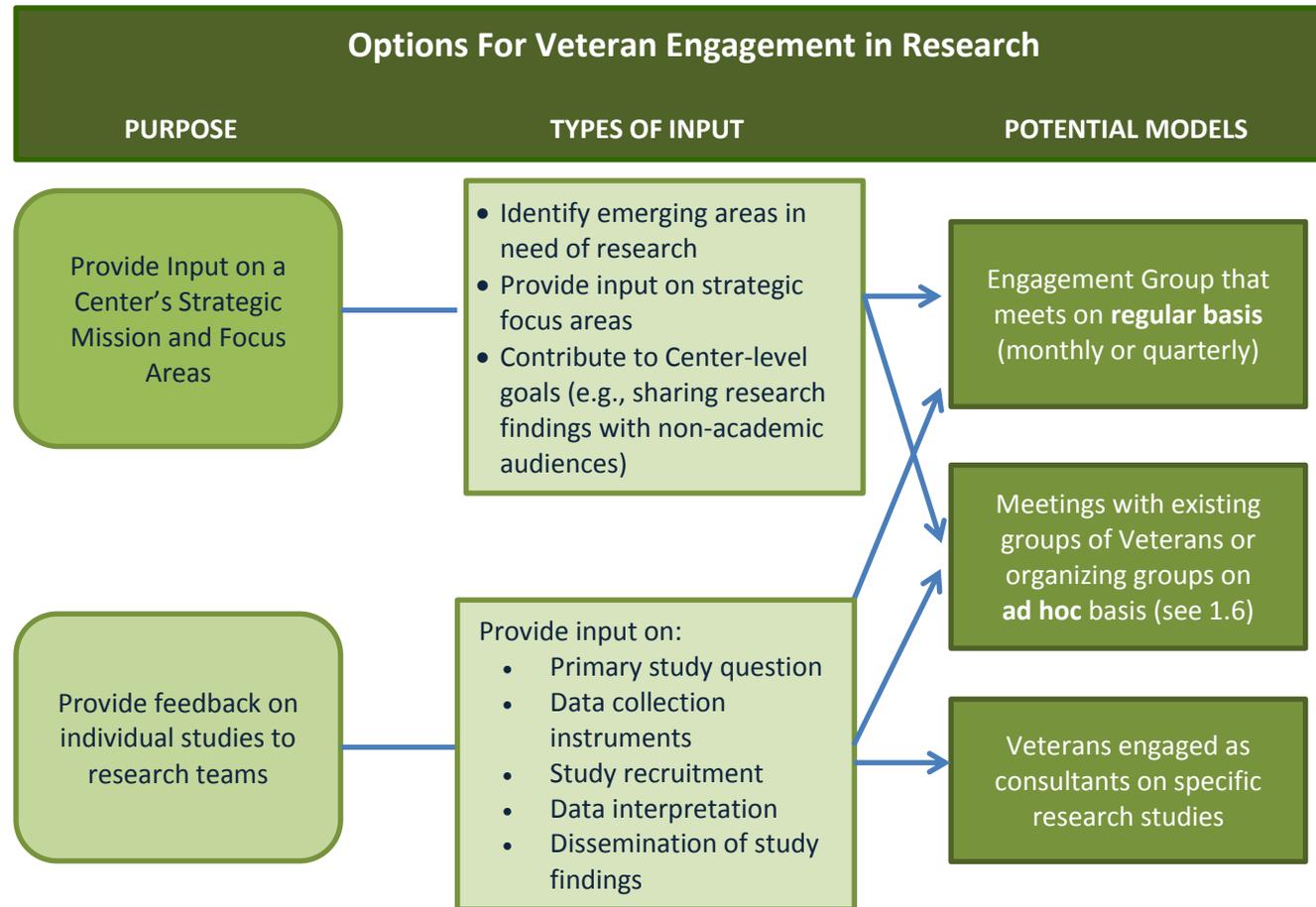
### CASE STUDY: An Engagement Group without a Mission Statement

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.

### 1.4.1 Development Approaches

As you are thinking about *what* needs to get accomplished, you also want to think about *how* to accomplish these actions. There are several ways to use your steering committees to develop your plan of action. Some options include:

#### **Approach 1: Subcommittees**

Create subcommittees that align with the scope of work you outlined. Identify a lead for each subcommittee to ensure the group meets regularly. Responsibilities include gathering information, drafting documents and protocols, and putting together recommendations. These recommendations then get brought to the larger Steering Committee for review and discussion.

#### **Approach 2: Full Steering Committee**

The steering committee could also work together on all action items. This requires setting action item priorities and working through them one at a time. Work is assigned between meetings and updates or draft products are sent to the leads in advance of the meeting. Ideally updates and draft products are sent to Steering Committee members in advance of meetings so everyone has a chance to review.

#### **Approach 3: Individual**

Another approach is to have one individual be responsible for developing items on the action plan. This individual likely has protected time to do the development work. She/he is provided a timeline for accomplishing his/her action items and reports out on his/her efforts during Steering Committee meetings.

#### **TIPS:**

#### **Developing Your Veteran Engagement Initiative**

- **Brainstorm** activities that are needed to develop your Veteran Engagement model
- **Prioritize** the activities
- Establish a **timeline** for the development process and set specific benchmarks for each activity
- **Select a strategy** for accomplishing the development phase that is appropriate for your infrastructure
- Hold **regular Steering Committee** meetings with expectations of reporting out on progress
- **Record major decisions** made by the Steering Committee as well as any barriers or challenges that are impeding progress towards goals

## 1.5 What Does Success Mean for Your Center?

---

In the **Section 5** of this Toolkit we provide a more detailed overview of approaches to evaluating your Veteran Engagement initiative. In this Planning Section we want to highlight the value of having a “big picture” conversation with your Steering Committee and Center Leadership about what a successful Veteran Engagement initiative means for your group. This conversation is closely tied to the **Purpose** of your Veteran Engagement initiative.

Below are example questions that you can use to facilitate conversation about your Center’s vision of success for Veteran Engagement:

- How will you know that our Veteran Engagement initiative has been successful? What would be the signs of success for you?
- Imagine our Center 3 years from now. We have our Veteran Engagement initiative in full operation. What differences or changes do you think we will see in our research? In our staff? Among the Veterans that we are working with?
- I’d like to go around the room and ask everyone to identify one positive improvement you would like to see once we have our Veteran Engagement initiative launched?
- We are launching an effort to engage Veterans in our research. What impact would you like to see this effort have on the research we conduct in the next year? In the next three years? In the next five years?

Having these conversations at the beginning of your planning process can help clarify your vision for Veteran Engagement and what you hope to accomplish.

### *Important Regulatory Considerations*

## 1.6 Regulations that impact what and how Veterans can be engaged

---

Below we address **FACA**, **IRB**, and **compensation**. These topics commonly generate a lot of questions. Many of us have direct experience working through these and other regulatory issues that impact Veteran Engagement at a Center level. We leveraged the wisdom of our group and the larger HSR&D Veteran Engagement Workgroup’s Subgroup on Regulations to provide an overview of issues to consider. Given that there may be some local variability in how regulations are interpreted, you may also want to consult with additional individuals to inform the scope and practices of your Veteran engagement activities or Engagement Group:

- Facility AO or ACOS for Research
- Facility Director – While this is at minimum a courtesy, multiple locations found that having an MOU that provides written support for your Engagement Group is helpful. Especially if leadership changes.
- Local IRB or R&D Committee to determine if they consider your VEG or VEG activities human subjects research (**see Section 1.7**)
- Privacy and Security Officer if recommended by your local IRB or R&D Committee
- Point of Contact for other Veteran and family groups already established in your area (see 1.6). This step helps avoid confusion if there are multiple groups recruiting members at the same time.
- Public Affairs officer – Some locations may require that the local PAO review any promotional or information materials before they are disseminated to the public.
- VA Form 10-3203 – This is important to have Veterans sign if you plan to photograph, video record, or quote any individual involved with your Engagement Group or Veteran engagement activities.

### 1.6.1 The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)

**Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)** is administrated by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). It is intended to provide transparency and inhibit undue influence on government by private, unelected individuals. The Act requires registration and oversight of federal committees that solicit advice of private, non-federal individuals. FACA is invoked if you assemble a group of non-federal employees to make decisions or provide advice based on vote or consensus. NOTE: this does *not* include motions or votes under Roberts Rule of Orders as long as they pertain to the running of the meeting or board.

FACA is a law that provides a process for establishing, operating, overseeing and terminating advisory committees to the federal government through Congress.

- FACA generally applies to groups with one or more individuals who are not full time or permanent part time Federal employees and *established* or *utilized* by an agency *to obtain advice or recommendations*.
- A group is utilized by an agency when it is federally funded or under the strict management and control of the agency.
- Management and control encompasses actions including, but not limited to, the following: appointing the group's members, providing staff, setting the agenda, recording the minutes, and maintaining the group's records.

VA may participate in outside groups without triggering FACA so long as VA does not utilize the group (as described above) to **obtain advice or recommendations**.

- FACA is not triggered if an outside group that is not managed or controlled by VA provides advice or recommendations **not solicited by VA**.
- FACA is not triggered if VA provides views to a group formed by the private sector or assists an outside group in developing guidance for the private sector.
- VA may seek advice/recommendations from outside entities/persons **individually** without triggering FACA.
- If VA seeks **only facts/information/experiences** from a group, FACA is not triggered.

Talks between the head of HSR&D, OGC Contacts, Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation and the Denver VA COIN/MIRECC on establishing Veteran Engagement Groups lead to information that made it clear these types of Engagement Groups do not fall under FACA. Guidance has been shared that helps clarify this decision. The guidance includes:

- They are not Advisory in nature but established to engage with Veterans as partners in the research that ultimately impacts their care.
- The Members of the meetings do not make group recommendations. All members provide individual viewpoints during meetings.
- A recommended practice is to be very clear about the role of Engagement Board members in documents such as MOUs and Charters. The recommended language is as follows: “Veteran/Family Advisors provides individual viewpoints only. Their work does not implicate the Federal Advisory Committee Act.”

**Web information on the Act** is available [here](#).

## 1.7 IRB criteria (researcher vs non-researcher roles)

---

Before moving forward with Veteran engagement activities or Veteran engaged research consider what requirements your local VA R&D and University IRB may deem necessary. There are two general R&D/IRB paths that you may follow depending on the type of engagement activities you are setting up: (1) Project specific participant engagement in which study participants are identified and asked to take on a separate role as study consultants or partners, and (2) Ongoing Veteran engagement in the form of an Engagement Group comprised of Veterans who give feedback related to multiple projects typically at a Research Center. R&D/IRB approaches for both paths are described below.

### 1.7.1 Project specific participant engagement

**We recommend setting up a meeting with your IRB early to ascertain the necessary requirements and plan accordingly.** Engaging Veterans as collaborators or members of the research team on specific studies may require formal review by R&D and IRB panels and thus necessitate inclusion in the study protocol and informed consent design. IRBs across the country are becoming more familiar with patient and stakeholder engaged methods or study designs and may have specific language and requirements for studies using a collaborative approach. In most cases, if you have Veteran consultants obtaining informed consent or reviewing and analyzing identifiable personal information, you will need to include them on your IRB protocol. This means they must complete required trainings to conduct research with human subjects and other VA privacy trainings. If their role is clearly defined as providing input on study design and instruments or interpretation of aggregate findings and they will not have access to identifiable data, they may not need to be identified as members of the research team. It is best to consult with your own IRB to make this determination. Some IRBs now have research trainings designed specifically for community members and stakeholders that move from study participants to study partners.

### 1.7.2 Ongoing Veteran engagement at the Center level

An ongoing Engagement Group should not be considered a research study. Veterans are collaborators and community partners, rather than participants in research and their feedback should not be considered research data. There should be no R&D/IRB regulatory requirements on this path. However, it may be useful to meet with your local IRB or R&D committee so they are aware of the group's activities, contribution to your Research Center, and distinct role as Veteran collaborators rather than study participants. Your Center may choose to have Veterans on this path go through the Without Compensation Process (WOC). As a WOC, Veterans will receive privacy and research training that will provide essential knowledge about the VA and research and allow their names to be added to study protocols and educational materials as team members. The WOC process varies from location to

#### **CASE STUDY: The decision to use WOC status with Engagement Group members**

The CIVIC Veteran Engagement Group (VEG) in Portland, Oregon, was advised by the local IRB to use a process similar to the one IRB uses for community members. This involved having VEG members go through the WOC process. The VEG Liaison works closely with the person who processes WOCs for research and is often the one to help Veterans with scheduling steps like fingerprinting to make sure that the process runs smoothly. It takes several weeks to complete a WOC depending on the time of year. The advantage is that VEG members have a PIV that validates their official role as part of the Center and allows them access to the building where meetings are held. The WOC in research has training (TMS) requirements to ensure a working knowledge of privacy and data security. This status is something that VEG members may choose to put on a resume. It may not be the best path to take everywhere, but it had worked well in Portland so far.

location and is not required for an Engagement Group to be formed.

## 1.8 Compensation for time

---

Among the things that are a challenge in the VA research context is compensation of Engagement Group members. There are two key aspects of compensation that you want to consider as part of your engagement activity planning:

- How much do we compensate?
- What mechanisms for compensating individuals have been used across VA?

### 1.8.1 How much do we compensate?

---

Thanks to a collective of research colleagues in the **Patient Engagement Research Scientific Interest Group (PER-SIG)**, a range of reasonable approaches to compensation have been compiled. What this reflects are the approaches taken by several researchers and/or research groups. These data largely reflect non-VA researchers who are doing work that involves patients engaged in research and other stakeholders as indicated. Data address a variety of research settings, both project-level and for standing groups. [See **Compensation Table**, Reported Compensation Strategies provided by the Health Care Systems Research Network’s Patient Engagement in Research Scientific Interest Group (PER SIG)]

#### **TIP**

Frequency of compensation is decided at the site-level. The range is from monthly to annually.

### 1.8.2 What mechanisms for compensating individuals have been used across VA?

---

Compensating individuals who are involved in research Engagement Groups and activities can be a moving target and this is among the sections that will likely need updating from time to time as regulations change. These are what were determined to be a range of reasonable options that have worked for at least one VA health care system. We offer more than one since not every mode of compensation will work in all places.

#### **Gift Card Compensation (VA funds)**

This has been done using VA research funds. Gift cards are purchased through an approved vendor with an existing VA contract. In the case of Portland, the gift cards are to a large, regional “one-stop-shopping” merchant where a wide range of products are available. Using this approach requires advanced planning as the time involved in contracted purchases can often take several weeks.

### 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.

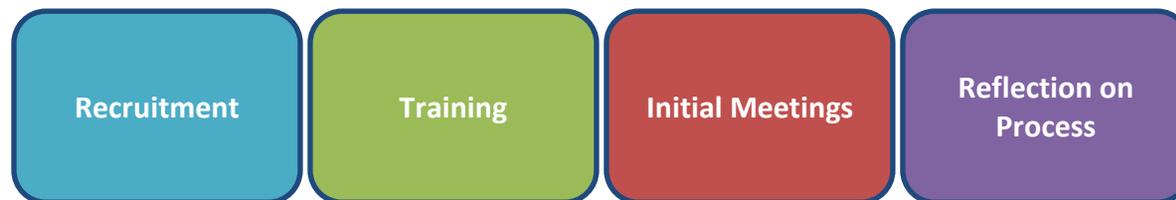
---

## Section 2: Convening

---

*“You have to do the research. If you don’t know about something, then you ask the right people who do.”*  
-Spike Lee

One of the most important steps in developing your Veteran Engagement model is deciding who are the right people to invite as consultants and collaborators. Across VA, there are a range of different types of people that have been identified as appropriate for stakeholder groups, including Veterans, care partners, or community-based or VA-based providers. The question of who to invite should be informed by your mission and the focus areas of your Center. Once you decide who to recruit, the next question is how to recruit these individuals. In this section of the Toolkit we provide some ideas that other VA Centers have successfully used to outreach to and recruit Veteran stakeholders to participate in their Veteran Engagement initiative(s). When possible, we have provided example recruitment materials from VA centers that may help inform the development of your own recruitment efforts (see [Resources section](#)).



## 2.1 Recruitment

---

Recruitment is one of the most common topics of interest when it comes to establishing an Engagement Group. It can be helpful to think about what characteristics would be ideal for your Engagement Group and try to target recruitment as best you can to fit that vision. Diversity takes many forms in the Veteran community. There may be traits specific to the military that need consideration, such as branch of service and rank. Just as you may seek to have men and women involved, you may also decide to consider the representation of rank in your group.

Defining the type of initiative you want will help dictate what actions you pursue for your recruitment. There are different ways an Engagement Group can be set up, from a group that has open meetings for all to attend, to having a structured meeting where the same members regularly attend. Either method will provide opportunities for Veterans to engage with researchers. These opportunities are the critical piece, and there are lots of ways to get there.

It may also be helpful to think about your Engagement Group development in stages, breaking the task down into pieces. Some locations decided to start small, with 2-3 Veterans, and grow from there. In Portland, CIVIC implemented a 'seed committee' to get rapid feedback as the center developed a plan and a process for its Engagement Group, and then the seed committee members helped with outreach and recruitment from the local community.

### 2.1.2 Who to recruit

---

You likely started working on recruitment in the planning phase. Who you want to engage depends to a large extent on your mission and purpose. Some commonly considered characteristics that drive recruitment include:

- Era of service (WWII, Korean, Vietnam, Gulf War, OEI/OIF, in-between war periods)
- Branch of service (e.g., Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, National Guard)
- Service Rank (e.g., Private, Field or Senior Officers, General, Lieutenant General, Captain)
- Gender
- Type of stakeholder other than Veteran (e.g., family members, VA employees, Veteran liaisons, etc.)
- VHA utilization (Veterans enrolled or not enrolled in VHA care)
- Ethnicity
- Education and Professional Backgrounds

### 2.1.3 Develop a recruitment plan

---

Develop a recruitment plan that outlines who, what, where and when you will conduct your outreach efforts. Some VA Veteran Engagement leaders have told us that having a recruitment plan demonstrates to those you are recruiting that you are thoughtful and serious about their engagement. Your plan should include the following information:

**Who** to recruit is discussed above. While you may need some flexibility in your recruitment, it is helpful to have a sense of the diversity of participants you would like to have from the beginning.

**How and Where** to recruit can take many forms. Many samples are provided through the links in [Section 6 – Recruitment Materials](#). Some suggestions are listed below:

- **Flyers and Posters:** Most sites have developed recruitment materials ranging from flyers to tri-fold brochures. These are useful to provide to individuals as you meet them in person or to leave in designated areas for people to review if interested.
- **Presentations:** considering presenting the idea to local groups within and outside of the hospital (i.e., Research Week Presentation, MyVA groups or Mental Health Councils, VFW, American Legion, etc.).
- **Recruitment Letters for Providers:** Connect with Providers and Services in the hospital. Provide them a detailed description on what your center is doing and ask them to pass on your contact information to Veterans who may be looking for these types of opportunities.
- **Social media:** If you are looking for a large number of people to take part in an Engagement Group or you do not have specific recruitment criteria, you may consider posting information about the opportunity on approved social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. 

**Point of contact** is important to designate so that individuals interested in learning more about the engagement opportunity have a clear sense of who they can contact.

**Process for selection** is a good practice to ensure those interested understand the commitment and will be a good fit for this type of activity. Some Research Centers have Veterans fill out a Statement of Interest, interview with staff and other Veterans, or both. Additional recommendations setting up a process to select Engagement Board members are provided below.

**Training** that may be important to prepare Engagement Board members for their role is also important to include in your recruitment plan. This allows you to be able to explain what the orientation and preparation process is when you identify potential members. It also helps prioritize the development or adaptation of training materials.

### ***Additional thoughts for your recruitment plan:***

You may find some initial confusion about whether or not this opportunity is a research study. Keep in mind that Engagement Groups for research are still relatively new and may take some explaining – to BOTH Veterans and researchers. Two recommendations include: 1) make sure the people who are recruiting individuals to take part in groups are able to explain what is being asked of them, and 2) be as transparent as possible about what will be involved and how their input will be used. This will help ensure that those who connect with you will have expectations consistent with the work they will be doing.

#### ***2.1.4 Selection Process***

**Applications and Interviews:** As noted above, a number of Research Centers have a formalized process for selecting individuals to be a part of their Engagement Groups. Some have a two-step process that begins with submission of a statement of interest to participate and/or completion of a brief application. The second step is an interview. The statement of interest or brief application provides you with some initial information about why an individual is interested in research. Sometimes due to staffing, room, or other restraints we are not able to offer everyone an opportunity to participate in the Engagement Group. Some Research Centers have created a rubric to score the interviews or interest forms, which can help make the selection process less subjective (see Recruitment Materials in Resources Section).

Interviews can be conducted in person or by phone. It's important to keep in mind that interviews do not have to be the same as ones you may conduct for a study. We recommend striving for a conversational tone. Having questions identified in advance can be helpful and ensure consistency. Interviews are also an opportunity for prospective Veterans to ask questions and get clarification about what is expected. *Approaching this as a two-way exchange is helpful to everyone involved.*

People conducting interviews should be prepared to provide prospective members with the following information:

- Objectives of the group
- Information on the Research Center
- A summary of the position (role of Veterans on Engagement Groups)

### **CASE STUDY**

When Portland was establishing the CIVIC Veteran Engagement Group, people interested in joining or referred, were asked to share a bit about themselves and write a paragraph about why they were interested in collaborating with researchers. There were also demographic questions and a free text question about health conditions of personal interest (no requirement to disclose PHI). It was a way for us to get a sense of people before a conversation and one investigator pointed out that we'd know someone was a good fit when they turned in a paragraph and returned out calls.

- Examples of duties and responsibilities
- Overview of any training requirements
- Compensation information
- Professional characteristics (e.g., listens well, shares perspective, etc.) you would like someone to have

During these initial conversations you may also spend some time discussing the research process. Research can be a meticulous process and it is important to discuss the role of Engagement Groups in the process and timelines for giving and receiving input on research. It is often a bit of a surprise to people outside of research how long it takes just to get a study developed and funded! Again, these types of practices can also show how important and valuable the Veterans Engagement is to the Research Center.

## 2.2 Training

---

Training is an important way to set people up for success. Like most aspects of Veteran Engagement there are numerous paths to take and one is not necessarily better than another. If there is a best practice related to training, it is to keep in mind that you want participants to succeed – to feel confident and comfortable, and to take away something positive from the engagement encounter. This applies to Veterans and stakeholders as well as researchers. Training is important for [Veterans](#) so that they have a context for research and feel comfortable talking with researchers and sharing their experiences and perspectives. Training for Veterans also needs to inform them of important principles in research such as privacy and data security. Training for [researchers](#) is also important to offer. Researchers may not be comfortable with the idea of getting feedback, or may have questions about what to do with feedback – especially if it is critical. Training or support may also be needed to make sure that information is delivered at a level that is understandable and accessible. Understanding the intent of an Engagement Group helps a presenter prepare for an encounter.

During the Planning phase of your Engagement Group you may have started thinking about the kinds of training that may be useful to offer to Veterans and research members. When you convene your Engagement Group and meet in person, take the time to discuss their training interests and needs. Use this meeting time to assess what is essential for Veteran members to thrive in the engagement process generally or on specific projects. Every Engagement Group is different. Many who have active Engagement Groups have built skills over time to anticipate and address the training needs of Veterans and research staff.

Ideas for training topics include:

- What is Health Services Research? (*for Veterans*)

- Health Services Research & Development (HSR&D) Research at the VA: An overview of policy, grants, programs and timelines (*for Veterans*)
- Military cultural competence (*for Researchers*)
- How to communicate scientific concepts in lay language, shared decision-making, and basic knowledge of military organization and history (*for Researchers*)

**Training does not all have to happen at once.** Training can be an ongoing group activity. When you run into an area that you don't know about, invite an expert in to provide a training! This toolkit can be used as part of training and there are materials in the **Section 6 –Training** that offer training activities and models to help visualize engagement.

Below we outline examples from the Durham COIN VetREP and the Portland COIN Veteran Engagement Group (VEG). These VE training narratives demonstrate multiple strategies for shared-decision making that have been successful within VA HSR&D.

## CASE STUDY: Two approaches to training

**The Durham COIN VetREP** (est. in 2016) convened a planning committee (which included two Seed Committee members) to develop and adapt trainings for Engagement Board members. They worked together to adapt three [training modules](#):

- Module 1: Research: What, Why and Who**
- Module 2: Research Ethics: History and Application**
- Module 3: Understanding the Research Process**

VetREP members spent the first six months training with the Center Veteran Engagement lead, Dr. Jennifer Gierisch and the Liaison, Brandolyn White, MPH. The 3 modules provide the foundation to enable the VetREP members to engage with various research studies.

The Durham VetREP annually recruits new members. The VetREP leadership team facilitates the annual training models for inaugural and new members.

**The Portland CIVIC VEG** (est. in 2015) convened a Seed Committee as part of a plan to implement the CIVIC Veteran Engagement Group (VEG). This group consisted of 4 Veterans, each bringing a different connection to the local Veteran community and 4 researchers. The Seed Committee met 3 times over the course of 5 months.

Two types of training were identified as being important for Veteran members. First, in order to be compensated for their time, Portland COIN VEG members were required to go through the WOC process. As part of this process they were required to complete TMS trainings associated with research and privacy. These could be completed online when it was convenient.

The second kind of training focused on health services research and clinical science. The Seed Committee opted for these trainings to be provided through facilitated conversations with Center VEG leads and through research presentations made by Investigators.

Today, Portland CIVIC Veg is comprised of 8 members who have been relatively consistent since its inception.

## 2.3 Initial Meetings

---

In **Section 3: Working Together**, we provide an overview of key ingredients for successful meetings with your Engagement Group. In this section we highlight strategies that are important for those first initial meetings with the group. The goal of these initial meetings is to cultivate a sense of enthusiasm and value of the group and to lay the foundation for a strong working relationship between Engagement Board members and you or your Center and between Engagement Board members themselves. It can be tricky to strike a balance between relationship building and getting through logistical, bureaucratic and/or training requirements. We strongly recommend you prioritize what is most important to set the right foundation.

### TIPS:

#### Two ways to prepare for meetings

After the three module trainings with the Durham COIN VetREP, the VE Liaison sends “*Research Questions for VetREP Investigators*”, which is filled out in advance of the VetREP meeting. This document provides a foundation to guide the research engagement discussion and meeting materials. It gives individual Investigators the flexibility to engage with Veterans using shared language and to communicate up front what Veterans need.

When the Portland VEG liaison prepared for monthly meetings, she asked the Investigators and teams to identify 2-3 key questions that they wanted the VEG to address. This guided feedback and informed the pacing of the meeting to ensure there was time to touch on questions identified. The VEG liaison regularly consulted with research teams about tips for talking to the VEG, (e.g., make eye contact with the group and use accessible language).

#### *Sample meeting:*

##### ***Pre-Meeting Activities***

As people begin to gather, it is important to acknowledge everyone in the room and on the phone. Meetings will often start 5-10 minutes late because of the nature of coordinating a group of people that travel to meetings. VA parking is a notorious challenge at many facilities. Allow for flexibility in the beginning of the meeting and remind folks about the location of rest rooms and availability of snacks and coffee. The use of affirming language for

Veterans and staff can build comradery in the engagement process. This acknowledgement of appreciation for the Veterans' time and attention to detail can build inclusion and group morale. Use preferred names when members enter the room; this will give other people cues that the Engagement Group has a sense of community. Remember to laugh, make eye contact, speak clearly and recognize accomplishments or life changes when appropriate (e.g., a sick relative, a new baby, recent vacation). The first informal ten minutes of a meeting can set the stage for success.

**Introductions:** Go around and have everyone introduce themselves. It can give you a lot of information, especially what people choose to offer about themselves and which aspects of their identity the foreground. You may also ask individuals to talk about why they were interested in joining the Engagement Group and what they hope to gain for their participation. This creates a shared sense of understanding and mutual reinforcement of goals.

**Agenda:** This will vary depending on the stage of implementation of your group. In all meetings it is helpful to provide an overview of the meeting agenda and make sure everyone has reference materials when needed. Templates are available in [Section 6.5-Templates for Abstracts, Agendas, and Notes/Minutes](#). Information to provide during the initial meeting also includes:

- *(initial meeting)* **How do we work together:** Introduce the Mission Statement or Charter (this is COIN- or project-specific)
- *(initial meeting)* **Frequency of meetings:** use this initial meeting to ask how often the Veteran members want to meet, establish a goal and provide a follow-up email with meeting schedule.
- *(first few meetings and periodically as needed)* **Provide overview of roles, responsibilities, expectations –** reminder of group ground rules

**Trainings:** Some Research Centers opt to spend the first few meetings making sure that Engagement Board members feel prepared for their role. You can use some or all of your meeting time to provide recommended trainings. While this can provide a quick way of getting through the training recommendations, the potential downside is that members may start off with the impression that their role is to listen and learn rather than provide input. Another option is to provide a mix of training and research presentation/discussion during the initial meetings so that members gain a more immediate sense of what they have signed up for. (See [Section 6.4 – Trainings for Veterans](#))

**Research presentation / discussion:** Over time, most of your agenda will focus on providing input on research studies. Even though there is a lot to cover in the initial and first few meetings, it is nice to have at least one researcher present or share their work. We often learn best by doing, so jump in.

**Expectations about next steps:** With about 10 minutes left, be sure to remind the group when the next meeting is and make sure you know the best mode to communicate with members. In most cases email works well. If you are incorporating reflection or feedback surveys or activities into your process, make sure you save adequate time to get to these activities.

**Compensation for participation:** This should be established during *planning* (see **Section 1.8**). The Veteran Engagement liaison should pass out or mail compensation at the end of the meeting. If there is a delay in payment, make sure that follow through is timely.

## 2.4 Reflecting on Process

---

It is important to remember that establishing an Engagement Group is not an easy task, but once established it becomes rewarding quickly. We have heard from researchers that the encounter with an Engagement Group is often “surprising” or “not what I expected. People are frequently surprised by how energizing the encounter can be. One Colleague said that it was nice to have Veterans validate her work as relevant to them and to have a group be excited about a study. In the early months of meetings soak up what might seem like small wins. If people come to a second meeting that is a big win.

After you make it through recruitment, training and preparing processes, it is disappointing to have someone drop off before the group really gets going - but it happens. This is not necessarily a direct response to what you are doing – do not get discouraged. At one site, for example, a woman Veteran was recruited and in the phone interviews she was really excited about the opportunity. She had a natural curiosity and seemed like a great fit. When she didn’t come to the first meeting (even after confirming the day before) the group liaison was concerned. Following the meeting the liaison got a voicemail from the woman saying that she drove all the way to the VA, but when she got there she couldn’t get out of the car. She just not could bring herself to walk into the hospital, so she sat in her car a while and then she left for home. There are times when you find the right person and it just isn’t the right time for them to join. If possible, keep the door open so that if their situation changes in a year or some time down the road, there is an option to join the group later.

As a group, the SERVE team debated where to put **EVALUATION** in the toolkit. It is a stand-alone section that can be reviewed at any stage – see **Section 5 of this toolkit**. Some groups expressed that getting a group implemented was tough enough and that thinking about collecting measurement data was too overwhelming. Others didn’t think about data at this Convening stage and later wished they’d collected baseline data. It is up to you if and when you

are able to tackle measurement. In the meantime, there is one more thing to do once you have successfully convened your first Engagement Group meeting: take some time and reflect on the process.

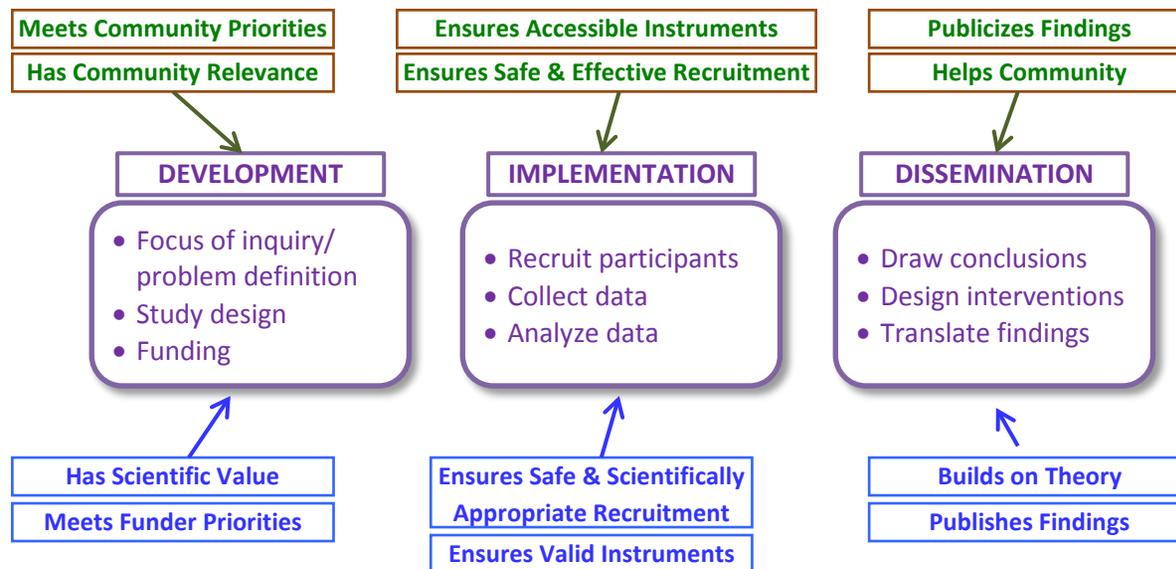
- What surprised you?
- How engaged were all participants in the discussion?
- What might you want to do differently or try next time the group meets?
- Did anyone eat the snacks – which ones?

**Early Engagement: Understanding Personal Drivers**

There is also reflection that can help you stay in alignment with your engagement goals and make adjustments when needed. The model below may be helpful for thinking about why participants come to engagement encounters.

**Veterans**

**KEEPS RESEARCH ETHICALLY SOUND AND SOCIALLY RELEVANT**



**KEEPS RESEARCH SCIENTIFICALLY SOUND AND ACADEMICALLY RELEVANT**

**Researchers**

Adapted from Dora Raymaker, Katherine McDonald, Christina Nicolaidis, 2009. Contact [dora@aspireproject.org](mailto:dora@aspireproject.org)



The model is designed with **Community Based Participatory Research** in mind, but it also applies to Veteran engagement. It is a nice reminder that different participants in Engagement Groups can have similar and different goals that keep them engaged. Maintaining an open line of dialogue with an Engagement Group and the local researcher community will help surface challenges before they become problems. Keeping these different reasons or motivators in mind will help you build bridges when needed and ultimately cultivate a strong and resilient group.

---

## Section 3: Working Together

---

*“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; **working together is success.**”*  
-Henry Ford

Up until this point you have been thinking about the purpose of your engagement group(s), the infrastructure needed to get the effort launched, who to invite to participate, and how to recruit them. Once these pieces are together, you can turn your attention to *how* you will work together. Although the content of your meetings will vary, there are practices and processes you can create to facilitate engagement. In this section we present recommendations from a number of different investigators who have shared their experiences with running successful engagement groups. When available, we provide links to tools and resources that they have developed to support the planning and running of meaningful meetings.



### 3.1 Preparing for Meetings

---

There is a lot of work that goes in to planning for engagement group meetings. You will likely need to begin planning efforts at least one month in advance of a meeting. A meeting checklist is available in the resources section of the toolkit, but key steps include:

### ***Set agenda:***

The purpose of your engagement group will inform the type of activities that are created for each meeting. For example, if the purpose of your group is to inform specific research studies then you will want to reach out to investigators at your Center to identify individuals who are ready and willing to discuss their research with the group. If the purpose of your group is to inform Center level strategic planning, you will want to talk with the leadership team or focus area leads to identify needs for input. Samples are available in [Section 6.5-Templates for Abstracts, Agendas and Notes/Minutes](#).

***Prepare presenters:*** It is important to assure that presenters are prepared for their meeting with the engagement group. First time presenters may need some coaching on their presentation, including the scope of questions, order of material being presented, language, etc. You may want to ask them to outline 1-2 goals for the meeting or identify 2-3 questions they'd like to have the group address. In other words, what would a successful presentation and discussion look like to them? Then discuss how best to engage members in a conversation that would meet these goals. Some engagement group leads have created templates or specific instructions for presenters to help guide the development of their presentations (see examples presentation formats in Resources).

***Logistics:*** Assure there is a large enough meeting space available with the appropriate equipment that is needed for the meeting. You may also need to assure that arrangements have been made for transportation and/or parking. Also consider whether or not any members have special needs that can be accommodated. Send out any directions or instructions for getting to the meeting (including access to buildings and secure areas) with the agenda.

### **TIP: Recommendations for Meeting Agendas**

- Most meetings are 1.5-2 hours in length. It is important to structure meetings so that there is ample time for discussion on each key topic. Do not try to pack in too many items on your agenda.
- Build time for relationship building into the beginning of each meeting. This can include offering food and beverages prior to the meeting so that people can come a little early and socialize. Groups often tend to socialize at the end of a meeting, so plan accordingly. It can be disappointing to get rushed out of a conference room after an energized encounter.
- Have an opening exercise that allows the facilitator to get a sense of the energy of the group and to get engaged in the meeting. An opening activity can be as simple as a question about how everyone is feeling or sharing an interesting observation related to health services.
- Report back on the outcome of the prior meeting. When possible, share how the group's input was used.
- The majority of your time will be focused on one or two presentations or topics for consideration. You want to allow at least 30-45 minutes for main presentations.
- Conclude with a summary of what was learned during the meeting. Summarize key take away points and discuss any action items for the next meeting.

**Send out Agenda:** Approximately one week before a meeting, send out the agenda, materials, directions or instructions for getting to the meeting and any other important materials to engagement group members, presenters and other meeting attendees. You are allowed to email these materials to members who have provided their email addresses. If this is not the best way to get materials to a member or attendee, you can mail them. Note that mail may take longer to reach someone, so incorporate this into your timeline.

#### **Other Recommendations**

- Set a yearly meeting schedule for your engagement group. This helps participants to get the meetings into their schedules early. It also helps research team members identify meetings that are appropriate for their needs.
- Presenters are often scheduled months in advance depending on how often a group meets. Other times an investigator may need feedback on a tight timeline, so scheduling takes a bit of practice and a bit of patience.
- Some groups opt to not meet during summer months and avoid meeting during holiday weeks.

### **3.2 Running Effective Meetings**

---

**Good facilitation is essential for running effective, engaging meetings.** Facilitators help ensure that meetings are well planned and carried out. They also function as a liaison between Engagement Group members and researchers, helping to bridge conversations when needed, to support communication during and after meetings, and to provide feedback to support on-going collaboration and relationship building. A skilled facilitator can diffuse tension and be the one to ask for clarification when needed.

#### **3.2.1 Qualities of good facilitators**

---

Many of the current Engagement Groups within the VA are moderated by a facilitator. Some Centers have meetings facilitated by a VA employee, most often a Veteran Engagement Champion for the site. Others have opted to have a non-VA employee contracted specifically for meeting facilitation. Regardless of how you set up your meeting facilitation, there are certain qualities inherent in good facilitators and good facilitation techniques to consider.

**Organized** Able to prepare in advance of meetings or other VEG activities, including but not limited to setting agendas, gathering information for distribution, researching topics or questions of interests, etc.

**Good Listener** Takes time to listen to the perspectives and ideas of the Veterans; actively engaged with eye contact when someone is speaking.

**Good synthesizer** Able to pull together and synthesize information shared by individuals and groups in real time. Listens for underlying meanings, identifies themes, uses Veterans' own words in summaries.

**Flexible** Able to adjust processes as needed, including agendas and any logistical matters, based on group consensus or input.

**Patient** Mindful of certain actions and decision-making along the process of facilitating a VEG that may require time and not be immediate in outcome.

**Objective** Able to be neutral, unbiased in providing information for decision-making among the group or at the individual-level. Facilitators understand their role and ability to neutralize natural power imbalance initially present between researcher and Veterans and pull in outside expertise when needed.

**Passionate** Has a desire for helping to empower Veterans to have an active voice in issues affecting their fellow Veterans. Should have an authentic belief that Veterans hold as much agency and expertise as the "experts" that come in to present.

**Committed** Is committed to elevating the Veteran voice along the research process. Often means re-directing the conversation back to the board to prioritize the Veteran voice.

- Steer major questions back to the board for their input.
- Ask for permission to re-write or add to cultural norms.
- If a Veteran suggests a way to proceed during facilitation, follow their lead.

**Interpersonal** Is personable with the ability to build relationships quickly with Veterans. Able to host a space where the Veterans can make a personal connection.

### 3.2.2 *Engaging Veterans in conversation*

---

Creating an engaging, interactive dialogue between researchers and Engagement Group members requires attention to both **structure** and **process**. Structure and consistency are especially important for Veterans. Knowing what to expect and having a regular routine that is followed in each meeting is aligned with a military culture that is still

meaningful to many Veterans. Feedback indicates the importance of an agenda and a preference for knowing what to expect.

*TIP*

**Establish structure for each meeting to help members prepare for their participation**

- Send Engagement Group members all meeting materials one week before every meeting so they can review them at their own pace and come fully prepared to discuss the topics.
- Discuss expectations for engagement in meeting discussions and put these expectations in writing.
- Have a consistent structure to meeting agendas so members know what to expect during meetings
- When researchers (or others) come to present their ideas to the group, encourage them to begin with **why** the topic matters. This will help group members connect and engage with the topic that they have come prepared to discuss.

In addition to establishing good structures that support engagement goals, it is important to think about the types of meeting activities that will generate conversation and elicit the input that is desired. By and large, Engagement Group members are not coming to meetings to listen to presentations about research studies. They are coming to provide consultation to researchers – to share their experiences and contribute their ideas to inform research studies. Asking questions in a way that engagement group members can respond to is an important consideration.

**Ideas for Meetings Activities (Process)**

There are many different approaches to generating conversation once you are together (process). Some common meeting activities include:

- A presentation of material by the researchers that includes a full group question and answer and discussion (good for getting feedback on specific ideas).
- A brief presentation followed by small group discussions and then a larger group discussion (good for brainstorming, especially if you have a large group).
- An interactive process mapping or brainstorming exercise around the topic (good for identifying gaps or areas for improvement).



Two key points to keep in mind as you develop meeting activities. First, it may take more time for engagement group members to understand certain topics than other. Engaging them sometimes requires researchers, liaisons and facilitators to slow down until everyone is at the same place with the process. Second, it is important to remember that the purpose of the meeting is to hear from engagement group members. Continuously monitor the room to assess levels of participation in the conversation and adjust your approach as needed. This is an opportunity to think of three ways to explain something; not everyone will understand a point the first time it is presented or a question the first time it is asked.

### *3.2.3 Role of facilitators during meeting*

---

The meeting facilitator is responsible for setting the tone of the meeting and creating a safe, productive space for all participants to share their thoughts and opinions.

**Preparation:** Prior to each meeting, the facilitator should ensure that the room is set up in a way that facilitates interaction with others. Tables set up in a circle or oval shape configuration is recommended. Arrange seating so that researchers and Engagement Group members sit together and engage as equals. Other pre-meeting logistics include ensuring that agendas and other materials for review are available, technology is operational, and food and beverages are set up.

**Meeting:** During the meeting, the Facilitator serves as an advocate for Engagement Group members. Physical location of the Facilitator is important; the facilitator should sit near any Veterans that are hard of hearing while keeping a view of all the Veterans to watch their body language. The facilitator should not be standing and presenting but sitting down with the Veterans as an ally. It is recommended that research team members also sit with Engagement Group members to create a collaborative working meeting. Other recommendations for meeting facilitation are noted in the green Tip box on the next page.

## **TIP**

### **Recommendations for Running Meetings**

- Check in with Veterans at the start of the meeting to gauge initial feelings and questions about that meeting's presentation.
- Check in with researcher on what questions they would like answered if their initial ask was too general or needs reframing due to Veteran confusion.
- Scan/read the room to ensure that Veterans feel comfortable and can ask the questions they need to get to a place of understanding around the subject material being presented.
- Give non-verbal cues to individuals that may have gone off topic for too long to keep the meeting moving. Alternatively, interrupt the individual, acknowledge the importance of their discussion, and re-direct the meeting back on task to respect everyone's time. Upon group consensus and interest, schedule future time for the discussion to continue.
- Check time to generally adhere to movement through the agenda while ensuring there is understanding of subject material before moving along.
- Give Veterans the option to continue to provide thoughts and feedback post-meeting via email or phone should the group run out of time.
- Be prepared to be flexible with the agenda. If Veterans wish to continue discussion on an issue or if something new comes up that is not on the agenda, pause the meeting and discuss the best course of action for proceeding. There may be times when it is not possible to alter then agenda. Honor their interests by suggesting the topic be placed on the following meeting agenda.
- Ensure the researcher's questions are addressed by the group.
- Record themes and Veterans' recommendations/feedback throughout the meeting
- Determine when to share themes to allow the group to reflect on where they have been and open new conversations. This keeps the process moving forward.
- Provide a wrap-up of the Veteran perspective for the researcher at the end of the meeting to confirm an accurate and complete account (can elect to also provide a written copy of Veterans' feedback).

#### **3.2.4 Meeting documentation**

Engagement Group meetings should be documented in order to have a record of information shared during a meeting. Ideally there is a designated note-taker for each meeting that is neither an Engagement Group member nor the facilitator. This allows all participants to fully engage in their role during the meeting. Some groups opt to audio record meetings for accuracy; however, full transcription may not be required. If you are recording the meeting,

make sure that participants are in agreement. Even if your Engagement Group is not considered human subjects research, audio recordings will still need to be stored in a locally compliant way and recorded using approved devices.

There is no consensus on the best form for meeting notes. Some groups opt to have detailed notes of the full conversation and others decide to create high level summary points of the main information shared. Given the variability in preferences across groups, you *may ask members how they would like to capture the content of their meetings* and try out a few formats before making a final decision. It is also important to communicate with researchers about what level of detail is most useful for them. Some will use feedback to advance their thinking, while others may desire Veteran feedback in the form of direct quotes. Know what is expected in advance in helpful. Samples of meeting notes are available in [Section 6.5](#).

### *3.2.5 A final thought on facilitation*

---

One thing we are learning as more Engagement Groups are established is that there are always challenges we cannot anticipate. Fear of challenges and uncomfortable situations is not a reason to avoid Veteran Engagement activities. However, it is important even once a group is up and running to stay attuned to tensions that may arise. In the VA we have the advantage of a research community where we actively share information and consult with each other as challenges present themselves.

At one site that contributed to this toolkit development there was tension for the facilitator when it came to working with Veterans in this capacity. The facilitator was a younger woman who had a hard time cutting off or re-directing older, male Veterans who tended to talk at length and easily got off topic. She wanted the Veteran to feel heard and, on at least one occasion, when she tried to re-direct the conversation she was ignored or talked over. This resulted in her becoming more tentative. There was also a case where the joking and teasing among group members made a liaison uncomfortable. It is interesting to note that the majority of Engagement Groups we collaborated with are organized and/or facilitated by women. Gender, age, and military background are factors that may affect group dynamics. In addition to checking in with Engagement Group members periodically, it is also important to maintain open communication with individuals who are acting as a group liaison or as a facilitator. Should tensions arise it is helpful to address with individuals and the group as needed.

### *3.2.6 Trainings and Resources for Meeting Facilitation*

---

**Facilitating Meaningful Engagement** on Community Advisory Committees in Patient-Centered Outcome Research: Article featuring the aspects of facilitation that drive meaningful engagement <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/673541>

**Seed of Change: Facilitating Meetings** offers a good overview of how to facilitate meetings, including building consensus and dealing with challenging behavior. <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/facilitationmeeting>

**VA Learning University:** Contains resources (e.g. audiobooks) related to meeting facilitation. <https://www.valu.va.gov/Home/Index>

**Burns Facilitator Self-Assessment:** A self-assessment tool designed to help the facilitator understand their facilitation style. Includes tips for intervening. <http://www.rmc.org/wpdev/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Facilitator-Self-Assessment1.pdf>

### 3.3 Post-Meeting Meeting Follow-Up

---

Following each meeting, Engagement members and researchers should be able to expect the following:

- Meeting notes that reflect the information shared during the meeting
- A list of action items for members and/or researchers (as appropriate)
- The time, date, and location of the next meeting (if known)
- A post-meeting evaluation survey (see Section 5 for using this strategy as a way to gauge satisfaction with the Engagement Group)

**Creating Feedback Loops:** *Engagement Group members are more likely to stay engaged if they believe that they are providing meaningful input to people who are listening and able to act on their recommendations.* This does not mean that every idea must be acted upon or adopted, but it does mean that the ideas are seriously considered. It also means that Engagement Group champions or facilitators should have a strategy for circling back to researchers to learn how they used the information provided. Some feedback loop strategies include:

- **Semi-structured survey** can be sent to researchers following the meeting to assess satisfaction with: a) meeting preparation, b) meeting organization, and c) quality of input. Open-ended questions can ask for information about how the input is being incorporated into research studies. A similar survey can be used for Engagement Group members to offer feedback on: a) pre-meeting preparation, b) presentation(s), and c) receptivity to input. This has proven to be a way for Veterans and stakeholders to communicate feelings that may not have been expressed during a meeting.

- *Recommendations checklist* can be generated from meeting notes and sent to researchers to review. The checklist would have a summary of key recommendations or ideas provided. Researchers could check with recommendations are incorporated, under consideration, or not used.
- *Follow up conversation* with researchers could also be organized to gather more qualitative feedback on how the meeting went and how recommendations are being incorporated into research studies. It will be helpful to have a copy of the meeting minutes to refer to during the conversation. Follow up conversations can also be informal; there is a lot of information that gets shared in the 15 minutes after a meeting ends or in the hallway while people are heading out of the building.

Information about how information was incorporated can be shared at the beginning of each meeting. It can also be communicated back to Engagement Group members in written format. You may want to discuss what members prefer and try their recommended approaches.

### 3.4 Keeping Engagement Board Members Engaged

---

#### *3.4.1 Signs of Disengagement.*

Oftentimes, Veterans who volunteer to engage with researchers are Veterans who volunteer for a lot of other activities as well. This can lead to competing priorities and “volunteer fatigue.” Additionally, changes in project focus can lessen the interest of volunteers who signed on because they felt passionate about a specific issue or topic. Others may become frustrated if they don’t see their ideas reflected in grant applications and research studies, or feel there is no room for personal advancement. It is not uncommon for some participants to engage in research with the hope of becoming researchers themselves or conducting a study. These and other factors can contribute to gradual, and sometimes abrupt, disengagement. Setting clear expectations for the role of Engagement Group members, and revisiting these expectations at least annually, can help reduce disappointment.

# Managing Engagement

A few common signs that a Veteran may be disengaging include:

- Unreturned emails and phone calls
- Decrease in meeting attendance
- Decrease in the number of contributions during meetings
- Decrease in the quality of contributions to the group
- Affective changes, such as boredom or frustration, expressed verbally or non-verbally

Some strategies for handling disengagement include:

- Initiate (or renew) **relationship-building** efforts: Make activities FUN! This should be something participants *want* to do. Ensure there are opportunities to socialize, share personal stories, and “break bread” together. Find a better balance between business and pleasure. Consider ways to bring food, games, media, or pets into routine activities, or as special events.
- Create (or enhance) **feedback loops** that enable Veteran participants to clearly see how their contributions have changed the course of the project, how their ideas have been incorporated into something *meaningful*. Take notes about who says what and refer to these comments or suggestions at subsequent meetings.
- Simply **ask!** *What’s changed? What can we do? What would you like to get out of this?*
- Demonstrate **reciprocity**: Inquire about ways *we* can help *them*. Consider ways to live the principle of “mutual helpfulness” espoused in the American Legion’s mission statement.

Consider **accommodating** this lifecycle with:

- Term limits (e.g., annual), rotation/re-assignment, holidays/hiatuses
- Routine “check-ins,” assessments – *What’s working well? What could be improved?*
- Opportunities to “mix it up,” i.e., for Veterans to work in different venues, take on a new role, or have different duties

### 3.4.2 Bringing New People to the Table.

As some Veterans disengage from activities, whether by choice or circumstances, new Veterans will be needed to take their places. Consider asking those who leave for referrals/recommendations. Consult with members of your “core group.”

#### TIP

#### Orientation ideas for new Veteran volunteers

- Creative **icebreaker activities** that happen *on an ongoing basis*: These can make it more interesting for the people who are already in the group AND makes it easier for a new person to catch up socially.
- **Veteran-Veteran Orientation**: Connect a new participant to a Veteran participant to update the rookie on the informal rules of the group. You can also invite the group to lead orientation for new members; this will give you the opportunity to hear how the group views the encounters as well as their task as an Engagement Group.
- **Review orientation materials** with new members on a periodic basis. The facilitator or Engagement Group Leads may be the best to provide a formal orientation to the purpose of the group, what participation entails, and what to expect from members and researchers.
- Foster integration into the group dynamic by including **team-building activities** on an ongoing basis.

## Section 4: Evolving

*“Continue to grow and evolve.”  
-Mahatma Gandhi*

Now that you have a group of Veterans identified and providing input on your research studies, you hopefully feel a sense of accomplishment. Implementing Veteran Engagement activities is not a quick and easy task. If you are like others who have created more participatory approaches to research, the journey has had some ups and downs, forward movement at times and no movement at others. By now you realize that this is a journey, not a destination; the work is not over yet. Once you have worked out how researchers and Veterans can work together, you can turn your attention to *sustaining* these relationships, possibly *expanding* what you are able to do, and *evolving* the work with those involved.

This section is one that you may read early in the process of developing a group and return to from time to time. There is no prescribed timeline for when you might find the content in this section useful. Instead, these are areas to continue to explore and share what we are seeing emerge over time. The field-testing of content in this area is currently underway and as your experience increases we hope that you will contribute your learning and ideas-that-work to this section. We have included: *reflections*, *suggestions*, and *ideas* to move Veteran Engagement activities forward – this might mean growing VE at your Center, in your research, or in the local community.

Ongoing  
Reflection &  
Quality  
Improvement

Contributions of  
Veterans to  
Research

Shift in Roles  
&  
Veterans  
Ambassadors

How & When to  
Share Research

Expanding  
Research  
through  
Engagement

## 4.1 Ongoing Reflection and Quality Improvement

---

Before beginning formal Veteran engagement research processes, it's important to design an ongoing reflection and quality improvement plan. Building in opportunities for Veterans and researchers to give feedback on their experiences allows for all participants to catch small problems before they become big and fine tune meeting and communication processes to optimize functioning. Ongoing reflection may be designed in a manner that serves as a feedback loop with Veterans as well as an evaluation of engagement activities and outcomes. Detailed guidance on building in opportunities for feedback and quality improvement is included in the Evaluation section of this toolkit. In this section we highlight a few key points to consider.

### 4.1.1 *What feedback is most useful?*

---

The kind of feedback you find most useful will likely vary over time, with different questions being associated with different stages of development. As you are standing up engagement group activities, you may want to know what people think about the structure and organization of meetings, how prepared participants felt to engage within one another, recommendations for improving communication and group dynamics, and feedback on logistical issues, such as time and day of meeting, meeting space, etc. As things get up and running, you may have new questions that emerge. For example, you may be interested in perceptions of the value of input provided/received and best approaches to eliciting input and creating feedback loops. ***The key question to ask at any stage is: What kind of input would be most valuable to understanding and improving our efforts to engage Veterans in our research?***

### 4.1.2 *Methods for collecting feedback*

---

Once you have identified the kind of feedback you want, then you can think about the best approach to gathering it. The table below provides an overview of different methods for data collection and the kinds of questions that are best suited for each method. You will find example documents listed in **Section 6.6 – Evaluation Materials** of this Toolkit.

Feedback Method	Purpose	Example Documents
<b>Survey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May be used to collect Veteran and/or investigator feedback</li> <li>▪ Standardized</li> <li>▪ Used at set points in time</li> <li>▪ Useful for board QI</li> <li>▪ Useful for quantitative evaluation</li> <li>▪ May be used in feedback loop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tampa CINDRR Member Survey</li> <li>▪ Denver COIN-MIRECC Member Survey</li> <li>▪ Denver COIN-MIRECC Pre-Post Member Survey</li> <li>▪ Portland COIN Member Survey</li> <li>▪ Portland COIN Investigator Survey</li> <li>▪ Denver COIN-MIRECC Investigator Follow-up Survey</li> </ul>
<b>Focus Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Useful approach for collecting Veteran feedback</li> <li>▪ Allows for group comfort and idea sharing</li> <li>▪ Useful for board QI</li> <li>▪ Useful for qualitative board evaluation</li> <li>▪ No set points in time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May modify interview guide examples for Focus Group format</li> </ul>
<b>One-on-one conversation/ Interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May be used to collect Veteran and/or investigator feedback</li> <li>▪ Useful for board QI</li> <li>▪ Useful for qualitative board evaluation</li> <li>▪ No set points in time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Portland COIN Member Interview Guide</li> <li>▪ Denver COIN-MIRECC Member Interview Guide</li> <li>▪ Portland COIN Investigator Interview Guide</li> <li>▪ Denver COIN-MIRECC Investigator Interview Guide</li> </ul>

#### 4.1.3 *When and how often to collect feedback:*

There are a number of options for collecting feedback from engagement group and research team members. Consider the timeliness of the input you need and the resources you have available to collect, analyze and interpret the feedback.

- **End of meeting:** Capturing feedback immediately following a meeting is useful for understanding meeting processes and tone, individual comfort or concerns, topic understanding and initial levels of engagement between Veterans and researchers.
- **Pre-Post:** Capturing Veteran feedback around levels of engagement with the researcher may be useful for understanding if meetings are moving projects and researchers towards deeper levels of engagement. For example, how do Veterans feel about levels of engagement in a project immediately before a meeting with

an investigator? Do their feelings change after the investigator has notified them of changes to the project based off the Veteran feedback?

- **Post Meeting (1 week to 1 month):** Allowing time before collecting feedback after a meeting gives Veterans and/or researchers a chance to reflect on the meeting. This also gives researchers time to make initial alterations to their projects based off the input they received, which can then be communicated back to the Veterans at the next meeting.
- **Annually:** Collecting feedback annually from Veterans may result in general feedback about processes rather than project specific feedback. This may be a good opportunity for the use of focus groups or one-on-one interviews to explore the significance of participation and engagement. Feedback from researchers at this point allows for more proximal outcomes from engagement to potentially surface in research studies. Changes to and results of studies could be elicited and communicated to Veterans, reinforcing the feedback loop.

## 4.2 Identifying New Opportunities for Veterans and COINs

---

*“It doesn’t take much. We have given out certificates to our Veteran Engagement Group members at the Center’s Research Conference, and one Veteran had the idea to get I CARE pins for the group members. These little things can go a long way and are easy to do.” [HSR&D Investigator]*

### 4.2.1 Recognition of contributions of Veterans to research

Just as professional researchers receive recognition for the value of their contributions, Veteran and community research partners should receive recognition. This may include compensation for their time, effort, and expertise – a topic covered elsewhere in this toolkit. It can and should include other forms of recognition and reciprocity on the part of VA and academic researchers.

While we cannot prescribe what forms of recognition are offered to Veteran collaborators, we can tell you from experience that it will take some commitment in terms of your mindset, time, and funds. In addition, many forms of recognition will require some forethought, as you will need to ask your Veteran and community collaborators about their preferences regarding use of their names, photos, etc. in project reporting and dissemination efforts.

Researchers and Center leadership should approach recognition of Veterans’ contributions to the research enterprise in the same way they do with that of other research team members and junior investigators, including mentorship and guidance on how individuals can frame their contributions in ways that benefit them in valued areas of life.

## *Examples*

Dr. Gala True, who has spent the past 10 years conducting VA funded community based participatory research with Veterans and families, uses a simple spreadsheet to track Veteran collaborators preferences for being cited or acknowledged publicly, including how they would want their name to appear in any dissemination products. She also asks each individual to indicate whether they are willing to be contacted by press or others for comments on the work they do with VA research. The spreadsheet includes a brief professional bio for each Veteran partner, which is developed in collaboration with each individual Veteran and updated yearly. She also tracks acknowledgements, activities, and contributions for each individual for two purposes. The first purpose is to keep track in case an individual wants to cite their contributions in a CV, resume, or application for school, a scholarship, or a job. The second purpose is to help the VA research team ensure that opportunities to take part in dissemination activities and be recognized publicly for their contributions are spread equitably among Veteran partners. She has also adopted the practice of writing up a brief reference for every dissemination product in which Veterans and community collaborators are involved, and sending it out to all partners with clear guidance on how the reference may be used in a professional bio, resume, or CV.



*PI Gala True interacts with visitors to the From War to Home photovoice exhibition as part of dissemination of this HSR&D research. <https://www.va.gov/fromwartohome/>*

Below, we give some additional concrete examples from VA and non-VA centers and projects in hopes they will help guide and inspire you:

- ***Acknowledgements by name in presentations, papers, and other dissemination efforts.*** This can be in the form of a slide on a presentation or in the acknowledgement section of a paper or report and is comparable to how you would typically acknowledge research team members who are not co-authors or co-presenters but made a significant contribution to the work being reported.
- ***Consider Veteran collaborators as co-presenters and/or co-authors on dissemination products.*** This builds individual Veteran and community capacity for knowledge creation, allows them opportunities to practice and hone skills related to communication of research findings, and enhances reach and impact of research findings.
- ***When possible, arrange for an honorarium or reimbursement for travel for the Veteran presenter from the host organization.*** Veterans involved in your research may appreciate the opportunity to be co-presenters at invited lectures, professional conferences, and public events. Ask if there are funds available to compensate Veteran partners as guest speakers at some level. This is comparable to the honoraria that are offered to academic guest speakers. It is important to be transparent with Veteran partners about such funds—that they may not always be available, how much the amount will be when it is available, and any possible tax implications if an honorarium is accepted.



*Research participant in 'From War to Home' photovoice pilot presenting HSR&D research along with PI, Gala True.*

## Research & Development



| [All Streamed Sessions](#) |

Veteran Speaker: Richard Barbato



Richard Barbato, speaking at the 2017 VA HSR&D/QUERI Annual Meeting, about the contributions of Veterans to research. Mr. Barbato is the co-chair of the Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research's (CHOIR) Veteran Stakeholder Council. His talk can be viewed here:

[https://www.hsr.d.research.va.gov/meetings/2017/streamed\\_sessions/veteran\\_speaker.cfm](https://www.hsr.d.research.va.gov/meetings/2017/streamed_sessions/veteran_speaker.cfm)

- ***In the case of professional conferences, it is possible to ask the conference organizers to waive registration fees for Veteran co-presenters.*** Some conferences may have scholarship opportunities to cover travel funds for Veteran and other community presenters—it is worth asking about this possibility, and if you are on the board of a professional organization, you may consider proposing this to the organization in the future if no such scholarships are currently available.
- Some Veteran engagement groups recognize the contributions of their Veteran members through ***certificates of recognition or other awards or commendations***. In addition, Veteran participants who go through research training or other learning activities as part of their membership on a Veteran engagement group should receive a training certificate acknowledging acquisition of new knowledge or a skill set.
- Many Veterans are pursuing educational and career opportunities. Research investigators and Center leadership can support these efforts through recognition of the Veteran's contribution to research by ***writing a letter of recommendation or serving as a professional reference when the Veteran is applying for an educational program, scholarship, unpaid internship, or professional employment***.

- A new and emerging form of recognition is a *University appointment for Community Faculty that formally recognizes the contributions of patient-community research collaborators*. For example, Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science has established an academic appointment process for Community Faculty.

#### 4.3 Shift in Roles – from providing input (responsive) to identifying opportunities (proactive)

---

Veterans who serve on Veteran Engagement boards may be interested in taking on different responsibilities as part of their service to the group or to research in general. Examples of Veterans becoming research advocates are common. This could mean:

- Wanting to take on administrative responsibilities of the group
- Reaching out to other Veterans to get feedback on different experiences in VHA services that may apply to research projects
- Giving out recruitment flyers for research they have partnered on
- Joining the Advisory Board for your individual research Center’s strategic plan
- Joining your VA or University’s IRB
- Presenting, applying for grants, writing manuscripts, etc. with researchers on research they partnered on

Shifts in roles should be guided by Veteran interest and be approached in a way that treats them as research peers. For example, some members may get more involved in a particular study out of interest. Some additional roles she/he could play include providing on-going input on instrument development, identifying recruitment opportunities, participating in recruitment efforts (if approved by IRB), and reviewing research findings. Your job as a leader of the Engagement Group will be to be aware of the interests of members and help match these interests with research opportunities as they arise.

#### 4.4 Ambassadors for VA research

---

Many Veterans say they participate in a specific research study or as a member of a Veteran engagement group in order to better understand VA research in general or to learn more about a particular research project, investigator, or Center. Their goals are often to give input on research studies and guidance to other Veterans in their community. Veterans can be the best ambassadors in terms of vouching for the importance of VA research in general by helping to make clear the connection between research that is conducted at VA and the specific services, treatments, programs and benefits available to Veterans through VA. *To learn more about how some Veterans see themselves as ambassadors for VA research, please listen to these interviews with two Veterans who engaged in a particular VA research project:*

## Veteran Voices



United States Army Veterans Ray Facundo (left) and Lawrence Davidson (right) share their experiences as participants in the VA Health Services Research project, "From War to Home".

[https://www.research.va.gov/for\\_veterans/veteran\\_voices.cfm](https://www.research.va.gov/for_veterans/veteran_voices.cfm)

Of note, both of these Veterans have gone on to build on their engagement in VA research, with Mr. Facundo becoming employed as Program Manager on a VA HSR&D funded MERIT and Mr. Lawrence serving on the Steering Committee of that same project, as well as serving on a VA HSR&D workgroup to develop a proposal for a field-based meeting focused on Veteran engagement in research.

### 4.5 Taking the lead in identifying how and when to share research

There are often existing venues within a community that can be leveraged for sharing research results. There is little literature that documents an evidence base for when and how, but experience with attempting to share research offers some recommendations for “when” and “how” to share research. Some samples of dissemination products are available in [Section 6.7- Dissemination Products](#).

**WHEN** to share research:

- **At existing Veteran events.** These events may be focused on Veterans health and social service needs, such as the Dryhootch Warrior Summit, or purely social gatherings such as remembrance events. Of note, usually Memorial day or Veterans day events have full agendas, but D-Day or Pearl Harbor day events may be less so.
- **At researcher-planned events**, such as a “Study Results Party,” Grand Rounds, or a local research conference.
- **Meetings of Veterans Service Organizations** bring together veterans who are often influential in the Veteran and broader community. There is likely to be interest in seeing locally relevant results at individual post meetings (10-50 Veterans), district meetings (post leaders from a section of a state meet) or State meetings. The conveners may give you time on the agenda, or you may be able to set up a table at a State convention, where you might meet many Veterans.

**HOW** to share research:

- Ensure Veteran contributions are **visible**, yet respectful of differing views. Ask Veterans what they want: For example, “*Would you like to co-present or write with us?*”
- Recognize and appreciate Veteran contributors, internally and/or publicly, with awards, certificates, etc.
- Emphasize authentic bi-directional utility: Research is good for VA *and* Veterans.
- Frame research as a means of delivering better services to fellow Veterans, a way to empower Veterans.

**WHAT** to share:

Remember that different audiences will be interested in different kinds of research information. That typically suggests that one should do a *learner needs assessment* and organize materials to match audience interests. Chances are that at least some Veteran audiences are not very interested in the research methods of a study but rather the “take home” messages. Take for example a study examining the impact of nurse management strategies on hypertension control. They are more likely interested in take home messages about hypertension. So the talk could be 40% information about hypertension management that you view as not research, but including the justification for your study, 10% presenting your study results and how it might affect them, and 50% open discussion about hypertension and VA research. If people want to know why the VA does not provide certain services, or why their health condition is not service connected, try to give them feedback on those issues. You are engaging with them and they are engaging with a VA researcher who is giving them the respect they deserve. You are both winning, even if it is not the exact focus of the conversation you came to engage in.

## 4.6 Helping to expand VA research through community engagement

---

Veterans who do not receive their care at the VA are still a crucial demographic for VA research. It is important for researchers with community engagement experience to help reframe the mission of VA research as an endeavor for ALL Veterans, not just those who are VA service users.

There are many ways to *find and connect* with these Veterans:

- Going to Veteran-friendly events (e.g., you'll find many Veterans at Harley rider events)
- Engaging Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) by presenting VA research results or otherwise engaging with Veterans attending Statewide or District meetings of the VSO.
- Offering to come to Veteran-focused meetings and making presentations on topics of interest to them—the researcher goes to them! The visiting researcher should be helpful and friendly, and willing to answer questions about things not directly related to research or to help them connect with the right person to get their questions answered.
- Many organizations and community service providers are reaching out to Veterans—for example, service dog providers, equine therapists, and other alternative medicine groups. The VA isn't the only place Veterans get care, particularly non-traditional care.
- New Veterans' groups, like the Wounded Warrior Project, reach a different group than do the more traditional VSOs, like the American Legion or Vietnam Veterans of America.

Our research has the potential to be important to all Veterans, as well as to the healthcare systems (VA and non-VA) and community organizations that care for them. Your Veteran Engagement Group can help you identify these different audiences and organizations. They are trusted consultants and important ambassadors to our research.

---

# Section 5: Evaluating

---

*“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted”*  
~ Albert Einstein

## *Evaluation of Veteran Engagement*

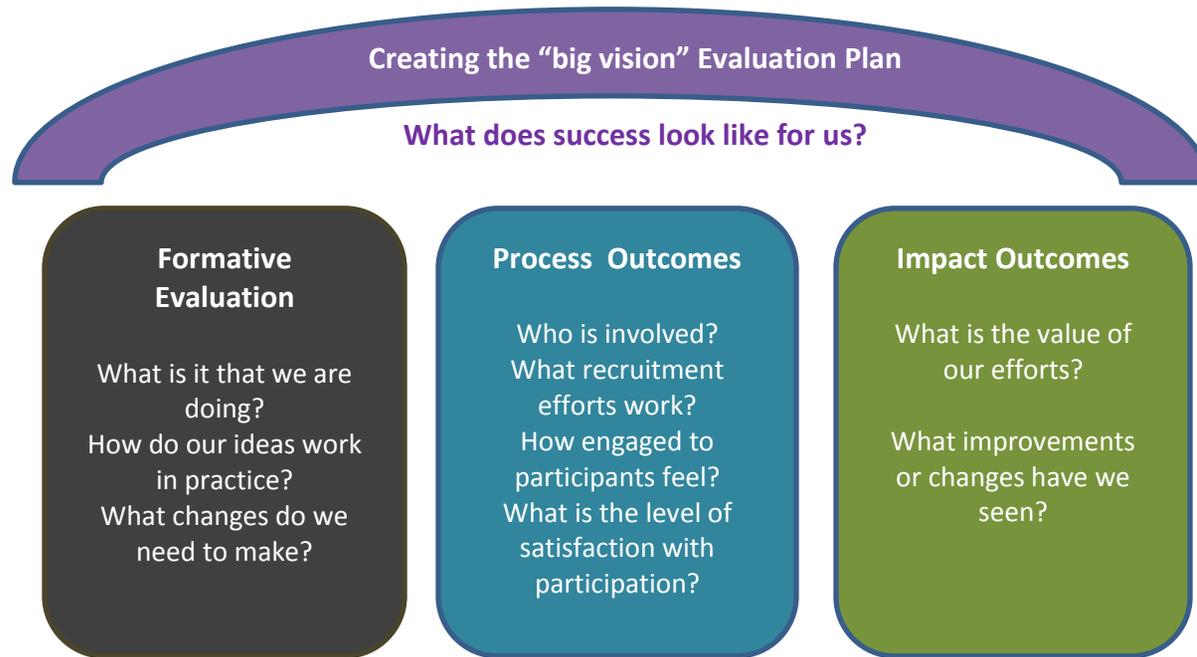
---

Previous sections of this toolkit have hinted at the value of incorporating evaluation strategies into your Veteran engagement initiative. From thinking about the purpose of your Engagement Group and what success looks like to understanding the impact of participation on Veterans, research teams, and your Center as a whole, there are a number of different questions you can ask and approaches you can use. Ultimately, your evaluation questions should be closely linked to the purpose of your engagement group and what you have identified as indicators of success (see Planning section).

In this section you will find guidance on creating a “big vision” to guide your evaluation approach. We recommend working through a process to create a logic model or road map that specifies the activities you are planning, the resources that will go into the effort, and the outcomes (short and long term) you expect to see. Creating a “big vision” road map early in your development process can help inform your planning and implementation efforts. It is also a great way to engage Veterans, researchers, and Center leaders in conversations about what they hope and expect to improve as a result of the Engagement Group. The road map you create is a living document that will likely change as you implement your plans for engagement and assess how they are working.

Once you have your “big vision” evaluation plan drafted, you’ll want to think about the information you need as you progress through stages of implementation to know that a) your vision is being implemented as intended, b) the activities you planned are contributing to this vision, c) you are engaging the participants you anticipated, and d) the benefits are worth the effort for those involved. These questions are really foundational to your overall evaluation as

they help you be able to link your inputs and activities to the outcomes you hope to see. They also help inform adjustments to your efforts so that you can continue to grow and evolve.



This section of the toolkit is organized into four sections. The first is the process for creating the “big vision” evaluation plan. The second (Formative Evaluation), third (Process Outcomes) and fourth (Impact Outcomes) sections narrow in on different types of evaluation questions and strategies that you might develop as your progress through your phases of development and implementation.

### 5.1 Creating the “Big Vision”

The process you work through with your group to create the “big vision” evaluation plan builds on the work you did in the Planning stage to develop a purpose and mission for your Engagement Group. As noted previously, this initial plan is a living document that you should expect to revisit, modify and update as you move through stages of development

and implementation. In the early phases, it can serve as a beacon to your group as you embark on this journey. In later phases it can support quality improvement activities and inform answers to questions related to how and why more inclusive approaches make a difference in the quality, reach and impact of our research.

### *5.1.1 Initial questions*

---

There are some initial questions that you want to discuss with your subcommittee or others who are interested in thinking about the evaluation of your engagement group. These questions are meant as starting points to guide the development of your evaluation plan.

**Purpose:** What is the purpose of your evaluation? What is it that you want to learn?

**Audience:** Who will be the audience for the findings? What kind of information do they want or need? Why?

**Stage of Development:** Where are you in the process of developing your engagement groups? Where can you reasonably expect to be in 1 year? In 3 years? In 5 years?

**Resources:** What resources are available to you to implement your evaluation plan? Who will be responsible for oversight of evaluation activities? How much time is available (or is it a collateral duty)?

The first two questions are really important for creating that big vision so that you can select some initial outcomes and impacts that you would like to see. The stage of development question is designed to help keep you grounded in where you are in the process of development and how much you can know given where you are. The last set of questions about resources is not meant to dampen your big vision, but to help create a realistic vision for what you can actually develop (inputs and activities) AND evaluate (outcomes and impacts).

### *5.1.2 Create a Logic Model*

---

Once you work through these questions, we recommend developing a logic model or road map as a visual representation of your “big picture” evaluation plan. Creating a logic model may sound complex, but it is really just a visual depiction of how your intended activities relate to your anticipated outcomes. This is likely something you have already thought of since you aren’t just choosing random activities; you are using your own experience or knowledge of the literature to choose particular activities with the expectation that they will lead to specific outcomes. It is a valuable process as it makes explicit the linkages between activities and the change you hope to see.

## *What is the value...*

### *Of the process:*

The process of creating a logic model is helpful to for generating buy-in and clarifying stakeholders' expectations and goals regarding the work they are embarking on together. It provides an opportunity to talk with Veterans, researchers, Center leaders, and any other key participants about their expectations and interests. These conversations can help clarify your mission, deepen your understanding of what success means to different people, and illuminate assumptions that may need to be discussed and challenged. It highlights gaps in activities (hoped for outcomes that have no activities associated with them) and inefficiencies (planned activities, especially those we particularly like to do, that have no outcomes of interest associated with them).

### *Of the product:*

The “final” product, the logic model, is a valuable communication tool that can quickly convey to others what your Engagement Group does and hopes to achieve. It is also incredibly helpful for planning realistic and useful evaluation activities. It is important to note that your logic model reflects your *theory* of what will happen, not necessarily what *actually* happens. Because of that, logic models should be considered dynamic documents that need to be revisited periodically and reevaluated against any new knowledge or changes that have occurred. Instead of your logic model being called a ‘final’ product, it is probably better to think of it as the latest draft.

There are a number of on-line resources available to support your development of a logic model. A link to these resources is included at the end of this section. Here we provide a broad overview of the process that may be enough to get you started.

## *How do you develop a logic model?*

---

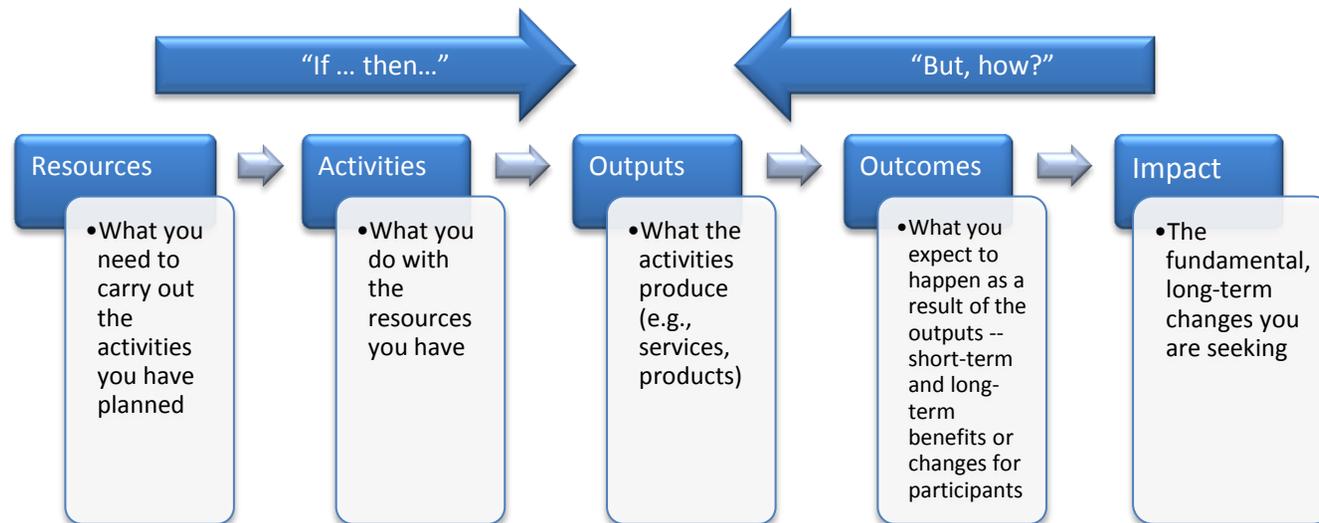
Facilitating the development of a logic model involves asking yourself and any early partners a series of questions. This line of questioning may start with broad questions such as:

- What does “successful” engagement look like from the point of view of different stakeholders (e.g., individual researchers, research centers, operational and clinical partners, individual Veterans, Veterans as a community)?

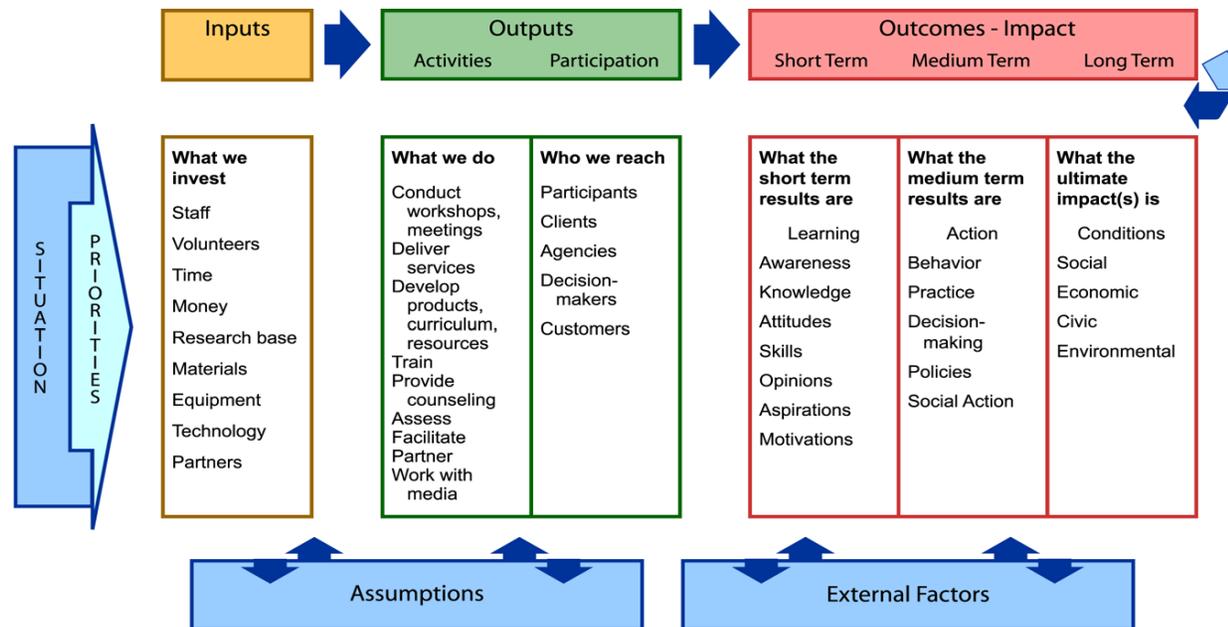
And then move on to a more specific line of questions, such as:

- In [5 years], what will it look like if we achieve our desired outcome? *This is asking about the impact.*
- What needs to change prior to that in [3-5 years] in order for that Impact to be achieved? *This is asking about long-term outcomes.*
- What needs to change prior to that in [2-3 years] in order for those long-term outcomes to be achieved? *This is asking about intermediate-term outcomes.*
- What needs to change prior to that in [0-2 years] in order for those intermediate-term outcomes to be achieved? *This is asking about short-term outcomes.*
- Activities: What activities have to happen in order for those short-term outcomes to be achieved?

This is a helpful visual for guiding this conversation:



If you start with the impact, you move from right to left and continually ask yourselves 'But, how will that happen?' If you start with activities, you move from left to right and make a series of "If-Then" statements. It is traditional to start with the impact, though in reality it is a little like sailing, tacking back and forth between "But, how" questions and "If-then" statements. The timeline is highly dependent on your particular activities and could be significantly truncated from the example given.



*Enhancing Program Performance with Logic Models, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Feb. 2003*  
[https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guides/results\\_chain/logic\\_models](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guides/results_chain/logic_models)

Having a one-page visual representation of your overarching vision, activities, outcomes, and assumptions will help guide your evaluation plan. You do not have to measure every outcome that you hope to achieve. However, it is useful to have this big picture as you proceed through stages of development. It serves as a quick reference for bringing on new people and getting them oriented to the initiative.

Additional resources on logic model development include:

- **Logic Model Development Guide** developed by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- **Logic Model Workbook** developed by the Innovation Network
- **How to Develop a Program Logic Model:** presentation developed by the Corporation for National & Community Service

## 5.2 Formative Evaluation

---

It might be tempting to jump right into evaluating your Veteran Engagement initiative. Given that most of us are working with limited resources, you want to make sure that you are evaluating your initiative (inputs and activities) as it is intended to be implemented. Often in the early launch period, things do not work out as intended or modifications need to be made to your inputs and activities. If you are just getting started, we recommend starting with a formative evaluation.

### 5.2.1 *What is Formative Evaluation?*

---

Formative evaluation is a way to gather timely information that can inform and improve your work. It can help you understand what it is you are doing and reflect on whether or not this is aligned with plans and expectations.

### 5.2.2 *Key Formative Evaluation questions include:*

---

- How are the activities we developed to recruit and engage Veterans being implemented?
- Are the inputs (staffing, communication, materials) sufficient for the activities we developed?
- What do people think about the activities we have designed? Are there things we can do to improve our efforts to engage Veterans in research?
- How prepared do research teams feel to engage Veterans in conversations about their research and how prepared are Veterans to provide input?
- What else should we be doing that we haven't thought about to make the experience better for all participants and/or to make sure our activities are suited to the outcomes we hope to achieve?

### 5.2.3 *Approach*

---

Formative evaluation is often performed while a program is still being developed. Typically, a small number of individuals provide feedback so that you can identify any improvements that are needed or design elements that work well.

#### 5.2.4 *Common methods include:*

---

**Surveys** are useful methods for getting feedback on how your processes are working. For example, you can survey Veterans or other stakeholders to gauge how satisfied they are with the organization of your meetings, communication leading up to and during the meetings, how input is received, and strategies for sharing how their input was received. Research team members can also be surveyed to assess satisfaction with the communication leading up to and during the meeting, the usefulness of input, and recommendations for preparing other research team members for meetings.

**Interviews:** For more in-depth feedback on the approach you have developed for engaging Veterans, you can opt to get feedback by talking with participants one-on-one or as a group. Similar questions to those you ask in surveys can be used to guide conversations. You can also ask specific questions about aspects of your approach that are working well and/or not working as well. Interviews provide a nice opportunity to elicit recommendations for improvement. They are, however, more resource intensive.

**Observations** can also be conducted to assess how meetings are running, levels of engagement among group members, and dynamics between research team members and Veterans.

#### 5.2.5 *From Analysis to Action*

---

Our recommendation is to keep your questions brief and targeted so that you can quickly synthesize information and incorporate what you learn into your structure and organization. Go back to your original formative evaluation questions and review what you wanted to learn. Look over the data you have gathered. Identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. Discuss which recommendations are reasonable and feasible to act upon. Consider how you can incorporate these changes into your structure and organization. Identify the changes or modifications you are going to act on and document your plans.

Depending on your time and resources, you may go through another review and feedback cycle after you implement changes to determine whether or not they led to desired improvements. The need for this may depend on the extent of the changes made. You may also consider incorporating similar feedback questions into subsequent phases of your evaluation efforts to determine whether or not there have been improvements or changes.

Once you are confident that your mission is aligned with your activities and input, you may feel like it is time to start focusing on measuring outcomes.

## 5.3 Process Evaluation

---

In order to ensure that your group's work does not end before it has truly begun, the first focus of your evaluation efforts may be on the *process* of successfully engaging veterans and researchers in this work. This is not an inconsequential step; if the veterans and researchers do not like this work and/or find it hard to remain engaged there will be no actual Engagement Group to evaluate further.

### 5.3.1 Satisfaction with Engagement

---

Collecting some simple measures of satisfaction with the process (of which there are many facets) and barriers and facilitators to engagement can be useful for continually improving the quality of your Engagement Group activities. You may consider measuring the extent to which the meetings achieve known benchmarks for the experience of collaborative work (example benchmarks can be found in the Wilder Collaboration Survey or PCORI's WE-ENACT). This type of data collection is considered a best practice and many sites with the most successful Engagement Groups collect these types of process measures regularly.

**Example process measures:**

<b>Engagement Group Members</b>	
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of people present at each meeting</li> <li>• Consistency of participation in and across meetings</li> <li>• Perception that meetings are interesting</li> </ul>
Satisfaction with experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall satisfaction with being involved in group</li> <li>• Perception that input is valued</li> <li>• Would recommend involvement in the group to others</li> </ul>
Feedback on organization of meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception that meetings are well organized</li> <li>• Perception there is enough time to discuss topics</li> <li>• Perception that materials are useful in preparing people for meetings</li> </ul>
Meeting facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception that meetings are well facilitated</li> <li>• Facilitator ensures that everyone has a chance to voice their opinion</li> <li>• Facilitator has the right skills to ensure that the group is able to meet its goals for each meeting</li> </ul>
<b>Research Team Members</b>	
Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of research teams who sign up to present their work to the engagement group</li> <li>• Number of research teams who present multiple times</li> </ul>
Valuable Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception that the input elicited is valuable</li> <li>• Discussion with the engagement group leads to new thinking or ideas</li> </ul>
Feedback on organization of meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception that meetings are well organized</li> <li>• Perception of the facilitator’s skills in keeping the meeting on-track</li> </ul>

(Survey samples are available in [Section 6.6 – Evaluation Materials](#))

### 5.3.2 *Is what you are doing useful?*

Another important early step in the development and implementation of your Engagement Group is setting up tools to document the engagement strategies and activities that are taking place. If you conducted a formative evaluation you may have already started this process. Continuing to collect this type of process data will be valuable for determining your own best practices for engaging veterans in research and, in the event you collect outcomes data, will be necessary for articulating the activities that were associated with your outcomes of interest. These tools can be simple and often takes the format of paper or electronic logs that systematically document activities implemented, content shared, attendance rates, etc.

<b>Recruitment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Documentation of how Veterans are recruited</li><li>• Strategies or outreach efforts</li><li>• Characteristics of individuals who agree to be in engagement groups</li><li>• Experience with recruitment efforts</li></ul>
<b>Meetings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Days and times that meetings are held</li></ul>
<b>Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Types/content of trainings offered</li><li>• Frequency of trainings</li><li>• Characteristics of training facilitators</li></ul>
<b>Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Characteristics of people playing a leadership role</li><li>• Roles and responsibilities of leaders</li></ul>
<b>Decision-making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Types of decisions made</li><li>• Documentation of how decisions are made</li></ul>
<b>Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Modes of communication with engagement group members</li><li>• Modes of communication between engagement group members and research team members</li></ul>
<b>Dissemination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Materials shared with engagement groups</li><li>• Types and formats of information shared with other Veterans</li><li>• Frequency of dissemination</li></ul>

Collecting and periodically reviewing process data can help you maintain an awareness of the various strategies you have developed to get your Engagement Group up and running. It can provide you with concrete information such as trends in participation and outreach activities. Importantly, these types of data can help you reflect on why your engagement efforts are successful or not.

## 5.4 Outcome Measures

---

When you are ready to evaluate outcomes related to your engagement group, return to the logic model you originally drafted and determine which outcomes are most relevant *and* feasible at your stage of development. You may not be able to measure all of the outcomes you have identified as important. Resources are finite, so you need to focus your evaluation activities. The logic model shows what your activities can be expected to change, *within a given timeframe*. Therefore your logic model is most helpful in figuring out *when it* is feasible to measure particular outcomes. Outcomes such as changes in clinical health measures may be what all the stakeholders are ultimately hoping to achieve, but the logic model will show that those types of outcomes are generally a number of years in the future. Therefore, creating short term evaluation goals around measuring clinical health outcomes would not be realistic or feasible. Logic models can be a helpful tool for communicating this to others.

It is important to note that measurement of engagement outcomes is still evolving. In our review of the literature, we have observed that, to date, measurement of engagement efforts and initiatives has largely focused on pre-implementation, context and process. There is still much work to be done on measures of short-term (proximal) and long-term (distal) outcomes.

### 5.4.1 Selection

---

You will want to think about selecting outcomes measures that are feasible for you to measure in the timeframe you are working with. Some outcomes may require a baseline measurement in order to determine changes over time. This may or may not be feasible depending on the developmental stage you are in when you are ready to measure outcomes.

*Example Outcome Measures include:*

	Short term	Long term
Veterans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge about the research process</li> <li>• Increase in capacity to contribute to research ideas</li> <li>• Increased perception in the value of VA research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement group members see themselves as ambassadors to VA research</li> <li>• Increase sense of empowerment to contribute to the research process</li> <li>• Sense of shared ownership over the research process</li> </ul>
Research Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of improved quality of research questions and design</li> <li>• Perceived value of introducing new perspectives in the development of research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater proportion of grant proposals funded</li> <li>• Increase in dissemination of research findings to Veterans, Care Partners, and others</li> </ul>
VA Health Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VA supports quality research that is meaningful and relevant to Veterans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research informs policy changes to improve the quality of care, types of services, organization of systems</li> </ul>

In [Section 6- Literature and Selected Readings](#) you will find a links to a number of articles about patient engagement in research. The strength of this literature is that there are well-defined frameworks for engagement and anticipated outcomes for different types of stakeholders. However, for most outcomes there are few agreed-upon and validated measures. The following graphic presents a few measures that some have used to measure different outcomes associated with patient engagement in research.

What do you want to measure?	Try This Measure	What it Covers	Reference (including links)
Trust, shared decision-making, perceived benefits	Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory	Measures how collaboration is working	<a href="#">Mattessich P, Murray-Close M, Monsey B. (2001). <i>Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory</i>. St. Paul, MN: Wilder Research.</a>
Influence on project, satisfaction	We-ENACT	Assesses nature and impact of engagement	PCORI
Sustained Engagement	Community Engagement in Research Index	Tracks levels of engagement of different partners	<a href="#">Khodyakov D, Stockdale S, Jones A, et al. On Measuring Community Participation in Research. <i>Health education &amp; behavior</i>. 2013;40(3):346-354. doi:10.1177/1090198112459050.</a>
Capacity	Interorganizational Network Survey (ION)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪formal agreements</li> <li>▪joint activities</li> </ul>	<a href="#">Wendel M, Prochaska JD, Clark HR, et al. Interorganizational Network Changes Among Health Organizations in the Brazos Valley, Texas. <i>Journal of Prevention</i>, April 2010.</a>
Processes	HMORN Patient Engagement Workbook	Documents processes and details of engagement	<a href="#">Madrid S, Wright L. Healthcare Systems Research Network.</a>

Note: Measurement of outcomes associated with Veteran engagement in research is an area of potential for growth and development. There are many VA colleagues who are interested in collaborating on measurement development if you are interested.

#### 5.4.2 Data collection feasibility:

---

The ideal evaluation and what is possible, given the resources available, is often not the same thing. It is important when designing your evaluation to consider what it will take to conduct the evaluation activities.

#### 5.4.3 Choosing indicators:

---

Outcomes are often phrased in a general way that are not amenable to measurement so outcomes have to be translated into indicators. For example: a more traditional health services indicator for the outcome “Veterans experience better health” may be “60% of the veterans with uncontrolled diabetes reduce their A1c levels to below 8% within 6 months.” You can imagine the challenge of creating reliable indicators for the outcome “Veterans have an increased understanding of the research process.” What is an indicator of “understanding the research process?” Without established or agreed upon measures, most of us may rely on self-reported perceptions. Other outcomes, such as “decrease in the average length of time from study conclusion to dissemination” is possible to examine more objectively, but it will require baseline and follow up data collection and many discussions to come to consensus around what constitutes key concepts, such as “study conclusion” and “dissemination.”

In creating useful and streamlined evaluation plans, it is important to know what indicators are meaningful for your stakeholders and to have some sense of the difficulty you would experience in trying to gather the data related to those indicators. To determine the feasibility of your evaluation activities, ask yourself and your partners:

- What **resources** will be needed to collect any measures, manage the data, and conduct analysis, and reporting of findings? Will additional funding be needed to provide these resources? Who will be responsible for the evaluation (e.g., only the researchers, researchers and partners)?
- What level of **response burden** is acceptable for different stakeholders when it comes to completing measures? (e.g., how many questions/questionnaires can you reasonably expect different stakeholders to complete, and how often?)

### 5.5 Disseminating your Evaluation Findings

---

As you develop your evaluation plan you will want to keep your audience in mind. You may have multiple audiences, some who will review evaluation data and support quality improvement efforts. Others will be interested in outcomes associated with engagement.

Some important questions to consider include:

- How do you plan to use any findings from outcomes measures? How will you disseminate or share findings, and to which audiences (internal and external)?
- What will you do with “negative” findings (e.g., if you find out that some members of the Engagement Group feel disempowered during meetings, or that some researchers do not appreciate the feedback they receive from the Engagement Group)?
- Who is responsible for sharing findings? How will you assure accuracy in reporting?

Having these discussions in advance of your data collection efforts can increase transparency of your process and reduce concerns with bias or selectivity.

## 5.6 Ethical Considerations

---

Evaluation activities associated with your Veteran Engagement board will likely lead you to question whether or not your activities are in the realm of research or quality improvement. This will vary based on your evaluation questions, design, and use of the data. Here are some good resources to help you think through the kind of work you are doing with your evaluation and the potential to bring this work up for more formal review with your facility’s institutional review board. If you have questions, we recommend talking with the chair of your board to seek additional guidance.

QUERI Program: <https://www.queri.research.va.gov/tools/QI-Ethics-Toolkit-Guide.pdf>

For more information, see the 2018 cyberseminar [by Hamilton and True](#) and consult the corresponding reading list [here](#).