

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

4.1.3 When and how often to collect feedback:

There are several 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.

On the next page, we give some additional concrete examples from VA and non-VA centers and projects in hopes they will help guide and inspire you.



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/>

- ***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

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

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 & Development



2017 HSR&D/QUERI National Conference

Accelerating Innovation and Implementation in Health System Science

July 18-20, 2017

Hyatt Regency Crystal City

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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.hsrd.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".

Of note, both of these Veterans have gone on to build on their engagement in VA research, with Mr. Facundo becoming employed as Project Manager on various VA funded studies, 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.