

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
2020 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report**

I. Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing:

- a. Carrie McVicker, Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary
- b. Prevolia Harper, Deputy Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary
- c. Coordinator: Vivian Drake, Staff Assistant, Office of the Executive Secretary

The Department's Administrations and Staff Offices also provide continued support to VA's Plain Language efforts.

II. Explain what specific types of agency communications you have released by making them available in a format that is consistent with the Plain Writing guidelines:

VA has a dedicated responsibility to fulfill President Lincoln's promise "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan" by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's Veterans.

VA is committed to tailoring communications to better inform and respond to our diverse Veteran population in a timely manner. VA implements this by simplifying our correspondence, using plain language to communicate with Veterans, and validating or obtaining feedback, such as surveys, to ensure it is easy for the intended audience to understand us.

VA continues to improve, accountability, communication and cross functional collaboration throughout the organization. VA tailors customer experience training for employees so they will be more sensitive to, and understanding of, the diversity of our Veteran population.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, VA implemented an aggressive public health and communication response to protect and care for Veterans, their families, health care providers, and staff. This includes connecting with our customers and employees in creative and innovative ways such as leadership messages, our website, social media channels, and involvement in the community. It has been important to maintain consistent and relevant communications that address' current concerns about the pandemic as well as VA's services and benefits. An example of plain writing during COVID-19 are *Coronavirus FAQs: What Veterans Need to know* at <https://www.va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions> and *VA Charting the Course: Maintaining Continuous Services to Veterans and Resuming pre-COVID-19*

Operations plan at <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5443> or <https://www.va.gov/opa/docs/VA-Charting-the-Course-FINAL-05072020.pdf>.

VA has issued several types of communications to the public in a format that is consistent with the Plain Writing Act. The VA Welcome Kit <https://www.va.gov/welcome-kit/> is a great example of VA's plain writing effort.

Other examples include:

Benefits:

- Veterans Experience Office News – <https://www.va.gov/ve/pressreleases/summary.asp>
- The VA Welcome Kit Press Release – <https://www.va.gov/VE/pressreleases/2019100801.asp>
- Benefits content on VA.gov's improved website (over 10 million average monthly users); <https://www.va.gov>
- Letters to almost 200,000 Veterans regarding fiscal stewardship
- Claims development letters to VA applicants clarifying what is needed to process their claims
- Benefits fact sheets and brochures – <https://www.va.gov/benefits/factsheets.asp>
<https://vaww.blog.va.gov/heyvba> (internal)
- VA forms
- Surveys
- Blog posts
- GovDelivery bulletins (emails)
- VA's video scripts and descriptions – <https://www.youtube.com/c/VAVeterBenefits>
- Social media posts; <https://www.facebook.com/VeteransBenefits>
<https://twitter.com/vavetbenefits>; and <https://www.instagram.com/vbabenefits/>
- Letter to Funeral Directors of VA National Cemeteries resuming committal services halted by COVID-19 pandemic – <https://www.cem.va.gov/alerts.asp>
- COVID-19 Alert – <https://www.cem.va.gov/alerts.asp>
- Frequently Asked Questions – <https://www.va.gov/burials-memorials/pre-need-eligibility/>
- Pre-Need Eligibility for Burial in a VA Cemetery – <https://www.cem.va.gov/cem/faq.asp>
- Veterans Employment Services Offices Fact Sheet – https://www.vaforvets.va.gov/vaforvets/docs/FactSheet_12-11-2017.pdf
- Training and Resources – <https://www.vaforvets/va/gov/vaforvets/JobSeekers/resources/Pages/Training-and-Resources.asp>
- Center for Minority Veterans fact sheet; and quarterly newsletters – <https://www.va.gov/centerforminorityveterans/newsletter/index.asp>

Health/Community Care:

- Understanding Your VA Patient Statement – https://www.va.gov/HEALTHBENEFITS/resources/publications/IB10-691-understanding_your_VA_patient_statement.pdf#
- Urgent Care webpage – https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/Urgent_Care.asp
- Quick Start Guide – Urgent Care – <https://www.va.gov/urgent-care-quick-start-guide.pdf>
- Urgent Care Infographic – <https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/programs/Urgent-Care-Infographic.pdf>
- Copayments – Financial Hardship – https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/revenue_ops/Financial_Hardship.asp
- Children of Women Vietnam Veterans brochure – https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/pubfiles/brochures/CWVV_brochure_508c.pdf#
- Homepage – <https://www.va.gov/communitycare/>
- General Community Care webpage – https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/General_Care.asp
- Quick Start Guide – Understanding Community Care – <https://www.va.gov/community-care-quick-start-guide.pdf>
- Community Care eligibility fact sheet – https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/pubfiles/factsheets/VA-FS_CC-Eligibility.pdf#
- Veteran Community Care Fact Sheet – www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/pubfiles/factsheets/VHA-FS_mission-Act.pdf
- Filing a Claim for Veteran Care page – https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/revenue_ops/Veteran_Care_Claims.asp

III. Inform agency staff of Plain Writing Act's requirements:

The Office of the Executive Secretary (EXECSEC) reviewed its mission and vision to make clear its strategic plan to guide our work in being an example of public service professionalism and efficiency. The EXECSEC goal is to contribute to VA's positive message in supporting Veterans; optimize VA information technology investments to improve process efficiency; advance program mission goals; provide world-class customer service; and to ensure VA provides clear, reliable, and timely information that responds to customer requests. EXECSEC reinvigorated and streamlined its current congressional letter process as well as developed strategies on process improvements. Plain writing is supported in VA's updated Style Guide and Action Officer training.

- a. In May 2019, EXECSEC kicked off its Action Officer training for VA correspondence representatives, subject matter experts, leadership and new employees on VA format, writing, and standards on correspondence to internal and external stakeholders. Training incorporates tips from the Plain Language

Guide. The purpose of the training is to provide necessary training and tools needed for staff to independently provide a consistent quality product, reduce return of work and increase on-time rate for correspondence requiring the Secretary's signature. EXECSEC Reviewers also provided training for targeted staff or as refresher training. As of August 2020, EXECSEC has provided 57 training sessions for approximately 1,300 employees. Action Officer training is a permanent training activity to ensure that employees fully understand the importance of writing to our audience and how to do it effectively.

- b. EXECSEC, in collaboration with VA administrations and key program offices, recently revised the Department's new Style Guide that mirrors the standards of a single style resource, with VA-specific exceptions. The revised Style Guide is user friendly and includes templates to be used by VA program offices. While the Style Guide relies heavily on Associated Press style, it includes the requirements for writing in Plain Language for use of tone and voice. EXECSEC launched the new Style Guide on its website and in its Action Officer training.

Information on the Plain Language Act is posted on the Department's external websites and available at the following links: <http://www.va.gov/> and http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp.

IV. Training:

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Employee Education System (EES) partners with VA, VHA program offices and Veterans Integrated Service Networks to provide quality workforce education and training. They continue to evaluate its courses to ensure that they offer high-quality training to all staff. EES provides 9 courses for plain language on its Talent Management System and other blended methods such as classroom or audio conference. The Formal Writing Using Plain Language module, a two-hour web-based training, that presents a practical approach to understanding Plain Language is the most robust with approximately 3,400 employees having completed this course. There are other targeted or locally developed internal plain language training provided within staff offices, such as plain language writing techniques to be used when creating and maintaining locally created website information; and VHA Office of Executive Correspondence's 3 ½ hour, in-person training class, on the principles of plain writing principles and the Plain Writing Act of 2010.

V. Ongoing compliance/sustaining change:

The Department has embarked upon and accelerated its transformation in the way it provides services for its Veterans nationally. The VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION Act) significantly changes VA health care through its mandates to enhance services offered to Veterans, their families, caregivers, survivors and the Nation.

VA is deploying one of the largest information technology systems innovations that will empower its workforce to ably serve Veterans in the field with world-class customer service and improved Veteran outcomes.

The Secretary's prime directive is customer service where VA is putting Veterans and their families at the center of every process. Making the Veterans' experience better is a significant milestone in the future focus at VA. VA's goal is that a Veteran receives an exceptional experience whenever they interact or visit with VA.

VA will communicate with Veterans and their families and seek their input early and consistently throughout their service and life journey to better understand what new services they need and learn what changes we must make to improve outcomes for Veterans. The Veterans journey map is an example of VA's improvements in how we will relate to, interact with, and serve our Veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. Additional information can be found at:

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Veteran-Journey-Map.pdf> and <https://www.va.gov/playbook/downloads/vaci-project-toolkit.pdf>

VI. Agency's plain writing website

- a. VA's Plain Language website – http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp
- b. Contact Us page – http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp
VAPlainLanguage@va.gov
- c. Link from VA's homepage – <http://www.va.gov/>
- d. Link from VA's Open.gov page – <http://www.va.gov/open/>
- e. Links to Compliance reports – http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp
2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 reports are available.
- f. Links to OMB and PLAIN – http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp

VI. Customer Satisfaction Evaluation after Experiencing Plain Writing Communications:

VA continues to use feedback from our customers, diverse Veterans advocacy groups and employees and VA.gov user surveys to transform the way information is presented to Veterans – creating a better information architecture for our audience. VA uses its website to be Veteran-centric and user friendly by providing seamless and personalized forms, tools, online communications, and information. Our efforts have led to a higher percentage of trust from Veterans.

VA used feedback and best practices to establish a web content style guide located at <https://design.va.gov/content-style-guide/> to provide consistent delivery of information

across the enterprise. For example, VA made improvements based on information provided by Veterans and other stakeholders through our Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS) to improve their VA web experience.