

Summary Report of Findings

Veteran Customer Experience Human-Centered Design (VCX-HCD)

U.S. Department of Labor
Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS)
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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	1
Research Background.....	2
About JVSG and AJCs	2
About CX	2
About HCD in Research.....	3
Research Overview.....	3
Research Outputs	4
Focus on Underserved Veteran Populations	5
The Path Forward – Preliminary Recommendations	6
Appendix: Disclaimers.....	9

Research Background

The Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) has embarked on a Human-Centered Design (HCD) project to better understand the veteran customer experience (CX) with American Job Centers (AJCs) throughout the country, specifically services provided through the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) program. VETS has partnered with veteran-owned consulting firms, Technical Assent and Powell Strategies (hereinafter referred to as the "CX team"), to gather the perspectives of those involved in the veteran employment journey. Together, they will create a holistic picture of program successes and challenges, with the goal of creating solutions to better support all involved. The first phase of this project included 10 months of research utilizing HCD methodologies to explore and uncover key factors influencing the veteran job-seeker journey from the perspectives of veterans and stakeholders.

Aligning with the federal government's 2030 Trust Building initiative¹, the findings presented below will help VETS equip its staff and partners with tools, technology, and methods to serve veterans effectively and empathetically.

About JVSG and AJCs

JVSG is a formula grant program through which DOL VETS provides funding to 54 State Workforce Agencies (SWAs). With this funding, SWAs hire employees responsible for providing "individualized career and training-related services to veterans and eligible persons with significant barriers to employment (SBEs), and for helping employers fill their workforce needs with job-seeking veterans."² These employees and the services they provide are part of AJCs (often referred to as "Career One-Stop Centers," among other names), which also house a variety of programs funded and overseen by different government agencies that are administered locally. These additional programs and services administered at AJCs may include job-training and support services in addition to programs such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), among others.

About CX

CX encompasses the interactions between an organization and its customers and can be divided into five key metrics: equity and transparency of the process; ease and simplicity; efficiency and speed; employee interactions; and effectiveness and perceived value of the service. Ideally, these five elements work together to optimize customers' experiences, improving their overall view of the organization and better enabling them to reach their goals.

The importance of CX has been recognized across the federal government. In December 2021, President Biden signed the *Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government*, ensuring that the federal government serves its

¹ "Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government." *The White House*. 13 Dec 2021

² "Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) Primer." *National Veterans' Training Institute*. September 2018

customers better by putting people at the center of everything it does. VETS is committed to improving CX for its customers in support of both this initiative and those accessing JVSG services.

About HCD in Research

HCD is a problem-solving approach that is suitable for tackling organizational challenges and improving CX. Unlike quantitative research methodologies, HCD leverages ethnography, actively prioritizing the needs and perspectives of end-users by engaging them in all stages of research and design. This ensures researchers have a comprehensive, empathetic understanding of the challenges at hand and do not rely on their own assumptions about the causes of such challenges or their potential solutions.

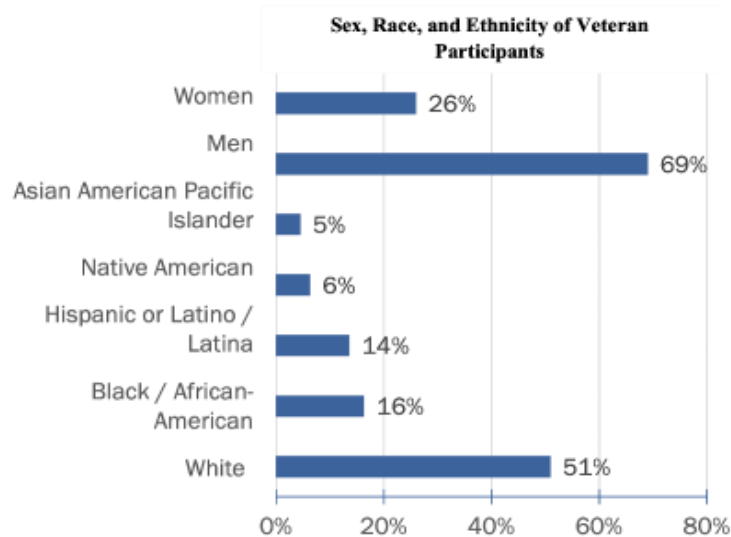
As such, the research findings presented here are primarily qualitative in nature and are not intended to be representative of every experience at every AJC across the nation. Rather, qualitative research is thematic and meaning-based. It uncovers perceptions, needs, pain points, norms, and shared stories. It is well-suited for exploring broad-stroke experiences, unpacking complexities, and understanding the deeper ‘why’ behind problems that can help organizations identify actionable opportunities and solutions. The findings are directional and context-dependent and may not necessarily be generalizable to broader populations or situations.

Notably, these findings and conclusions represent the synthesis of information collected during the research phase only. Not everyone with whom researchers spoke was an expert in the programs discussed. While the findings do not necessarily reflect the views, policies, or endorsements of the federal government or any of its agencies, the data and information presented represent the lived experiences of the research participants.

Research Overview

To understand the goals and challenges of VETS and JVSG customers, the researchers addressed the following research aims: uncover service gaps, explore resource utilization, and understand the employment landscape. These focus areas and subsequent findings will inform the development of novel solutions in future project phases as the researchers work with partners and JVSG customers to collaboratively determine and implement drivers of positive change. The CX research team used several research methods to achieve their objectives, including desktop research, focus groups, veteran and stakeholder interviews, in-person observation of JVSG service delivery at AJCs, and workshops to validate initial findings. The researchers also employed quantitative methods to analyze content from veteran interviews to identify demographic trends regarding customers’ experiences.

Researchers spoke with hundreds of individuals across the country, including veterans, DOL staff, JVSG staff, SWA members, and representatives from community organizations, among others.



Note: This data visualization excludes individuals who did not share data on race or sex. Furthermore, these categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, a veteran could identify as a man, AAPI, and Black or African American. As such, these percentages do not sum to 100 percent.

Additionally, the CX team traveled to at least one AJC in each of the six DOL regions to engage with stakeholders and better understand the delivery of AJCs and JVSG services. Ensuring a representative and diverse sample was of critical importance as well. To this end, demographic targets were set, including 71 percent of veterans interviewed indicating experiencing at least one SBE, as well as targets for historically underserved populations. Other demographic considerations included gender, disability rating, sexual orientation, years of service, and use or non-use of AJCs and JVSG services, among others.

Research Outputs

The CX research team's efforts resulted in three outputs: a Report of Findings highlighting nine key insights and corresponding opportunities, five veteran personas, and a veteran job-seeker journey map. The insights provide a foundation for future phases of the project. Aligning the insights to the five components of CX and exploring the associated opportunities allows for designing creative and collaborative solutions that prioritize the customer and address the challenges uncovered during the research phase. The insights, sorted by CX element, are below:

CX Element: Equity and Transparency of the Process

- 1. Eligible populations could be better connected to AJC resources:** *There is a missed opportunity to connect certain populations with employment support resources. This lack of connection may exacerbate the challenges veterans face in finding employment.*
- 2. JVSG eligibility requirements cause inconsistent service delivery and deter eligible veterans:** *Eligible veterans are deterred from utilizing JVSG for several reasons, including fear of being*

denied services, “taking services” away from other veterans, and/or misunderstanding the eligibility criteria.

CX Element: Effectiveness and Perceived Value of the Service

3. **Inconsistent practices across AJC staff may impede service delivery:** *Inconsistent execution of duties, within and across AJCs, may hinder the ability of AJC and JVSG staff to best serve veterans.*
4. **Veterans do not view AJCs as a go-to resource:** *Visiting an AJC is not thought of as a logical step in the job search and many veterans are not aware of the value or existence of AJCs.*
5. **Negative experiences with other aspects of government influence AJC utilization:** *A veteran who has a negative experience with a government service may feel discouraged from using other government services, including AJCs.*

CX Element: Efficiency and Speed of the Process

6. **Community partnerships are effective but underutilized:** *Despite evidence of best practices in community partnerships, they are not a universal component of JVSG.*

CX Element: Employee Interaction

7. **Individual DVOPs impact veterans’ experiences:** *Veterans’ experiences with DVOP services depend heavily on how each DVOP interprets and implements the job duties and program policies, especially regarding outreach and support to overcome significant barriers to employment.*

CX Element: Ease and Simplicity of the Process

8. **Location impacts access:** *Public transportation is lacking in rural communities, impacting access to both AJCs and jobs. Additionally, the local economy, especially in rural communities, can significantly hinder access to quality jobs. JVSG cannot eliminate these challenges on its own. It will require the collaboration and partnership of other stakeholders in the employment ecosystem.*
9. **Military experience complicates the job search:** *Discerning which parts of military skills or identity serve a veteran well (and conveying this to an employer) versus which ones might be a hindrance, is difficult for veterans and interferes with their job search.*

Focus on Underserved Veteran Populations

To better understand the experience of various populations, researchers assessed the frequency of each insight across historically underserved veterans within the research sample. First, LGBTQ+ veterans were disproportionately impacted by insight one. Insight two disproportionately impacted Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) veterans, Hispanic or Latino/Latina veterans, women-identifying veterans, and unemployed veterans. Insight three disproportionately impacted Hispanic or Latino/Latina veterans, Black/African American veterans, those with a disability rating of 30 percent or higher, and Vietnam-era veterans, while insight four disproportionately impacted Black/African American veterans and those with a disability rating of 30 percent or higher. Veterans disproportionately affected by insight five include AAPI veterans, veterans with a disability rating of 30 percent or higher, women-identifying veterans, and LGBTQ+ veterans. Those who were disproportionately impacted by insight six include veterans with a disability rating of 30 percent or higher, women-identifying veterans, and unemployed veterans. Groups who were overrepresented in insight seven include Black/African American veterans and unemployed veterans. The only group disproportionately impacted by insight eight was Native American veterans, who accounted for 18

percent of unique mentions of this insight but only 5 percent of the veterans interviewed. Finally, insight nine disproportionately impacted veterans with a disability rating of 30 percent or higher.

The Path Forward – Preliminary Recommendations

Preliminary recommendations provide a framework for developing and refining solutions aligned with an HCD informed CX Strategy. They acknowledge the evolving organizational needs, opportunities, and challenges. These recommendations represent high-level initiatives and are not final directives. They will evolve with the project as feedback is incorporated from stakeholders and the DOL VETS Executive Working Group. Additionally, they will adapt as DOL VETS defines and determines the organizational strategy for its CX initiatives.

Recommendation Categories:

In formulating our recommendations, enhancements to the JVSG service experience address both immediately addressable pain points (quick wins) and more complex systemic challenges (medium/long-term recommendations).

- **Quick Wins** – Focus on programmatic changes or initiatives that require minimal investment and can yield near-term, incremental positive impact on customer experiences.
- **Medium/Long-Term Recommendations** – Aim to address systemic programmatic changes or initiatives that necessitate strategic coordination and will take longer to have a measurable impact on customer experiences.

Leveraging Recommendations:

These recommendations should serve as a framework for identifying, developing, and planning coordinated solution workstreams. Achieving this will necessitate collaboration with DOL VETS to ensure alignment with the Multi-Year CX Strategy and DOL VETS strategic planning efforts, along with engagement with other stakeholder collaboration and co-creation activities.

Quick Wins:

The following have been strategically selected to address symptomatic pain points where we believe DOL VETS could achieve the most significant immediate impact. Our assessment of pressing challenges within the organization, with concurrence from the DOL VETS Executive Working Group, guided the selection of these initiatives, and both quick wins are currently underway.

- **Quick Win #1: Encourage grantees to conduct targeted marketing and outreach for JVSG.** Investigate current opportunities presented by [Training and Guidance Letter \(TEGL\) 3-23](#). Develop and distribute templated marketing information to reinforce consistent communications across American Job Centers (AJCs).
- **Quick Win #2: Introduce JVSG and emphasize Priority of Service (POS) during Transition Assistance Program (TAP).** Develop content to incorporate into the DOL TAP curriculum that

describes JVSG eligibility, informs on POS, and assists veterans in locating their closest American Job Centers (AJCs).

Although these Quick Wins have a near-term focus, they provide additional context and insight into the greater JVSG CX challenge. As such, they have an important connection to the medium/long-term recommendations.

Medium/Long-Term Recommendations:

The following medium/long-term recommendations outline solutions for possible execution in future phases of the project. Note: While numbered for readability, the recommendations are in no order of preference.

Recommendation #1: Enhance TAP to enable behavior change, increasing Transitioning Service Member (TSM) and veteran engagement with AJCs and JVSG services. Explore factors outside of the curriculum that could better facilitate a smoother transition by equipping transitioning service members with the necessary tools, knowledge, and skills to engage with AJCs and CareerOneStop.org resources to achieve their career goals.

Recommendation #2: Create and distribute tools that inform screening at AJCs, enable tailoring of customized intake services and the development of pathways to employment. These tools build the knowledge and skills needed for curating a meaningful experience to ensure consistency and quality for veteran job seekers across regional, state, and local ecosystems.

Recommendation #3: Establish a foundational system to advance CX excellence and nurture sustainable organizational learning. This recommendation consists of the three components described below. This three-legged approach highlights channel, content, and community that together support a common set of CX behaviors and vocabulary.

a. Channel: Develop a JVSG CX portal on the DOL VETS website. A JVSG CX portal will serve as an engagement and professional development vehicle for JVSG staff and grantee partner organizations. It complements the National Veterans Training Institute (NVTI)³ and Workforce GPS⁴ resources, offering a vehicle to aggregate educational resources together into one platform. It is a space, vehicle, and destination that complements training by building a community forum in support of onboarding, talent development, and encouraging thought leadership.

b. Content: Facilitate institutional knowledge sharing. This is a practice-excellence-based development opportunity targeting JVSG staff and other front-line personnel that support JVSG objectives and leverage JVSG resources. It is as much about aggregating knowledge through engagement as it is about distributing best practices.

c. Community: Develop a DVOP/Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) “Spotlight” program. A spotlight approach serves to acknowledge good CX work and achievements in the form of accessible and genuine storytelling. These narratives are more than an announcement. They provide context of recognizable moments (e.g., model CX behaviors), encourage engagement, and provide a model to adapt to regional/state variations and local community needs.

³ <https://www.nvti.org/>

⁴ <https://www.workforcegps.org/>

Recommendation #4: Evolve the veteran-focused entry point on the DOL VETS website. Serves as a curated information hub for transitioning service members, veterans, their spouses, and their families to build a baseline understanding of how to engage with JVSG resources, navigate eligibility, and connect with the broader veteran employment ecosystem.

Recommendation #5: Develop a partner organization engagement platform. This coordinated outreach vehicle and toolset will better enable JVSG staff to connect and collaborate with internal VETS partners and external partner organizations (e.g., employers, non-profits, professional organizations, VSOs, and partner agencies).

Appendix: Disclaimers

Disclaimers

- The results represent programmatic inputs and insights from a specific time period (October 2022- June 2023). The report reflects input from select federal and state agencies during this time and may not address all current programmatic inputs, nor adjustments and improvements that may have occurred after the research concluded.
- All participants spoke with the CX-HCD team willingly and consented to their stories being anonymously shared.