Request for Approval under the "Generic Clearance for Improving Customer Experience (OMB Circular A-11, Section 280 Implementation)" (OMB Control Number: 2900-0876)

TITLE OF INFORMATION COLLECTION: Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS) Vet Center Survey

PURPOSE

The Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS) Vet Center Survey is designed to measure client satisfaction at a number of stages in their experience with RCS provided by local Veteran Centers. The Office of Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS), within VHA, consists of 300 Vet Centers, 83 Mobile Vet Centers, 20 Outstations, over 1000 Community Access Points (this number fluctuates dependent on demand), and the Vet Center Call Center (877-WAR-VETS). RCS is tasked with providing eligible individuals with direct counseling, outreach and referral. Vet Center services are available in all 50 States, District of Columbia, Puerto Rice, U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and American Samoa.

Veterans experience data is collected by using an online transactional survey disseminated via an invitation email sent to randomly selected Veterans. The data collection occurs once per week after clients have qualified for one of the stages of the survey. The survey is brief and contains general Likert-scale (a scale of 1-5 from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) questions to assess customer satisfaction, as well as questions assessing the knowledge, speed, and manner of the interaction. After the survey has been distributed, recipients have two weeks to complete the survey and will receive a reminder email after one week.

DESCRIPTION OF RESPONDENTS:

At each of five stages the Veteran can be invited to take a survey that is specific to the stage they are in. The stages include:

- Initial Engagement: New clients who have at least one visit
- Client Intake: New clients who have completed the intake process
- Client Counselor Relationship/Client Growth: Clients who have an assigned counselor and are receiving treatment
- Unengaged or suspended clients: Clients who are no longer receiving services at the Vet Center
- Reengaged clients: Clients who are reengaging with Vet Centers after a hiatus of more than 90 days

All clients that qualify for the survey over the time period of the survey qualify to participate in the survey. The purpose of this report is to document the survey methodology and sampling plan of the RCS Vet Center Survey.

CERTIFICATION:

I certify the following to be true:

- 1. The collection is voluntary.
- 2. The collection is low-burden for respondents and low-cost for the Federal Government.
- 3. The collection is non-controversial and does <u>not</u> raise issues of concern to other federal agencies.
- 4. Personally identifiable information (PII) is collected only to the extent necessary and is not retained.
- 5. Information gathered is intended to be used for general service improvement and program management purposes.
- 6. The collection is targeted to the solicitation of opinions from respondents who have experience with the program or may have experience with the program in the future.
- 7. All or a subset of information may be released as part of A-11, Section 280 requirements on performance.gov. Additionally, summaries of the data may be released to the public in communications to Congress, the media and other releases disseminated by VEO, consistent with the Information Quality Act.

Name:

 Dan Ostrow, VSignals Implementation Lead, Veterans Experience Office, VA, (414) 690-8587

To assist review, please provide answers to the following question:

Personally Identifiable Information:

- 1. Will this survey use individualized links, through which VA can identify particular respondents even if they do not provide their name or other personally identifiable information on the survey? [X] Yes [] No
- 2. Is personally identifiable information (PII) collected? [] Yes [X] No
- 3. If Yes, will any information that is collected be included in records that are subject to the Privacy Act of 1974? [] Yes [] No [N/A]
- 4. If Yes, has an up-to-date System of Records Notice (SORN) been published? [] Yes [] No [N/A]

Gifts or Payments:

Is an incentive (e.g., money or reimbursement of expenses, token of appreciation) provided to participants? [] Yes [X] No

BURDEN HOURS

Estimated Quarterly Population: 136,742 (from sample plan) Estimated Quarterly Population: 4 x 136,742 = 546,968

Category of Respondent	No. of Respondents per month	No. of Respondents per year	Average Participation Time (X minutes =)	Burden (÷ 60 =)
Individuals or Households	4,800 monthly	57,600 annually	4.6 average	4,416
Totals	4,800 monthly	57,600 annually	4.6 average	4,416

Please answer the following questions.

1.	Are you conducting a focus group, a survey that does not employ random
	sampling, user testing or any data collection method that does not employ
	statistical methods?

Yes	
No	X_{-}

If <u>Yes</u>, please answer questions 1a-1c, 2 and 3.

If \overline{No} , please answer or attach supporting documentation that answers questions 2-8.

- a. Please provide a description of how you plan to identify your potential group of respondents and how you will select them.
- b. How will you collect the information? (Check all that apply)
 [] Web-based or other forms of Social Media
 [] Telephone
 [] In-person
 [] Mail
 [X] Other- E-mail-based surveys
- c. Will interviewers or facilitators be used? [] Yes [X] No
- 2. Please provide an estimated annual cost to the Federal government to conduct this data collection: __\$13,000____
- 3. Please make sure that all instruments, instructions, and scripts are submitted with the request. This includes questionnaires, interviewer manuals (if using interviewers or

facilitators), all response options for questions that require respondents to select a response from a group of options, invitations given to potential respondents, instructions for completing the data collection or additional follow-up requests for the data collection.

-Done

- 4. Describe (including a numerical estimate) the potential respondent universe and any sampling or other respondent selection methods to be used. Data on the number of entities (e.g., establishments, State and local government units, households, or persons) in the universe covered by the collection and in the corresponding sample are to be provided in tabular form for the universe as a whole and for each of the strata in the proposed sample. Indicate expected response rates for the collection as a whole. If the collection had been conducted previously, include the actual response rate achieved during the last collection.
 - Please see Statistical Sample Plan in the Appendix.
- 5. Describe the procedures for the collection of information, including:
 - a. Statistical methodology for stratification and sample selection.
 - b. Estimation procedure.
 - c. Degree of accuracy needed for the purpose described in the justification.
 - d. Unusual problems requiring specialized sampling procedures.
 - e. Any use of periodic (less frequent than annual) data collection cycles to reduce burden.
 - Please see Statistical Sample Plan in the Appendix.
- 6. Describe methods to maximize response rates and to deal with issues of nonresponse. The accuracy and reliability of information collected must be shown to be adequate for intended uses. For collections based on sampling, a special justification must be provided for any collection that will not yield "reliable" data that can be generalized to the universe studied.
 - Please see Statistical Sample Plan in the Appendix.
- 7. Describe any tests of procedures or methods to be undertaken. Testing is encouraged as an effective means of refining collections of information to minimize burden and improve utility. Tests must be approved if they call for answers to identical questions from 10 or more respondents. A proposed test or set of tests may be submitted for approval separately or in combination with the main collection of information.
 - Please see Statistical Sample Plan in the Appendix.

8. Provide the name and telephone number of individuals consulted on statistical aspects of the design and the name of the agency unit, contractors, grantees, or other person(s) who will actually collect or analyze the information for the agency.

• Statistical Aspects:

o Mark Andrews, Statistician, Veterans Experience Office, VA. (703) 483-5305

• Collection and Analysis:

- Evan Albert, Dir. of Measurement and Data Analytics, Veterans Experience Office, VA, (202) 875-9478
- Dan Ostrow, VSignals Implementation Lead, Veterans Experience Office, VA, (414) 690-8587
- Martha Von Bank, Acting NSS Director, RCS Vet Center, VA, (734)-395-0658



RCS Vet Center Survey Sampling Methodology Report

Prepared by

Veteran Experience Office

Version 1 May 2021

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Executive Summary

The RCS Vet Center Survey is designed to measure client satisfaction at a number of stages in their experience with Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS) provided by local Veteran Centers. The Office of Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS), within VHA, consists of 300 Vet Centers, 83 Mobile Vet Centers, 20 Outstations, over 1000 Community Access Points (this number fluctuates dependent on demand), and the Vet Center Call Center (877-WAR-VETS). RCS is tasked with providing eligible individuals with direct counseling, outreach and referral. Vet Center services are available in all 50 States, District of Columbia, Puerto Rice, U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and American Samoa. At each of five stage the Veteran can be invited to take a survey that is specific to the stage they are in. The stages include:

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All clients that qualify for the survey over the time period of the survey qualify to participate in the survey. The purpose of this report is to document the survey methodology and sampling plan of the RCS Vet Center Survey.

Veterans experience data is collected by using an online transactional survey disseminated via an invitation email sent to randomly selected Veterans. The data collection occurs once per week after clients have qualified for one of the stages of the survey. The questionnaire is brief and contains general Likert-scale (a scale of 1-5 from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) questions to assess customer satisfaction, as well as questions assessing the knowledge, speed, and manner of the interaction. After the survey has been distributed, recipients have two weeks to complete the survey and will receive a reminder email after one week.

This report describes the methodology used to conduct the RCS Vet Center Survey. Information about quality assurance protocols, as well as limitations of the survey methodology, is also included in this report.

Part I – Introduction

A. Background

Enterprise Measurement and Design (EMD) is the Analytics and Human Centered Design (HCD) division within the Veterans Experience Office (VEO). The EMD team is tasked with conducting transactional surveys of the Veteran population to measure their satisfaction with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) numerous benefit services. Thus, their mission is to empower Veterans by rapidly and discreetly collecting feedback on their interactions with such VA entities as NCA, VHA, and VBA. VEO surveys generally entail *probability* samples which only contact minimal numbers of Veterans necessary to obtain reliable estimates. This information is subsequently used by internal stakeholders to monitor, evaluate, and improve beneficiary processes. Veterans are always able to decline participation and have the ability to opt out of future invitations. A *quarantine* protocol is maintained to limit the number of times a Veteran may be contacted, in order to prevent survey fatigue, across all VEO surveys.

Surveys issued by VEO are generally brief in nature and present a low amount of burden to Veterans. A few targeted questions will utilize a human centered design (HCD) methodology, revolving around seven:

- Overall: (1) Satisfaction, (2) Confidence/Trust
- Service: (3) Effectiveness/Quality
- Process: (4) Ease/Simplicity, (5) Efficiency/Speed, (6) Equity/Transparency
- People: (7) Employee Helpfulness

Questions will focus on a specific aspect of a service process; spanning communication, applying for benefits, deliberation, and/or receipt of benefits. Structured questions directly address the pertinent issues regarding each surveyed line of business. The opportunity to volunteer open-ended text responses is provided within most surveys. This open text has been demonstrated to yield enormous information. Machine learning tools are used for text classification, ranking by sentiment scores, and screening for homelessness, depression, etc. Modern survey theory is used to create sample designs which are representative, statistically sound, and in accordance with OMB guidelines on federal surveys.

The Veteran Experience Office (VEO) has been commissioned by the Office of Readjustment Counseling Services to measure the satisfaction and experience of clients who have received services through Vet Centers. Sampled clients will be contacted through an invitation email. A link will be enclosed so the survey may be completed using an online interface, with customized client information. The survey itself will consist of a handful of questions developed through a human-centered design process; focusing on such elements as trust, emotion, effective, and ease with the services they received.

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B. Basic Definitions

Coverage	The percentage of the population of interest that is included in
	the sampling frame.
Measurement Error	The difference between the response coded and the true value
	of the characteristic being studied for a respondent.
Non-Response	Failure of some respondents in the sample to provide responses
	in the survey.
Transaction	A transaction refers to the specific time a Veteran interacts
	with the VA that impacts the Veteran's journey and their
	perception of VA's effectiveness in caring for Veterans.
Response Rate	The ratio of participating persons to the number of contacted
	persons. This is one of the basic indicators of survey quality.
Sample	In statistics, a data sample is a set of data collected and/or
	selected from a statistical population by a defined procedure.
Sampling Error	Error due to taking a particular sample instead of measuring
	every unit in the population.
Sampling Frame	A list of units in the population from which a sample may be
	selected.
Reliability	The consistency or dependability of a measure. Also referred
	to as standard error.

C. Application to Veterans Affairs

This measurement may bring insights and value to all stakeholders at VA. Front-line VA leaders can resolve individual feedback from Veterans and take steps to improve the customer experience; meanwhile VA executives can receive real-time updates on systematic trends that allow them to make changes.

- 1) To collect continuous customer experience data from Veterans obtaining services from a Vet Center.
- 2) To help field staff and the national office identify opportunities that may improve the experience of Veterans
- 3) To better understand the reason that Veterans navigating the Vet Center services have a positive or negative experience.

Part II – Methodology

A. Target Population and Frame

The target population of the RCS Vet Center Surveys is all Veterans who have reached a number of stages in the process of receiving services through the network of Vet Centers. For each wave of the survey, the Office of Readjustment Counseling Services will provide VEO a population file including all qualifying clients for the prescribed time period.

B. Sample Size Determination

For a given margin of error and confidence level, the sample size is calculated as below (Lohr, 1999). For population that is *large*, the equation below is used to yield a representative sample for proportions:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z_{\alpha/2}^2 pq}{e^2}$$

where

- $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.95$, which is the critical Z score value under the normal distribution when using a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.05$).
- \mathbf{p} = the estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population, with q=1-p.
 - Note that pq attains its maximum when value p=0.5, and this is often used for a conservative sample size (i.e., large enough for any proportion).
- **e** = the level of precision achieved with the sample. Also referred to as the margin of error (MOE).

For a population that is relatively *small*, the finite population correction is used to yield a representative sample for proportions:

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{n_0}{N}}$$

Where

- n_0 = Representative sample for proportions when the population is large.
- N = Population size.

The margin of error surrounding the baseline proportion is calculated as:

Margin of error =
$$z_{\alpha/2} \sqrt{\frac{N-n}{N-1}} \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}$$

Where

- $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.95$, which is the critical Z score value under the normal distribution when using a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.05$).
- N = Population size.
- \mathbf{n} = Representative sample.
- \mathbf{p} = the estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population, with q=1-p.

At the time of drafting this report, population counts were not available by survey stage. Population counts are available for client visits. The assumption is that a great majority of these cases are client that would qualify for survey 3 (Client Counselor Relationship/Client Growth). As this stage is the core stage of service delivery, this will be where most of the surveys will be focused. For this survey we will target a sample of 2,400 monthly completes to achieve an MOE of +/- 2%. This survey is summarized below

in Table 2a. It expected that the remaining 4 surveys will be relatively small. The sample size for these surveys will be determined by a tiered target detailed in Table 2b. The combined target sample for all 5 survey will be capped at 4,800 responses per month (32,000 monthly invites). If the targets below exceed this amount, the targets will be reduced proportionally across all surveys.

Table 2a. Monthly Population and Sample Targets for Survey 3

	Estimate
Average Monthly Client Visits	124,175
Average Monthly Client Visits with Email Address	65,792
Average Monthly Unique Client Visits with Email Address	57,142
Available Monthly Client Visits (Less 20% Reserved for Other Surveys)	45,714
Available Monthly Client Visits (Less 20% Reserved for Quarantine)	36,571
Monthly Target Survey Completes	2,400
MOE	+/-2%
Response Rate	15%
Monthly Invites	16,000
Sample Rate (of Available Monthly Client Visits (Less 20% Reserved for Other Surveys)	35%

Table 2b. Monthly Sample Targets for Surveys 1, 2, 4, 5.

Average Monthly Unique Visits w/ Email Addresses	Target MOE	Confidence	Minimum Monthly Resp- onses Needed	Response Rates	Minimum Monthly Sample Needed
> 14,228	3.00%	95%	1,068	15%	7,115
> 10,453	3.50%	95%	784	15%	5,227
> 8,003	4.00%	95%	601	15%	4,002
> 6,324	4.50%	95%	475	15%	3,162
> 5,122	5.00%	95%	385	15%	2,562
> 3,608	5.00%	90%	271	15%	1,805
> 2,185	5.00%	80%	164	15%	1,093
> 1,414	6.00%	80%	106	15%	707
> 1,080	7.00%	80%	78	15%	540
<= 1,080	N/A	N/A	78 (or Max)	15%	540 (or Census)

C. Stratification

Stratification is used to ensure that the sample matches the population, to the extent possible, across sub-populations. The sample is stratified by client stage/ survey. The sample will also use implicit sampling to assure that the sample reflects the breakdown by Vet Center, veteran gender and age group within each explicit stratum.

D. Data Collection Methods

The RCS Vet Center Surveys sample will be drawn weekly from population files provided by the Office of Readjustment Counseling Services. The initial survey invites will be sent the following day. After 7 days a reminder invite will be sent and the survey will close 14 days after the initial invitation.

Table 3. Survey Mode

Mode of Data Collection	Recruitment Method	Recruitment Period
Online Survey	Email Recruitment	14 Days (Reminder after 7 Days)

E. Reporting

Researchers will be able to use the VSignals platform for interactive reporting and data visualization. Trust, Ease, Effectiveness, and Emotion scores can be observed for each). The scores may be viewed by facility, specialty, age group, gender, and race/ethnicity in various charts for different perspective. They are also depicted within time series plots to investigate trends. Finally, filter options are available to assess scores at varying time periods and within the context of other collected variable information. Because the lag time between service and survey is so different for the two survey waves, the results will be accessible for each wave separately but not combined.

Recruitment is continuous (once weekly) but the results from several weeks may be combined into a *Monthly* estimate for more precise estimates, which is the recommended reporting level. Monthly estimates may include minor distortions but allow analysts to review scores more quickly and within smaller time intervals. Weekly estimates are less reliable for small domains and should only be considered for aggregated populations. Quarterly estimates will have larger sample sizes, and therefore higher reliability. Initial scores will be delivered unweighted. Weights will be applied after each month of data is collected. Semi-annual and Annual data may be needed to examine smaller facilities, specialties, and/or other subpopulations.

F. Quality Control

To ensure the prevention of errors and inconsistencies in the data and the analysis, quality control procedures will be instituted in several steps of the survey process. Records will undergo a cleaning <u>during the population file creation</u>. The quality control steps are as follows.

- 1. Records will be reviewed for missing sampling and weighting variable data. When records with missing data are discovered, they will be either excluded from the population file or put into separate strata upon discussion with subject matter experts.
- 2. Any duplicate records will be removed from the population file to both maintain the probabilities of selection and prevent the double sampling of the same veteran.
- 3. Invalid emails will be removed.

The survey sample <u>loading and administration processes will</u> have quality control measures built into them.

- 1. The extracted sample will be reviewed for representativeness. A secondary review will be applied to the final respondent sample.
- 2. The survey load process will be rigorously tested prior to the induction of the C&P Survey to ensure that sampled customers is not inadvertently dropped or sent multiple emails.
- 3. The email delivery process is monitored to ensure that bounce-back records will not hold up the email delivery process.

The <u>weighting and data management quality</u> control checks are as follows:

- 1. The sum of the weighted respondents will be compared to the overall population count to confirm that the records are being properly weighted. When the sum does not match the population count, weighting classes will be collapsed to correct this issue.
- 2. The unequal weighting effect will be used to identify potential issues in the weighting process. Large unequal weighting effects indicate a problem with the weighting classes, such as a record receiving a large weight to compensate for nonresponse or coverage bias.

G. Sample Weighting, Coverage Bias, and Non-Response Bias

A final respondent sample should closely resemble the true population, in terms of the demographic distributions (e.g. age groups). One problem that arises in the survey collection process is *nonresponse*, which is defined as failure of selected persons in the sample to provide responses. This occurs in various degrees to *all* surveys, but the resulting estimates can be distorted when some groups are actually more or less prone to complete the survey. In many applications, younger people are less likely to participate than older persons. Another problem is *under-coverage*, which is the event that certain groups of interest in the population are not even included in the sampling frame. They cannot participate because they cannot be contacted: those without an email address will be excluded from sample frame. These two phenomena may cause some groups to be over- or under-represented. In such cases, when the respondent population does not match the true population, conclusions drawn from the survey data may not be reliable, and are said to be **biased**.

Survey practitioners recommend the use of sampling weighting to improve inference on the population. This will be introduced into the survey process as a tool that helps the respondent sample more closely represent the overall population. Weighting adjustments are commonly applied in surveys to correct for nonresponse bias and coverage bias. For example, in many surveys, differential response rates may be observed across age groups. In the event that some age groups are more represented in the final respondent sample, the weighting application will yield somewhat smaller weights for this age group. Conversely, age groups that are underrepresented will receive larger weights. This phenomenon is termed *non-response bias correction* for a single variable. Strictly speaking, we can never know how non-respondents would have really answered the question, but the aforementioned adjustment calibrates the sample to resemble the full population – from the perspective of demographics. This may result in a substantial correction in the resulting weighting survey estimates when compared to direct estimates in the presence of non-negligible sample error (non-response bias).

Because the email population will have different demographics than the overall population, the initial sample will be selected in a manner from the frame so that the final respondent sample resembles the overall population. Stratification may also adjust for non-response (occurring when certain subpopulations are less prone to participate). Targets will be established for every permutation of the following stratification variables.

As such, population values will be collected and recorded by VEO for every data collection period.

The stratification scheme above will result in a representative sample with respect to the full population. Weighting should then be applied so that the sample is more fully matched to the population. Since each of the stratum are, in fact, separate surveys; such *post-stratification weights* would only effect results if the results are being aggregated across surveys.

Since 85% of older Americans utilize email (Choi & Dinitto, 2013), we can presume that a large share of veterans chose not to share their email address with the VA or are simply unaware of that option. It is assumed that the level of satisfaction is not directly related to their email status (Missing at Random). Since age and gender have been observed to be strong predictors of patient satisfaction in other VA surveys, the stratification and weighting methodology outlined above will adequately compensate for any bias introduced by the incomplete frame of population.

If implemented, weighting will utilize cell weights in real time. To make this possible, targets will be based on the previous month's population. With each query on the VSignals platform for each respondent by dividing the target for a cell by the number of respondents in the cell. The weighting scheme will include, where possible all the variables used for explicit stratification, However, cells will be collapsed if the proportion of the population is insufficient to reliably achieve a minimum of 3 completes per month. As a result, weights may be more comprehensive for larger population segments. For instance, in the VA, women are a smaller proportion of the populations. Therefore, woman will have more collapsed cells than men.

As part of the weighting validation process, the weights of persons in age and gender groups are summed and verified that they match the universe estimates (i.e., population totals). Additionally, we calculate the *unequal weighting effect*, or UWE (see Kish, 1992; Liu et al., 2002). This statistic is an indication of the amount of variation that may be expected due to the inclusion of weighting. The unequal weighting effect estimates the percent increase in the variance of the final estimate due to the presence of weights and is calculated as:

$$UWE = 1 + cv_{weights}^2 = 1 + (\frac{s}{\overline{w}})^2$$

where

- \mathbf{cv} = coefficient of variation for all weights w_{ij} .
- $\mathbf{s} = \text{sample standard deviation of weights.}$
- \overline{w} = sample mean of weights, $\overline{w} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{ij} w_{ij}$.

H. Quarantine Rules

VEO seeks to limit contact with Veterans as much as possible, and only as needed to achieve measurement goals. These rules are enacted to prevent excessive recruitment attempts upon Veterans. VEO also monitors veteran participation within other surveys, to

ensure veterans do not experience survey fatigue. All VEO surveys offer options for respondents to opt out, and ensure they are no longer contacted for a specific survey. VEO also monitors Veteran participation within other surveys, to ensure Veterans do not experience survey *fatigue*. Finally, all VEO surveys offer options for respondents to opt out, and ensure they are no longer contacted for a specific survey.

Table 4. Ouarantine Protocol

Quarantine Rule	Description	Elapsed Time
Repeated Sampling for Vet Center Survey	Number of days between receiving online survey, prior to receiving email invitation for a separate Vet Center Survey	30 Days
Other VEO Surveys	Number of days between receiving online survey and becoming eligible for another VEO survey	30 Days
Opt Outs	Persons indicating their wish to opt out of either phone or online survey will no longer be contacted.	N/A

Part III – Assumptions and Limitations

A. Coverage Bias

Since the VEO RCS Vet Center Surveys are email only, there is a large population of patients that cannot be reached by the survey. Veterans that lack access to the internet or do not use email may have different levels of Trust and satisfaction with their service. However, the majority of Veterans that do not share their email addresses do so because they did not have an opportunity to provide the information, or they elected not to share their email address. As such, it is thought that Veterans in this latter category do not harbor any tangible differences to other Veterans who do share their information. In order to verify this, VEO plans to execute a coverage bias study to assess the amount of coverage bias due and derive adjustment factors in the presence of non-negligible bias.

Appendix: References

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