

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

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**TITLE OF INFORMATION COLLECTION:** VA Solid Start Survey

## **PURPOSE**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is responsible for providing and/or managing a wide array of health services and benefits to Veterans and their family members. The VA is committed to supporting servicemembers transitioning from service. The Office of Transition and Development (OTED) within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is responsible for managing the VA Solid Start program which reaches out to Veterans three times within a year after their separation.

The Veteran Experience Office (VEO) is in partnership with VBA on many surveys, but this is the first partnership with the VA Solid Start program. VA Solid Start is an outbound outreach effort carried out by OTED where VA Contact Centers call recently separated veterans multiple times around 90, 180, and 365 days after their separation. During these outreach efforts, qualified VA representatives make sure that recently separated veterans are aware of mental health services as well as additional services and benefits available to them. During this effort, VEO partnered with VBA to measure the satisfaction of Veterans after each of the three call touchpoints with VA Solid Start.

The goal of service level measurements is three-fold:

- 1) To collect continuous customer experience data from VA Solid Start customers
- 2) To help field staff and the national office identify areas for improvement
- 3) To better understand the reasons VA Solid Start customers provide positive or negative feedback

The survey 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. These questions have been mapped to the OMB A-11 Customer Experience drivers. After the survey has been distributed, recipients have two weeks to complete the survey. Invitees will receive a reminder email after one week.

The purpose of this document is to define VEO’s sampling methodology for selecting potential survey respondents for this study. This survey is conducted via random sampling. The sample size for VA Solid Start experience survey was determined so that the reliability of monthly survey estimates is 3.0% margin of error at a 95% confidence level. This report describes the methodology used to conduct the VA Solid Start experience survey. Information about quality assurance protocols, as well as limitations of the survey methodology, is also included in this report.

## **DESCRIPTION OF RESPONDENTS:**



VEO has been commissioned by VBA to measure the satisfaction and experience of customers with their disability compensation claims process with VBA Compensation. VEO proposes to conduct a brief survey on customers who experienced their entire disability claims process. Randomly sampled customers will be contacted through an invitation email. A link will be enclosed so the survey may be completed using an online interface, with customized customer information. The survey itself will consist of a handful of questions revolving around a human-centered design, focusing on such elements as trust, emotion, effective, and ease with the care they received.

**TYPE OF COLLECTION:** (Check one)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Customer Comment Card/Complaint Form          | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Customer Satisfaction Survey |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Usability Testing (e.g., Website or Software) | <input type="checkbox"/> Small Discussion Group                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus Group                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                            |

**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 not 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: Juan Jackson, Enterprise Measurement Project Manager, Veterans Experience Office, VA, (202) 603-4374

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? ☒ Yes ☐ No
2. Is personally identifiable information (PII) collected? ☐ Yes ☒ 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 ☒ No

**BURDEN HOURS**

Category of Respondent	No. of Respondents per month	No. of Respondents Per year	Participation Time	Burden
VA Solid Start	1,109	13,309	5 minutes	1,109 hours
<b>Totals</b>	1,109	13,309	5 minutes	1,109 hours

**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 Yes, please answer questions 1a-1c, 2 and 3.

If 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.
  - VEO has been commissioned by VBA to measure the satisfaction and experience of customers with VA Solid Start. VEO proposes to conduct a brief survey on customers who successfully connected with a VA Solid Start representative. Randomly sampled customers will be contacted through an invitation email. A link will be enclosed so the survey may be completed using an online interface, with customized customer information. The survey itself will consist of a handful of questions revolving around a human-centered



design, focusing on such elements as trust, emotion, effective, and ease with the care they received.

b. How will you collect the information? (Check all that apply)

☐ Web-based or other forms of Social Media

☐ Telephone

☐ In-person

☐ Mail

☒ Other- E-mail-based surveys

c. Will interviewers or facilitators be used? ☐ Yes ☒ 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 collect or analyze the information for the agency.
- Statistical Aspects:
    - Melissa Mitchell, Survey Statistician, Veterans Experience Office, VA. (202) 437-6730
  - Evan Albert, Dir. of Measurement and Data Analytics, Veterans Experience Office, VA, (202) 875-9478
  - Juan Jackson, Enterprise Measurement Project Manager, Veterans Experience Office, VA, (202) 603-474
  - Dawna Quick, Chief, Enterprise Contact Centers, Outreach, Transition and Economic Development, Veterans Benefits Office, VA, (202) 531-3269





# *VA Solid Start*

## *Sampling Methodology Report*

Prepared by  
Veteran Experience Office  
Version 1 March 2023



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## Executive Summary

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is responsible for providing and/or managing a wide array of health services and benefits to Veterans and their family members. The VA is committed to supporting servicemembers transitioning from service. The Office of Transition and Development (OTED) within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is responsible for managing the VA Solid Start program which reaches out to Veterans three times within a year after their separation.

The Veteran Experience Office (VEO) is in partnership with VBA on many surveys, but this is the first partnership with the VA Solid Start program. VA Solid Start is an outbound outreach effort carried out by OTED where VA Contact Centers call recently separated veterans multiple times around 90, 180, and 365 days after their separation. During these outreach efforts, qualified VA representatives make sure that recently separated veterans are aware of mental health services as well as additional services and benefits available to them. During this effort, VEO partnered with VBA to measure the satisfaction of Veterans after each of the three call touchpoints with VA Solid Start.

The goal of service level measurements is three-fold:

- 4) To collect continuous customer experience data from VA Solid Start customers
- 5) To help field staff and the national office identify areas for improvement
- 6) To better understand the reasons VA Solid Start customers provide positive or negative feedback

The survey 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. These questions have been mapped to the OMB A-11 Customer Experience drivers. After the survey has been distributed, recipients have two weeks to complete the survey. Invitees will receive a reminder email after one week.

The purpose of this document is to define VEO's sampling methodology for selecting potential survey respondents for this study. This survey is conducted via random sampling. The sample size for VA Solid Start experience survey was determined so that the reliability of monthly survey estimates is 3.0% margin of error at a 95% confidence level. This report describes the methodology used to conduct the VA Solid Start experience 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

The **Enterprise Measurement and Design** team (EMD) within the **Veterans Experience Office** (VEO) is tasked with conducting transactional surveys of the customer 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 National Cemetery Administration (NCA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). VEO surveys generally entail *probability* samples which only contact minimal numbers of customers necessary to obtain reliable estimates. This information is subsequently used by internal stakeholders to monitor, evaluate, and improve beneficiary processes. Customers are always able to decline participation and can opt out of future invitations. A *quarantine* protocol is maintained to limit the number of times a customer may be contacted over a period of time across all VEO surveys, in order to prevent survey fatigue.

Surveys issued by EMD are generally brief in nature and present a low amount of burden to customers. A few targeted questions will utilize a human centered design (HCD) methodology, revolving around concepts of Trust, Ease, Effectiveness and Emotion. 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.

VEO has been commissioned by VBA to measure the satisfaction and experience of customers with VA Solid Start. VEO proposes to conduct a **brief survey** on customers who successfully connected with a VA Solid Start representative. Randomly sampled customers will be contacted through an invitation email. A link will be enclosed so the survey may be completed using an online interface, with customized customer information. The survey itself will consist of a handful of questions revolving around a human-centered design, focusing on such elements as trust, emotion, effective, and ease with the care they received.



## 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 <i>transaction</i> refers to the specific time a customer interacts with the VA that impacts the customer's journey and their perception of VA's effectiveness in servicing customers.
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 <i>standard error</i> .

## 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 customers 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 to monitor the relative success of programs designed to improve customer experience with VA Solid Start.
- 2) To help field staff and the national office identify need of the specific population they serve
- 3) To better understand why VA Solid Start customers provide positive or negative feedback

## Part II – Methodology

### A. Target Population and Frame

The target population of the VA Solid Start experience survey is all VA Solid Start customers that have successful contacts with a VA Solid Start representative after a touchpoint (90, 180, 365 days).



## 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

- $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.96$ , which is the critical Z score value under the normal distribution when using a 95% confidence level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ).
- $p$  = 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 desired level of precision; Also referred to as **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:

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

Where

- $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.96$ , which is the critical Z score value under the normal distribution when using a 95% confidence level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ).
- $N$  = Population size.
- $n$  = Representative sample.
- $p$  = the estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population, with  $q=1-p$ .

Table 2 depicts the estimated number of unique VA Solid Start customers within a month. Preliminary analysis of this population indicates that approximately **98.75%** of qualifying customers have provided an email address to VA Solid Start. VEO proposes to randomly sample VA Solid Start customers. With current estimates, this would result in 13,308 completed surveys from 166,284 invitations per year. To account for potential estimation errors, improvement in email collection, or changes in business volume; we are requesting approval for a maximum of 14,308 completes annually.

**Table 2. Monthly Population and Survey Figures**

Survey	Estimated Total Population	Approximate Email Population	Available Population <sup>1</sup>	Target Sample	Actual Sample Needed	Expected Response Rate	Error with 95% Confidence	Yearly Actual Sample Needed
<b>VA Solid Start Experience</b>	21,365	20,098	18,988	1,109	13,857	8%	3.0%	166,284

<sup>1</sup> Excluding estimated duplicates and quarantined records (10% loss)

## B. Stratification

Stratification is used to ensure that the sample matches the population, to the extent possible, across sub-populations. The survey will be stratified (or balanced) by VA Solid Start interval or cohort (i.e. which stage or time period the Veteran made a successful contact with a VA Solid Start representative) and by Call Center (location).

## C. Data Collection Methods

The population for the survey will be provided each week by the Office of Field Operations on behalf of the VA Solid Start program. VEO data analysts will access the data and query VBA and VHA data to augment email addresses for Veterans. Email invitations are delivered to all randomly selected customers. Selected respondents will be contacted within 8 days of their interaction. They will have 14 days to complete the survey. Estimates will be accessible to data users instantly on the VSignals platform.

**Table 3. Survey Mode**

Mode of Data Collection	Recruitment Method	Time After Transaction	Recruitment Period	Collection Days
<b>Online Survey</b>	Email Recruitment	Within 8 days of interaction	14 Days (Reminder after 7 Days)	Tuesday

## D. 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 various subgroups 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.

Recruitment is continuous (weekly) but the results from several weeks may be combined into a *quarterly* estimate for more precise estimates, which is the recommended reporting level.

### E. 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 during the population file creation. The quality control steps are as follows.

1. Records will be reviewed for missing data. When records with missing data are discovered, they will be either excluded from the population file when required or coded as missing.
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 customer.
3. Invalid emails will be removed.

The survey sample loading and administration processes will 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 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.

### F. 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**.

While we are not currently planning to weight the data, 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. As a business rule will be implemented to require callers to provide email address, the coverage bias for this survey is expected to decrease. In many surveys, however, 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).

It was reported earlier that the email population comprises 98.75% of the full VA Solid Start population. This is very respectable considering that 88% of US veterans utilize email (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2020). It is assumed that the level of customer satisfaction is not directly related to their email status (Missing at Random).

When implemented, weighting will utilize cell weights in real time. 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:

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

where

- **cv** = coefficient of variation for all weights  $w_{ij}$ .
- **s** = sample standard deviation of weights.



- $\bar{w}$  = sample mean of weights,  $\bar{w} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{ij} w_{ij}$ .

## G. Quarantine Rules

VEO seeks to limit contact with customers as much as possible, and only as needed to achieve measurement goals. These rules are enacted to prevent excessive recruitment attempts upon VA's customers. VEO also monitors participation within other surveys, to ensure veterans and other customers 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 customers do not experience survey *fatigue*.

**Table 4. Quarantine Protocol**

Quarantine Rule	Description	Elapsed Time
<b>Repeated Sampling for VA Solid Start</b>	Number of days between receiving/completing online survey, prior to receiving email invitation for VA Solid Start experience survey	30 Days
<b>Other VEO Surveys</b>	Number of days between receiving/completing online survey and becoming eligible for another VEO survey	30 Days
<b>Opt Outs</b>	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 VA Solid Start Surveys are email only, there is a small population of VA Solid Start customers 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. As such, it is thought that customers 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.



## References

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