



Launching VA MISSION Act Legislation

Award of Excellence

Community Relations — Government

Submitted By: Department of Veterans Affairs; Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Office of Community Care, VHA Office of Communications, Employee Education System and Office of Healthcare Transformation

PRSA

Two-Page Summary

OVERVIEW

To execute a nationwide public relations campaign for launching the Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), communicated broadly and effectively with millions of Veterans, their families, providers, and hundreds of thousands of employees across the largest integrated healthcare system in the United States.

Skillfully navigating a high-pressure, politically controversial environment, VHA's communications team equipped more than 1,100 sites of care with communications resources to successfully operationalize changes in the law by leveraging an integrated approach resulting in the successful launch of a new-and-improved community-based care program and VA's first-ever urgent care benefit, while highlighting the expansion of VA's telehealth services.

The team surmounted challenges in many forms including an extremely short timeline, the dizzying complexity of the law, pulling a cohort of temporarily-assigned employees together to lead efforts, a convoluted communication approval process, impervious organizational silos, and myriad constraints unique to a government entity.

Success relied upon prioritizing the needs of Veterans and VA employees, using approved key messaging across a diverse portfolio of products, and continued reinforcement of messaging.

INSIGHTS AND ANALYSIS (Attachment A)

Under the shadow of the Phoenix VA wait-time crisis of 2014 and the plagued Veterans Choice Program, an important insight was that communicating proactively and transparently about the MISSION Act was key not only to a successful launch but also in restoring and rebuilding trust with Veterans and the public. In preparing its communications plan, VHA conducted a communications audit (**Attachment A1**) that uncovered the following insights:

1. Veterans and VA employees needed a single location to access MISSION Act materials.
2. The team would need to navigate multiple programs in VA headquarters responsible for different parts of the law to create materials.

3. Obtaining approvals of communications would be grueling due to the complexity of topics, sensitivity, and huge impacts of the law.
4. There would be a critical need for messaging alignment in product development.
5. The team needed to address knowledge gaps about the MISSION Act at field sites.

A stakeholder gap analysis (**Attachment A2**) also identified nearly 40 operational areas the team considered when developing products.

PLANNING (Attachment B)

Based on the insights and analysis conducted, the team created both a primary and an internal communications plan for VHA (**Attachments B1 and B2, respectively**) along with a priority alignment model (**Attachment B3**) to align communications directly to VA and VHA strategic objectives. Three main goals were identified:

1. Improve public perception of VA as we move to embrace overarching components of the MISSION Act leading to the June 6th launch date and beyond.
2. Strengthen VA's MISSION Act implementation by aligning efforts to tie to both the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the VHA Executive in Charge priorities in our communications through 2019 and beyond.
3. Make the employees, volunteers, patients, and their families goodwill ambassadors by ensuring VHA communication efforts develop reliable, integrated and approved MISSION Act messaging and products to be used throughout the system from April/May 2019 and beyond, so that we may speak with one clear voice.

For the launch of the new community care and urgent care programs, a separate, supporting communications plan (**Attachment B6**) was developed with specific key messaging, audiences, objectives, risks/mitigation strategies, and how VHA would translate multiple sections of the law for community care into simple topic categories using plain language. The plan included product types, distribution channels, a public-facing toolkit, a timeline (**Attachment B7**) for releasing information, an evaluation approach, and a process flow for developing products.

The budget (**Attachment B9**) for printing, bulk mailing, videos, and promotional items was

roughly <REDACTED> with staff support from existing or temporarily-assigned employees.

EXECUTION (Attachment C)

Execution of the communications plan was swift and robust. A national memo (**Attachment C5**) from VHA's top leader announced "MISSION May" ahead of the launch date, providing field guidance on news releases, town halls, e-mail messages, and reporting requirements.

At the same time, VHA produced and released nationally a series of blogs and fact sheets, graphics, booklets, videos, social media, and messaging through Veteran-facing web platforms such as MyHealthVet, and held live virtual events (**Attachment C10**). The most substantial lift was mailing a letter from the VHA Executive in Charge (**Attachment C12**) and an educational brochure (**Attachment C14**) to 9 million Veterans where the team overcame special procurement rules, funding and supply issues.

The team also stood up a new intranet website (**Attachment C2**) to house all products, including messaging for senior leaders, field sites and local champions, along with education and training resources and promotional displays. Weekly calls with field-based public affairs staff were also part of the coordination effort leading up to June 6, 2019. Challenges were numerous, including:

- Extraordinary level of scrutiny from Veterans, Congress, White House, Veteran Service Organizations, the media, and VA leadership
- An intractable, byzantine communication product approval process (**Attachment B5**)
- Inclination of subject matter experts to focus on creating single products vs. key messaging
- Last-minute changes to key messaging
- Unclear or multiple internal owners for implementing a complicated, far-reaching law
- Seemingly impenetrable layers and silos
- Fierce, politicized public debate over how much care to offer Veterans outside VA

EVALUATION (Attachment D)

VHA's evaluation showed that it was able to broadly meet and exceed its stated communication goals, allowing for a smooth start to the nationwide launch of the VA MISSION Act.

Relative to Goal 1, perception of VA care improved based on positive Congressional reaction to the launch; generally positive and subdued media coverage (**Attachment D5**); with

37,028,356 positive media impressions from just the top 10 hits with 7,710 shares on social media, with a positive sentiment of 79.1% engagements (**Attachment D1**).

Relative to Goal 2, the communications strengthened the rollout of the MISSION Act, allowing for a successful launch, supported by data showing wide access of community care-related materials (**Attachment D7**). This included 34 products being accessed 1,202,554 times, with 764,127 views of eight blog articles, 290,651 views of five new webpages, 67,654 downloads of 14 guides, fact sheets, flyers and infographics, 72,975 attendees of three live webcast events, and 80,125 views of seven videos; plus countless leadership presentations, conference calls with field staff, and the intranet site that garnered more than 63,000 page views in a span of weeks. In addition, on June 6, 2019, VA's *Vet Resources* e-mail-based newsletter to 9,109,819 recipients had 3,795,799 opens with 5,298 Facebook clicks and 1,152 shares of content posted by VHA.

Relative to Goal 3, messaging and products were reliable and integrated based on feedback (**Attachment D7**) indicating 85% of Veterans were informed by June 6, 71% agreeing products were timely, and 100% saying audiences are now informed, but still processing information.

Overall, the team's evaluation found that public communications about the MISSION were highly-effective leading up to and after the launch date, with the public largely informed. However, the crushing amount of information (and training) being released in such a short time—driven by the hard deadline in the law—made it monumentally difficult for employees to read, process, understand and operationalize so much complex information all at once (**Attachment D7**), while the many layers through which information had to permeate made it difficult to prepare staff members and providers. Even so, VHA's outstanding employees across the country rose to the challenge and exceeded expectations, helping restore public confidence in VA.

Working closely with hundreds of key staff across VA, the communications effort was a success in underpinning VA's tremendous efforts to provide Veterans with more access and choices in receiving timely, outstanding health care by June 6, 2019—accomplishing a central goal of Congress and the MISSION Act.