

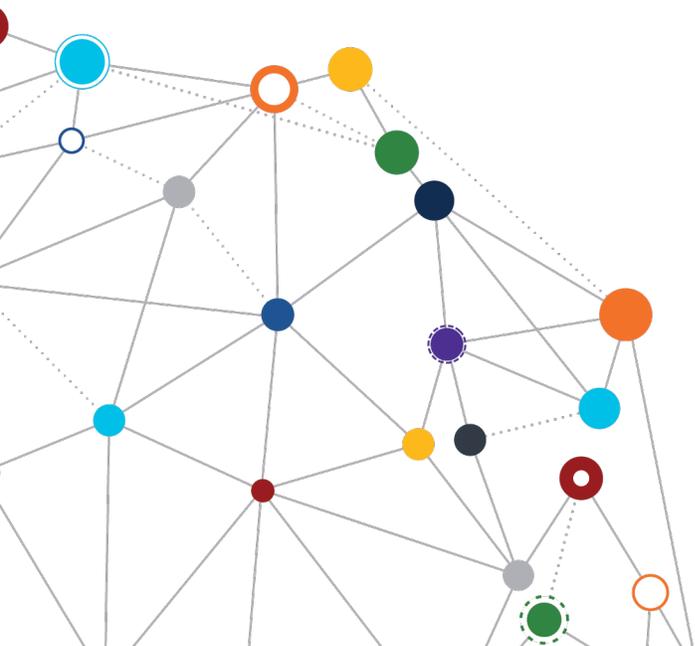
OFFICE OF  
INFORMATION  
AND TECHNOLOGY

# CIO Whitepaper

*Enhancing Transparency and Accountability at VA  
through Digital Innovation*

December 1, 2018 | Camilo J. Sandoval, Executive in Charge

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY



# Enhancing Transparency and Accountability at VA through Digital Innovation

## *VA's Modernization Commitment*

Our core principles—transparency, accountability, innovation, and teamwork—are words that appear often in our reports, our presentations, and our communication with our business partners. We chat with employees about these principles as we conduct town halls around the country. We devote senior leadership meetings to them. We weave them into our interviews with the press and our testimony in Congress.

During a sweeping information technology (IT) transformation that we [kicked off in 2015](#), we called them our “core DNA.” But that did not give a complete picture of how hard it is to institutionalize a change in mindset in an organization as large, as diverse, and as geographically dispersed as ours. So, we find ourselves continually reinforcing them, learning, growing—all the while remaining steadfast in our commitment to these principles while understanding they aren’t “automatic.”

These core principles are extremely important to the success of the transformation we began in 2015, and [the IT modernization strategy](#) we embarked on in 2017. Our ability to pursue and embody these core principles will mean the difference between an IT organization that collaborates with its business partners to create the best experience for all Veterans and VA employees—or one that becomes a roadblock to VA innovation and the VA customer experience.

We must work hard—every day- to fulfill this vision. We must recommit—every day—to these core principles: transparency, accountability, innovation, and teamwork.

Here’s how we define these core principles:

**TRANSPARENCY:** We share our successes and our failures. We tell it like it is, instead of qualifying or glossing over the truth.

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** We own the issues within our environment and our organization, and we hold ourselves accountable for fixing them.

**INNOVATION:** We ask, “Why not?” and “What if?” We look at our environment and our Veterans’ needs and explore the art of the possible.

**TEAMWORK:** We work for the success of Veterans and the VA team, not the glory of the moment.

Our modernization commitment is to pursuing these core principles in order to transform the way Veterans interact with VA. We envision a seamless, unified Veteran experience—one similar to the same experience they receive from leading tech companies in the private sector. And we’re building a modern IT infrastructure at VA. Most importantly, we’ve committed to



working and building *with* Veterans, not just for them. We strive to fully understand Veterans' experiences using VA's digital tools, and we look for ways to make those tools work for them.

Here is what this Veteran-centered approach to our work, and our commitment to the core principles of transparency, accountability, innovation, and teamwork have yielded this past year.

### *Appeals Status Tool*

For too long, the process for Veterans looking to appeal a disability benefits claim decision has been complicated, confusing, and lengthy. Some Veterans and their families wait years for a decision on their appeal, and they've had to call in to VA just to check on the status of their appeal. This isn't transparent, nor is it innovative.

Using the authorities our congressional partners have provided to us through the *Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017*, VA is working to restructure the convoluted appeals process for the first time in nearly 90 years. Veterans have told us about some of the common pain points of the appeals process, and in response to some of their most common concerns, VA introduced a reinvented appeals tracking tool that allows Veterans to seamlessly check the status of their appeal and get a meaningful answer that provides a transparent timeline. Veterans can view current and past appeals as well as keep track of any outstanding action items. They can also see how long it will take for VA to reach a decision, based on the time it has taken Veterans with similar claims to receive theirs.

### *API Management Platform*

VA's new open-government initiative, the Application Programming Interface (API) Management Platform enables third-party developers to help VA design better user experiences for Veterans. Think of the best websites, apps, and user experiences you've ever had—what makes those so remarkable? They're beautiful, they're intuitive, they pull data in from multiple locations to put things on one screen ... they just work. The API Management Platform will bring these kinds of experiences to VA. The designers and developers of those same digital tools you love can now partner with VA to bring those experience to our Veterans. Industry innovators can now come work seamlessly with VA.

One such tool we've created through the API Management Platform is the Benefits Intake API. Our Veterans and their families often rely on Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) to help with the cumbersome process of filing disability compensation claims, and most of these claims are still sent to VA through paper or fax. Aimed at drastically reducing the number of steps required for Veterans to submit a claim, VA developed the Benefits Intake API to enable VSOs to use third-party technologies that swiftly, securely submit a Veteran's claim.

A collaboration between VA's Office of Information and Technology (OIT), Veterans Benefits Administration, and several VSOs, the Benefits Intake API uses digital tools over traditional paper documents to enable VA to deliver faster decisions for Veterans, while simultaneously saving taxpayer dollars. Rather than replace or disrupt the existing document-sharing systems, the Benefits Intake API will provide an additional option for VA partners submitting claims on

behalf of our Veterans. To-date, VA has received more than 50,000 pages of documents from an initial group of testers—all transmitted instantly.

### *VEText*

Every missed VA medical appointment represents a lost opportunity to provide a Veteran access to the care they have earned. Not being able to provide another Veteran that appointment slot is wasteful, and a poor use of taxpayer resources. We needed to provide Veterans with appointment reminders – and an easy way to cancel if they weren't able to keep the appointment. We did that with VEText.

Through VEText, Veterans receive appointment reminders via text message on their mobile devices and can easily cancel appointments so that other Veterans can take that spot. They can also add appointments to their electronic calendars and get reminders—and using popular, native software that many Veterans already have on their devices, they can get directions to the facility and even see what time they need to leave in order to make it to VA on time.

*Every Veteran with a cell phone number listed in their health record is now automatically enrolled in the program.* Within the first four months of deployment, VA sent 18 million reminder messages which helped reduce no-show medical *appointments by more than 100,000*. That's innovative. And it helps us be more accountable about the time VA spends providing care to our Veterans.

### *Facility Wait Times*

Appointment wait times have been a challenge for VA, a very public challenge in the case of the 2014 Phoenix VA inaccurate wait times crisis. We recognized that only by embracing transparency, accountability, and innovation could we earn back the trust of the Veterans we let down. We leveraged these core principles and changed that, too.

We didn't just want to “fix a problem,” we wanted to create a solution that would make VA a premier example of transparency. So we designed the [Access to Care](#) website that shows estimated wait times at every single one of our facilities nationwide. Veterans can now go online to find any VA medical facility near them and see the estimated wait times, enabling them to find the VA care that works for them.

The Access to Care website was such a remarkable departure from how health organizations typically report on access and wait times, that Johns Hopkins HealthCare [began exploring](#) whether they should do the same at their facilities. By embracing transparency and accountability, VA was able to innovate in a way that gives Veterans the opportunity to make informed decisions about their care—and in a way that set an example for health providers across the country.

## **The Future of IT at VA**

Veterans have told us that VA's many websites, brands, and logins make it difficult for them to navigate VA's benefits and services. We listened and are tackling this problem head-on. We're launching a new VA.gov—a single, easy to navigate website with one login location that

provides access to everything a Veteran user needs in one personalized experience. Eighty percent of the things our Veterans tell us they come to VA's website to find will be front and center, no more clicking around VA's many websites to find that one tool or feature they need. We've rolled out a personalized dashboard available right when a Veteran logs in, which will provide transparency into any interactions the Veteran has across VA: from the status of their claims, to their upcoming appointments, prescription refills, and any messages from the health providers. All on one screen, with one login, on one website.

We are also only *just beginning* to harness the power of personalization, of APIs, and of Veteran-centered design, and will continue to challenge our industry partners and our community to ask questions and posit ideas of how to improve our Veterans' experience. *VA is open for business for those who want to join us to explore the art of the possible.*

At VA, we believe we can provide self-service tools on par with top private sector companies, and we're aggressively pursuing our vision of a VA that provides the best digital and customer experience in the Federal Government. Embracing our core principles of transparency, accountability, innovation, and teamwork—and working hard every day to reinforce these core principles at every level, in every project, to turn challenges into opportunities—will get us there.

We invite you to [follow our progress](#).

