

Improving the Delivery of Services and Care for Veterans: A Case Study of Enterprise Government

By Matthew Hidek, Nathaniel Birnbaum,
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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) operates the nation's largest integrated health care system and manages a wide range of federal benefits and services for veterans, their dependents, and survivors. At the same time, federal services and care for America's military veterans span across multiple agencies beyond the VA to include the Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Labor, and the Small Business Administration, among others. Yet, while the VA leads an internal strategic planning process aimed at linking national and local action, to date, no mechanism exists to establish priorities, resources, and responsibilities across the federal government and align federal efforts with those of the broader public (state and local), private, and nonprofit sectors working to serve the veteran community.

As with other challenges characterized by such widely shared responsibility—national security, for example—in the case of veterans' affairs we would expect the federal government to use a comprehensive approach that coordinates the efforts of each agency to achieve common purposes. This model, increasingly referred to as "enterprise government," involves a coordinated cross-agency planning

and governance system that aims to achieve goals spanning organizational boundaries.

In *Improving the Delivery of Services and Care for Veterans*, we present a roadmap for developing an enterprise approach to federal veterans' services and care—one that aligns interagency planning and service delivery to support veterans holistically, and does so in a way that promotes robust engagement with communities. Specifically, the report presents five building blocks for moving toward an enterprise approach, and an accompanying set of recommendations and key action steps to put these building blocks in place.

The Enterprise Approach

Mechanisms like governmentwide planning, organization-spanning goals, and accompanying implementation initiatives—from working groups to task forces—reflect the reality that while individual agencies of government pursue specific missions, much of what they aim to do spans spheres of responsibility. Accordingly, to get things done, agencies must often work together. Across policy areas and operational functions, such teaming goes by a number of different names, but is increasingly organized and classified under the concept of enterprise government.

This report uses the term enterprise specifically in reference to situations involving multiple organizational actors (here, multiple agencies of government), and defines the enterprise approach as a system of coordinated planning and governance to pursue goals that span organizational boundaries. This definition stems from and distills recent research and practice-oriented analysis of numerous cases involving federal agencies teaming up to address shared management challenges and to tackle policy issues cutting across areas of responsibility (for example, see Fountain, 2016). In these respects, the definition accounts for two distinct types of arrangements:

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- Unifying common operations to harness economies of scale, standardize common processes, and pool resources
- Collaborating in planning and implementation to serve citizens

An Enterprise Approach to Delivering Veterans’ Services and Care

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs FY 2018-2024 Strategic Plan is organized around four overarching strategic goals:

Goal One: Veterans choose VA for easy access, greater choices, and clear information to make informed decisions.

Goal Two: Veterans receive timely and integrated care and support that emphasizes their well-being and independence throughout their life journey.

Goal Three: Veterans trust the VA to be consistently accountable and transparent.

Goal Four: VA will modernize systems and focus resources more efficiently to be competitive and to provide world-class capabilities to veterans and its employees.

An enterprise approach that fosters greater collaboration between the VA and its federal partners, and further aligns their collective efforts with community-based actors, is essential to achieve the vision laid out in the VA’s strategic plan.

Five Building Blocks to Create an Enterprise Approach to Serving Veterans

An enterprise approach to U.S. federal veterans’ services and care requires robust collaboration across departments and agencies with veterans-focused programs; a clear, comprehensive definition of the challenges providing supportive services and care entails; and strategic alignment of agency responsibilities, community engagement, and technology solutions. These imperatives can be distilled into five major building blocks:



Building Block One: An appropriate interagency collaboration mechanism that sustains leadership engagement and participation, effective cross-agency planning and collaboration, and accountability for implementation actions.

Building Block Two: A comprehensive understanding of the challenges to delivering effective services and care—by understanding that the challenge of supporting veterans is multi-dimensional and should be defined in terms of meeting a range of needs, such as health, education, employment, family support, housing, and income support—rather than each need in isolation from the others.

Building Block Three: A coordinated set of agency core competencies by allocating effort and responsibility across agencies based on expertise, capabilities, and mission focus.

Building Block Four: A robust engagement strategy with community-level stakeholders by regularly engaging with state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and private sector stakeholders supporting veterans at the community level.

Building Block Five: The effective use of technology and data by harnessing technology solutions that capture the perspectives of disparate actors, facilitate sharing of information and insight, and enable data-driven decisions in strategic planning and service delivery.

Recommendations

Drawing from research and practice on strategic planning, interagency collaboration, and related areas, this report offers the following set of recommendations to move towards an enterprise approach.

- **Create and use** a broad, enterprise interagency collaboration mechanism of sufficient scope and leadership seniority to guide overall policy, planning, and implementation of federal veterans' services and care.
- **Define, plan, and monitor** progress toward the delivery of comprehensive support for veterans.
- **Ensure existing federal-wide efforts** to support veterans are engaged effectively according to agency roles, missions, and areas of comparative advantage—as well as provide sufficient leadership authority to execute their charge.
- **Create regular forums** to engage community-based stakeholders, leverage their insight and expertise, and align plans and service delivery strategies to complement and empower community-based efforts.
- **Identify, acquire, and deploy** information technology tools and data management structures to support enterprise planning.

Summary

Federal-wide planning is necessary, without question, to set clear priorities, allocate resources, and create a comprehensive approach to provide care and supportive assistance. This report presents five building blocks and related actions to improve the delivery of services and care for veterans through an enterprise approach. Foremost among them is establishing a unifying system of governance and strategic planning that spans the federal government, and integrates state and local governments, and private and nonprofit sector stakeholders, to pursue national goals.

Yet, while VA strategic plans clearly identify the need for collaborative partnerships at the federal, state, and community levels in practice, the functioning of veteran service networks at the community level still operate largely independent from a federal planning process with a deep-rooted dependence on centralized planning and policy coordination.

This report demonstrates the need for an enterprise approach that clearly defines a national strategic vision for veterans' care; identifies short-, medium-, and long-term planning goals across the federal government; and establishes formal coordination mechanisms to drive effective coordination and execution. From this follows a necessity to develop an enterprise approach that aligns efforts of the VA, its federal, state, and community partners, and the array of veteran-serving nonprofits and human service organizations across the country into the “better system” that the public and policy experts have demanded for years, if not decades (Carter, 2017).

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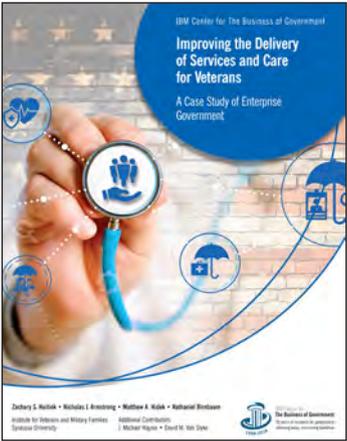
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