

Rural Veteran Outreach



TOOLKIT & WORKBOOK v3.5

2023

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Rural Veteran Outreach

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Forward

Welcome to the **2023 Rural Veteran Outreach (RVO) Toolkit and Workbook Version 3.5**.

Since the development of the original RVO Toolkit in 2011, we have had the opportunity to partner with rural communities in planning and conducting Veteran outreach. We learned many lessons through these experiences and from community partner feedback. We wish to share the benefit of these experiences in this updated toolkit.

This Toolkit and Workbook will serve as a *guide* with tools and activities to assist your team through the process, from establishing partnerships, to planning and implementing RVO events, to sustaining partnerships.

The new features of this Toolkit and Workbook include:

- Activities for your team to brainstorm ideas, think through options, and build enthusiasm for building community partnerships to assist rural Veterans in accessing benefits they have earned.
- A section designed to invite, integrate, and ultimately celebrate cultural diversity in planning and implementation of *both* events – the **Community Information and Referral Workshop**, and the **Veteran Outreach Event**.
- Checklists included to help with your events planning.
- An activity focused specifically on sustaining community partnerships.

Comments on your lessons learned and ideas that may improve this toolkit and workbook are welcomed. We would like to include those elements that have broad applicability to the next iteration of the RVO Toolkit and Workbook. Please submit your comments to ORH-WR@va.gov.

Thank you for all you do for our Veterans!

The Veterans Rural Health Resource Center-Salt Lake City

If you desire training on the use of this toolkit for your team or support on implementation of the process, please contact us at ORH-WR@va.gov.

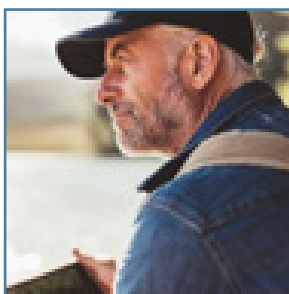
SNAPSHOT of RURAL VETERANS

19.1M

U.S. Veterans

4.7M

are rural



44%
earn less than
\$35,000

9M
(**44%** of total)
enrolled in VA care

Compared to urban, rural Veterans are more likely to say VA is their primary source of care and that VA care is their most cost effective alternative.

55%
are over
the age of **65**

30%
(**2.7M**)
of enrolled Veterans
are rural

10%
of enrolled rural Veterans
are minorities

58%
of rural Veterans are
enrolled in VA health care
compared to **38%**
of urban Veterans

27%
do not access
the internet at home

8%
of enrolled rural
Veterans are women

*Department of Veterans Affairs Statistics at a Glance (Accessed 2023)
VA Office of Rural Health Website, Rural Veteran Demographics (Accessed 2023)
Veterans Health Administration Website, About VHA (Accessed 2023)*

Introduction

The VA's Strategic Plan recognizes the challenges rural Veterans face in accessing their benefits. It explicitly emphasizes building partnerships between VA and community agencies as a means of improving access for all Veterans. In Fiscal Year 2011, the Office of Rural Health and the Veterans Rural Health Resource Center-Salt Lake City developed the Rural Veterans Outreach (RVO) model, built upon lessons learned in the successful Tribal Veterans Representative program in VISN 19. This toolkit and workbook extends that effort to specifically strengthen support of VA teams interested in implementing the RVO Program. Here, we integrated hands-on activities and guides based on RVO events that we have been a part of throughout the United States and Territories. We are grateful for the support of our community partners, many of whom are Veterans. The pages of this toolkit and workbook reflect their enthusiasm and commitment to improving rural Veteran lives.

Objectives of this Toolkit and Workbook are to:

- Build and sustain relationships between VA and rural communities.
- Bi-directional learning about VA and local community services and benefits available to Veterans.
- Connect VA programs with community partners to assist Veterans, and provide the partner with local VA contacts.
- Find rural Veterans in need and connect them with VA services.
- Improve outreach to Veterans living in rural areas.
- Assist rural Veterans access local community resources.
- Increase Veteran enrollment in VA programs and services.

“It has been my pleasure to take part in two of your workshops. I feel that the information communicated is invaluable. Not only did the seminars provide me with new contacts that serve the area Veterans, but they also gave me a better understanding of the VA system as a whole. My co-workers and I are now much more confident in directing our Veterans and their families to assistance that does not normally fall within our general area of service.”

NCA representative speaker at workshop

What is the Rural Veteran Outreach (RVO) model?

As VA employees, we share a commitment to improving Veterans' access to the benefits they earned in service to our country. You and your team likely have a great deal of experience reaching out to Veterans individually and at events, such as health fairs or Veterans Day events.

RVO is more than that. The goal remains unchanged: Improving Veterans' access to care and benefits. However, the model centers on rural community partnerships. RVO builds relationships with community members and organizations already motivated to help Veterans. By leveraging community expertise, RVO expands resources for rural Veterans.

RVO is a model for you and your team to:

- Identify needs of rural Veterans by learning about their communities.
- Empower community organizations to link Veterans with care and benefits.
- Develop an enduring VA presence in the community through non-VA agencies.

RVO promotes partnership between VA and the community to expand VA access to Veterans.

How does the RVO model work?

The RVO model consists of **2 events**, comprised of 5 steps (see schematic, below).

“Meeting real people and getting valuable information. Placing a “face” on the VA... seeing folks who care about what they do and are passionate despite having to function within government bureaucracy.”

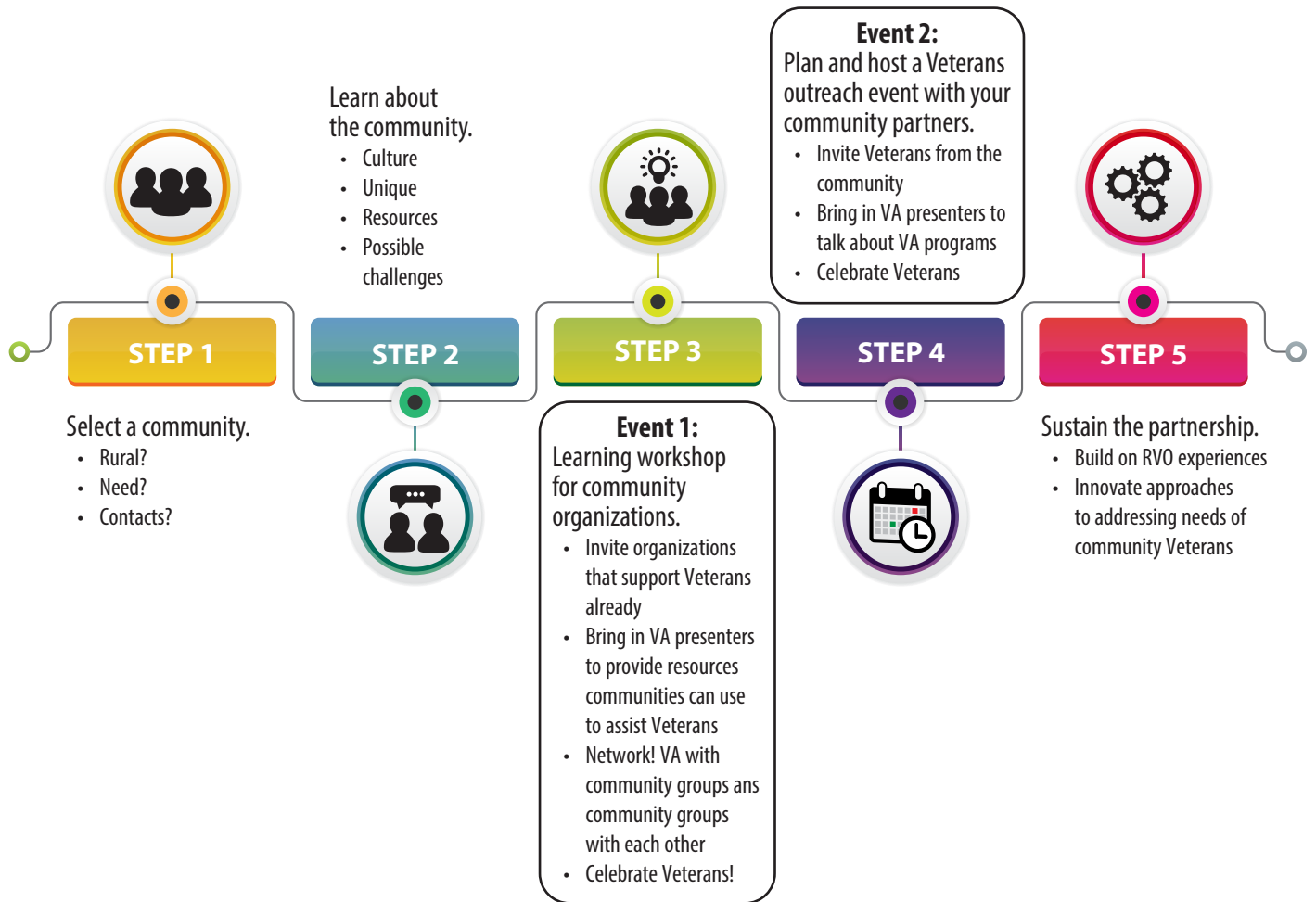
*Comment from
Community Workshop
participant*



This flowchart below gives a bird's eye view as to the elements of each step, for you and your team to keep in mind as you proceed through the workbook

RVO Flowchart

Five steps, two activities: Building successful VA-community partnerships to serve Veterans.



This toolkit and workbook will guide you through each step of this process. We invite you to explore the opportunities and rewards of building partnerships with rural communities.



Why a Community Partnership for our Facility?

As employees, we want to make sure Veterans at our facility are served with quality and respect. Partnering with communities can help us better serve Veterans in places where we can't always be, which will increase access to benefits those Veterans have earned.

1. Community partnerships are important because VA does not have a physical presence in every rural community.
2. Working with enthusiastic partners such as aging programs, churches, Veteran programs/ organizations (Vet Centers, Committees, Groups) and other agencies helps VA to reach more Veterans in rural areas.
3. These agencies are trusted members of the community and are experts on local customs and needs. They care about their community and about helping Veterans and their families.

Community partnerships that succeed are based on a solid understanding of **strengths, weaknesses, and mutual goals**. It is important to think through those pieces before your team begins the RVO activities. This will give your team a clearer picture of this joint venture.

Activity: Take a moment to brainstorm how community collaboration might work. List your thoughts and ideas in each box below. (Examples are listed to help give you ideas – your items may be completely different.)

What are the strengths of a community collaboration?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Examples:

- Creating good will between VA and communities can pave the way for future collaboration and innovation.
- Creating additional entry points for Veterans to receive accurate information and coordinated efforts to accessing benefits and services.

What are the challenges of a community collaboration?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Examples:

- Frustration with a complex VA system
- Lack of a formal structure within the community to support Veteran-focused activities.

What are the opportunities to advance mutual goals?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Examples:

- Pooling resources such as budget, personnel, and facilities.
- Creating stronger and more visible VA presence in communities, especially areas lacking VA facilities.



STEP 1

How do we Select a Rural or Underserved Community?

VA facilities may serve many rural communities. Which is the right one to choose for RVO partnership? Just about any rural community might benefit from an RVO – there is no “wrong” answer. However, some rural communities may be especially in need and more willing to engage in a partnership with the VA. These communities, in turn, may provide the best opportunity for providing increased VA access to Veterans.

Take the time to fill out the table on the opposite page with your team. This activity may be useful for you in your selection process.

Already have a community in mind? Fantastic. We encourage you to complete the table for this community. The answers to the questions may provide some important insights in your RVO planning processes.

Is the community rural?

If you aren't sure, check the “Am I Rural?” tool on the Rural Health Information Hub (ruralhealthinfo.org/).

“It is a good program and needs to be repeated in the future.”



Consider sustainability now.

We haven't yet figured out which community to partner with. Why think about sustainability now?

Sustainability is built on partnership. Thinking at this very early point about which communities might benefit in the long term—beyond the RVO—may help decide which community to work with now.



STEP 1

Activity (part a): Community selection worksheet—we suggest making this table on a white/smart board and listing options with your team. Feel free to expand the number of communities (columns) or add questions relevant for your team (rows).

Questions	Community 1: _____	Community 2: _____	Community 3: _____
Is this community rural?			
Veteran data: (name of VA person to assist?) # Enrolled _____ # Not enrolled _____			
What are the connections your team already has with the community? Has a Veteran advocate from the community approached your team for any reason (education, cemetery benefits, etc.)?			
Are there other projects with this community down the road that your team can envision? What are the benefits of sustaining the partnership?			
Other factors important to your team go here (add additional rows).			

Activity (part b): Take a step back and review the table. Which community has the most potential for a successful RVO (a community referral workshop and a Veterans outreach event)?

Selected community: _____





STEP 2

Understanding the Community

The initial aim in approaching a community is to listen and learn. Rather than offer a “*program*” to help Veterans in a community, focus on understanding community needs, values and culture from their perspective.

Cultural Considerations

Some people may assume that strategies to help Veterans in one rural community will work everywhere else. However, great diversity exists across rural communities; problems, values, and needs will vary.

- Developing a partnership in rural areas requires attention to and respect for local differences and diversity. This can be especially important with respect to local ethnic, religious, and regional cultures.
- In some rural areas, it may be necessary to adapt activities to accommodate local cultural customs. This flexibility conveys respect and fosters trust as the partnership develops.

Before beginning outreach into a community, take time to consult with partners and others familiar with the area about local customs.

Educate yourself about beliefs, traditions and social norms that may affect how you interact with community partners and Veterans in the area. This preparation can avoid potential offenses down the road.





STEP 2

Learning about community diversity

What is the cultural diversity of your community? (e.g. American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Asian, African American, Hispanic or Latino)

With your team, brainstorm some ideas about how an outreach event might be different for this community. What were some of the ideas? What kinds of things might be different compared to your regular outreach events? (e.g. beginning and ending of event(s) with prayer, primary language – do you need an interpreter/translator?)

Who are the community liaison(s), or partner(s) who may be familiar with local customs in these communities? How can you engage them as a part of your team?

Can you name, either specifically or in general, local organizations/programs that you are familiar with (e.g. local VSOs, Veteran groups or committees, Veteran Centers, Community Service Organizations)?

Keep these organizations/programs in mind for later, when you build an invitation list.)



STEP 2

VA Culture

When we talk about culture, we often forget to look at the one to which we belong. The VA has its own culture too – and sometimes communities find this culture puzzling.

Activity: Here is a list of VA-specific “cultural” features that may impact the RVO planning process, and which there may be items difficult for community partners to know about or understand. With your team, brainstorm when and how to talk with your community partners about them. Are some important to bring up early in planning? Or wait until later? Are there other items important for your VA facility not on this list?

- Local perceptions of the VA.
- The timeline for approvals.
- The chain of command for approval.
- Lines of communication.
- Purchasing or contracting involvement.

It’s important for VA to share with their partners that processes are slow because they have to follow federal regulations—these are not rules your facility makes up!

The Importance of Learning about Your Audience

Conducting advance research about the community demonstrates interest in beginning to work together. Your research may identify individuals and organizations that are concerned about Veterans and may want to participate in partnership activities. Your understanding of the community will change as the partnership develops over time. New information may require adjustments to your plans, but will ultimately result in better outreach because you will have adapted to local needs.





STEP 2

Find out about your chosen community

Below are topics and examples of what might be important to learn about the community you will be working with. Completing information on these topics (or those not on this list, but relevant to your community) will help with planning at each step.

- History of the community: [Example: In a crop-growing community, it's important to find out when their planting and harvesting seasons are to work around those busy times.]

- Relevant community demographics to help understand Veteran life: [Example: Using US Census and other data, determine how many people live your chosen community, along with household sizes or race/ethnic composition of the community.]

- Business and industry: *[Example: How does the community make its money to thrive? What type of education is available in the community—Pre-K all the way to state-run colleges or universities? Is there tourism and hospitality, health care, commercial retail/service sector? Is it an agricultural-based community, or is there mining in area?]*



STEP 3

First Event

Planning a Successful Community Information and Referral Workshop

A Community Information and Referral Workshop is a meeting, typically held classroom style, that brings VA and community leaders together to learn about benefits available through all three branches of VA (Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, and National Cemetery Administration).

In addition to VA benefits, our experience has shown this type of meeting also helps increase awareness within the community of State benefits or programs as well as the wide variety of local programs or services available through advocacy groups and organizations.

We define community leaders as any member of the community, who, by nature of their employment or through their advocacy groups, places them in a unique position to work or meet with Veterans or their beneficiaries regularly. These leaders know who the Veterans are in the community and oftentimes have a connection with them. Their work with Veterans places them in a position of trust to educate and assist Veterans in obtaining their benefits.

"Thank you so much for doing this—just getting the basic overview will be so helpful—I have worked in our Sr. Info & Assistance for 2 years w/limited knowledge of resources for Vets—So this is really important for our elderly & disabled Vets!"





STEP 3

The general concept of the referral workshop portion of the Rural Veteran Outreach program is simple; by educating community leaders about VA benefits, they can share that knowledge to improve quality of life and access to resources for those Veterans who reside in their community.

The referral workshop is designed to accomplish these goals:

- Educate local agencies about VA benefits and programs. (NOT train them to be benefit specialists)
- Educate VA staff of the many community programs that exist in serving Veterans.
- Create a referral network for directing Veterans to experts for assistance with claim applications.
- Create a networking opportunity for VA and community members to address the needs of Veterans in the community.
- Lay the groundwork with community partners to plan the Veteran outreach event portion of RVO for Veterans in the community.

In addition, the workshop opens dialog between VA and the community, and creates opportunities for future partnership to address Veterans' needs through collaboration.

What does the Community Information and Referral Workshop look like?

The Community Information and Referral Workshop is purposefully designed to be flexible, meaning the training agenda can be customized to meet training needs of a community. The core activities – the core items for the agenda – are presentations that focus on the three arms of the VA: Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery Administration (NCA). These presentations are not meant to teach community members how to enroll Veterans. Instead, they are to provide an overview about each arm to begin a conversation about how community members and organizations can help connect Veterans to the appropriate resources.

Additional items may be included on the agenda. For example, these might cover important topics that are community-specific, such as travel policies, or women Veteran services.





STEP 3

First Event

Getting Started

We provide a graphic showing important milestones and timeline, along with a checklist (pages 26-27), for planning the workshop. Planning a successful workshop, of course, is far more than a graphic and a to-do list. Working through the activities below will help.

The first step is to identify a small group of key individuals to participate in planning the workshop. In our experience, involving key members of the community early in the process achieves the most success. Your community partners are essential in helping to identify the local needs of Veterans, engaging other interested groups, and, as experts in their community's communication processes—advertising the event.

You may already know who these key community members are, or at least a couple of them. All the better. With them, it might be useful to work through the following exercise, in case it's important to include others.

An ideal workgroup includes a balance of community members and VA. Working together, the group will identify training agenda items, identify possible training locations, assist with some of the logistics needed and help identify invitees.

In selecting members for the planning group, keep in mind VA may not know all the dynamics of the community – your community members are the experts. Listen to them and let them own part of the process. Be mindful of the perception that VA is a bureaucracy that often gets bogged down or drowns out the voices of communities.

Tip:

Be careful not to tip the balance of the workgroup by overloading it with VA staff.





STEP 3

Identifying the community members of the planning group:

Typically, we've found that 3-5 community members, who represent a broad spectrum of services or programs, to be an ideal workgroup. Think broadly - members might include, the director of the local food bank, a librarian, a senior center activity director, or an employment office representative. It's not uncommon to start out with a fairly small number of active planners only to see the number grow throughout this stage. By strategically selecting members, you can maximize the efficiency of the group. It's important to note that being flexible, will increase enthusiasm and generate a feeling of ownership by the community, increasing the successfulness of the workshop. With your team, generate names or organizations that might be important in the planning process.

- Do you have a positive working relationship with someone from the community?
- Has anyone reached out to the VA in the past to partner?
- Are there groups (and then individuals within those groups or organizations) ideally suited to reach Veterans?

Be sure to include someone with the State Department of Veterans Affairs or County Service Officer(s). These individuals have proven to be critical in connecting local Veterans with VA resources. They can be very helpful.

♦ Add names and contact information below:

Potential workshop planning group:

Name:

Agency:

Contact information:

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Don't worry if you don't have a full list of partners. The list will grow as you start planning.

"Was so surprised and happy to see all the compensations and benefits "



STEP 3

First Event

Identifying VA members of the planning group:

Having a few key VA staff on the planning calls is vital to the success of the Workshop and ultimately the Outreach event. Initially, you will want to limit the number of VA participants, to allow for productive meetings to occur and bring others along as progress is made. Remember, you are working with community leaders, let them co-lead these efforts.

Fill in the box below to identify the VA planning group:

Key VA department staff to have on planning calls		Name:
VHA	Identify someone at your facility that is considered an expert in enrollment/eligibility and all the services available in your network.	
VBA	VBA contact that typically conducts outreach or community trainings? Consider asking a supervisor at VBA to guide you to a good contact.	
NCA	If no one is available, VBA oftentimes can speak to NCA benefits.	

Add additional VA staff to calls later in the process, as needed.

Now that you've developed the list to identify your planning group, what's next?

Reach out to all the people you've identified to discuss the goals of the Workshop, and Outreach event, to ask for their help in planning. We've found a personal phone call to each person individually is the optimal way to solidify a partnership.

After solidifying the planning group, hold regularly scheduled calls to keep the process moving along.

The planning group will take on several key tasks:

1. Identifying key topics important for Veterans in the community, and then recruiting presenters for these topics. (To develop a training agenda)
2. Building an invitation list of individuals and organizations.
3. Assisting with logistics, including identifying a location, setting a date, advertising, and planning for refreshments.
4. Developing a short training evaluation for the workshop.

Planning is a process—it will take time. You may find that each of these tasks can be advanced as you progress in your planning.

TIP:

Be prepared on this call to discuss some of the tasks involved. Most likely, they will want to know upfront what will be required of them to participate.

Developing the Training Agenda: On the next page is "scaffolding" for your agenda, along with suggested session lengths and tips. This is meant only as a guide - talk through these items with your team. In the last column, take notes on your team's ideas.



STEP 3

Developing the agenda

Presentation topic/ presenter affiliation	Topic Item Elements	Tips	Notes and Ideas
Welcoming and Introductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend a few minutes going over the agenda and goals for the day. • Discuss the desire to partner with everyone for the Veteran outreach event in the future. • Describe the differences among VHA, VBA, and NCA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The RVO lead should be the facilitator of the opening. • Allow time for attendees to introduce themselves and explain how their organization serves Veterans. 	
Veterans Health Administration Recommend 1-2 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility and Enrollment (1010 EZ) • VHA Healthcare benefits package. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Primary and Specialty Care ◦ Mental Health/ Suicide prevention services • Services available at the Medical Centers and CBOCs. • CHOICE program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority Groups, copays and income verification should be addressed briefly. • Be prepared to take these discussions offline or during a break to not distract the workshop agenda. • Some topics may require more than one presenter. 	
Veterans Benefits Administration Recommend 1-2 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying for Benefits • Veterans with Service Connected Disabilities • Special programs/ services • Dependents and survivor benefits • Pensions/Life insurance • Education • Home Loans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss qualification criteria. 	



STEP 3

First Event

Presentation topic/ presenter affiliation	Topic Item Elements	Tips	Notes and Ideas
National Cemetery Administration Recommend ½-1 hour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility • National, private and State Cemeteries • Markers, medallions and headstones • Flags and military funeral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterans Benefits Administration can present this information if a representative from the National Cemetery is unavailable. 	
Engaging community in Outreach planning /Closing Recommend ½ hour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the community for their help in extending the reach of VA with their participation in organizing an outreach event. • Ask for volunteers willing to participate in weekly planning calls for approximately the next 12 weeks. Set date and time for first call. • Thank everyone for coming and remind them of the contacts in the folder. • Thank the volunteers on the planning committee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not restrict the number of volunteers for the planning committee. (Be prepared for members to drop out as the planning evolves). • Encourage all ideas and opportunities. Have fun and be enthusiastic! • Follow-up quickly after the event to capitalize on the energy of the group. • Ask everyone to fill out a training evaluation form. 	

*"Very warm welcome with a beautiful smile.
Fa'afetai (to thank) tele (many) lava (enough)."*

American Samoan Veteran



STEP 3

Tips on Opening Comments

The Community Information and Referral Workshop

It is important to start the workshop off in a strong and welcoming way. The following items are some points that have resonated well with participants in prior referral workshops. Choose to use the ones you think will work best – and of course add your own!

**Be creative,
have fun
and work
hard in
event
planning!**

- Introduce yourself and your team. Talk about your background and interests. You should also talk about why you choose to work for VA.
- Talk about the Veterans in the community and why outreach is important. Distance from healthcare facility.
- Tell them they were invited because they are strong community leaders. Clearly explain the goals of the workshop. Enables the community to learn more about resources available through VA, state, Veteran service organizations and local entities.
- Encourage participants to introduce themselves, their organization and mission.
- Acknowledge and thank the Veterans in the group for their service.
- Talk about the mission of the VA. Most people do not know there are three branches of VA (VHA, VBA, NCA).

“All the community partners and VA representatives were so positive and supportive of the people who attended. I was impressed with the organization of the event and the willingness of VA employees willing to travel so far to reach out to the Veterans.”

Community partner



STEP 3

First Event

Points to Ponder:

- Be sure to build in plenty of breaks and time for questions and answers from the attendees.
- If hosting an all day workshop, consider providing a lunch as a way to keep attendees actively engaged.
- Avoid using acronyms in all presentations.
- Keep in mind the workshop provides an *overview* of VA and benefits. The aim is not to train benefits specialists, only to provide attendees with a basic understanding of the benefits available to Veterans, the process for obtaining them, and contact information for local people who can help answer detailed questions about benefits. This last point is crucial—local agencies need to know who within the VA they can contact for help with a Veterans' needs.
- Be sure to follow up on questions that arise from the workshop.

Think broadly to include any group that encounters Veterans; e.g. non-profits, social service agencies, and food banks. In the following, we provide some broad categories that might help you think of individuals or organizations to invite.

*"Thank you for helping all us Vets,
these men and women need help."*

Thank you again

Making an invitation list for the Information and Referral Workshop:

With your core community group, build a list of potential leaders in the community where you'd like to conduct a workshop and outreach event. These are the groups, or individuals, you want to invite to the workshop. The ideal number will depend on the community and the capacity of the venue. Target a number for group interaction conducive to learning.



STEP 3

- Who is involved in local and county government? Supporters of Veterans are especially important to include. *[Examples might include town council members or county commissioners who are supportive of Veterans]*

- Agencies that serve Veterans in the state and community. *[Examples: State Department of Veterans Services, Veteran Service Organizations such as DAV, VFW, The American Legion, and Veteran Service Officers]*

- Local, county and state organizations that serve the community. *[Examples: State Area Agencies on Aging, Area Health Education Centers, local colleges and universities, American Red Cross, clergy at local churches, or local police or fire departments]*

Keep a list of individuals, organizations, and contact information so your team can make sure they are invited to the Workshop. This list will undoubtedly grow as you work with the group while planning the workshop.

Planning logistics: Logistics around a workshop always involve some legwork and creativity. Finding a location and date are only the beginning. As you plan, you may find other important details need to be decided, including refreshments, Wi-Fi accessibility, and invitation timing. Community members can be especially helpful with these details!

Develop a short training evaluation form for workshop participants. Feedback from the evaluation will be helpful and assist moving forward. Decide what information is important to collect for the team or to share with your leadership.

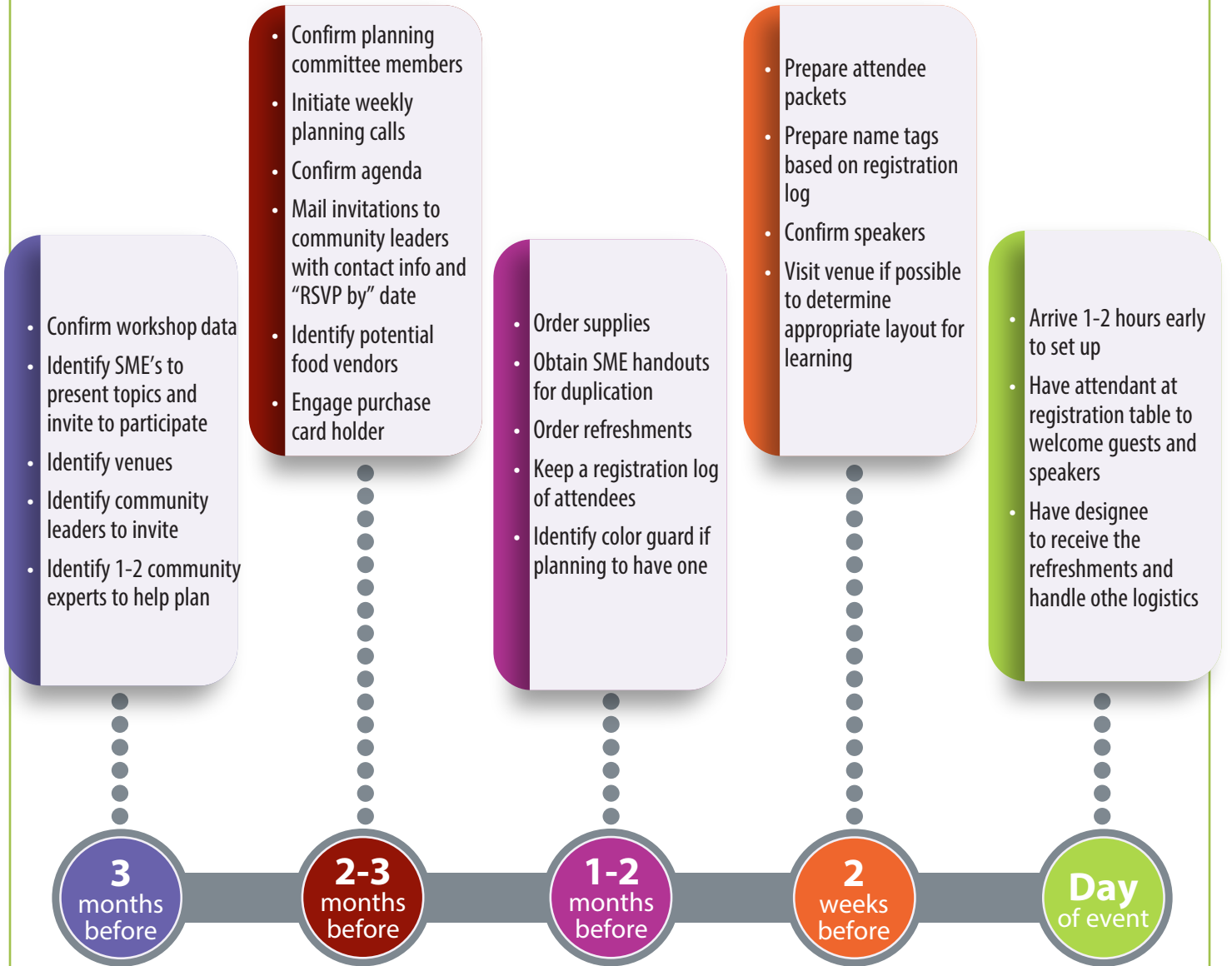


STEP 3

First Event

This timeline and the checklists that follow, may be useful to you and your team as you plan the workshop.

Timeline to Community and Referral Workshop





STEP 3

Checklist Community Information and Referral Workshop

3 Months Before:

- Confirm workshop date.
- Identify and invite your presenters/subject matter experts (SMEs). Share the presentation guidelines and workshop goals with them. They should plan a brief overview of their services and benefits and leave plenty of time for questions and discussion.
- Identify and secure venue location. Ensure adequate handicapped accessible parking, adequate space/room size, microphone, projector, computers, comfortable seating and room to network. Often community partners can identify a site for the workshop that is inexpensive or at no cost.
- Identify community leaders to invite.
- Identify 1-2 community experts to help plan.

2-3 Months Before:

- Confirm planning committee members.
- Initiate weekly planning calls.
- Confirm agenda.
- Mail invitations to community leaders with contact info and "RSVP by" date.
- Identify potential food vendors who might provide the meal or refreshments.
- Engage purchase card holder to ensure proper documentation for the food purchase for non-VA participants. Remember, VA employees must pay for their own lunch.

1-2 Months Before:

- Order supplies.
- Obtain subject matter expert (SME) handouts for duplication.
- Order refreshments.
- Keep a registration log of attendees.
- Identify Color Guard, if planning to have one.

2 Weeks Before:

- Prepare attendee packets.
- Prepare name tags based on registration log.
- Confirm speakers.
- Visit venue, if possible, to determine appropriate layout for learning.

Day of Workshop

- Arrive 1-2 hours early to set up.
- Have attendant at registration table to welcome guests and speakers.
- Have designee to receive refreshments and handle all other logistics.



STEP 4

Second Event

Planning a Community Outreach Event

The Information and Referral Workshop provided an opportunity to nurture relationships with your existing partners and to grow your network of Veteran advocates in the rural community. One way to capture the enthusiasm during the workshop is by partnering with the community to plan a Rural Veteran Outreach event.

What is a Rural Veteran Outreach Event?

A Rural Veteran Outreach Event is similar to other traditional outreach events. Information booths/tables setup where Veterans and their family members can visit to obtain information about programs, receive assistance in filling out forms, and to learn and take advantage of programs that are available in the community. Same as the Workshop, we included a timeline graphic and checklist for planning this event too. See pages 30-32.

Why is partnering with community members so important for the Outreach Event?

In urban communities, the VA is well connected enabling them to quickly and routinely host outreach events. In rural communities, VA is often less connected which can make hosting events a challenge. By working together with organizations that have mutual goals of serving Veterans and their family members, you will significantly increase the likelihood of a well-attended and successful event consistent with community needs while incorporating the unique culture of the community.



"We need to have a yearly fair. More Service on benefits."

"Thank you I have been out since '73 and first time I have seen my benefits"





STEP 4

Getting started:

Through the course of planning the Community Information and Referral Workshop, the community members were made aware of the RVO Outreach Event and an expanded list of volunteer participants for planning the event was generated.

▶ **Volunteers from the Community Information and Referral Workshop:**

Veteran Event Planning group

Name:

Agency:

Contact information:

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Don't forget the partners who helped plan the workshop and all of the presenters.

This list will grow as you start planning.

Now that you've developed the list to identify your planning group, what's next?

Reach out to all of the new people you have identified in the workshop to discuss the outreach event. We've found a personal phone call to each person individually is the optimal way to solidify a partnership.

After solidifying the planning group, you'll want to hold regularly scheduled calls to keep the process moving along. On the next page, you'll see the key milestones that need to be addressed throughout the planning process. Because your workgroup will operate at a unique pace, we've included suggested timelines and tips for consideration in structuring the frequency of your calls.

On the next page, you will find a timeline and checklist specifically for planning a Veterans Outreach Event with your team. These will be useful in helping to remember and organize the many details. The community members on your team may be able to help with many of these items.

TIP

Be prepared on this call to discuss some of the tasks involved—most likely they will want to know upfront what will be required of them to participate.

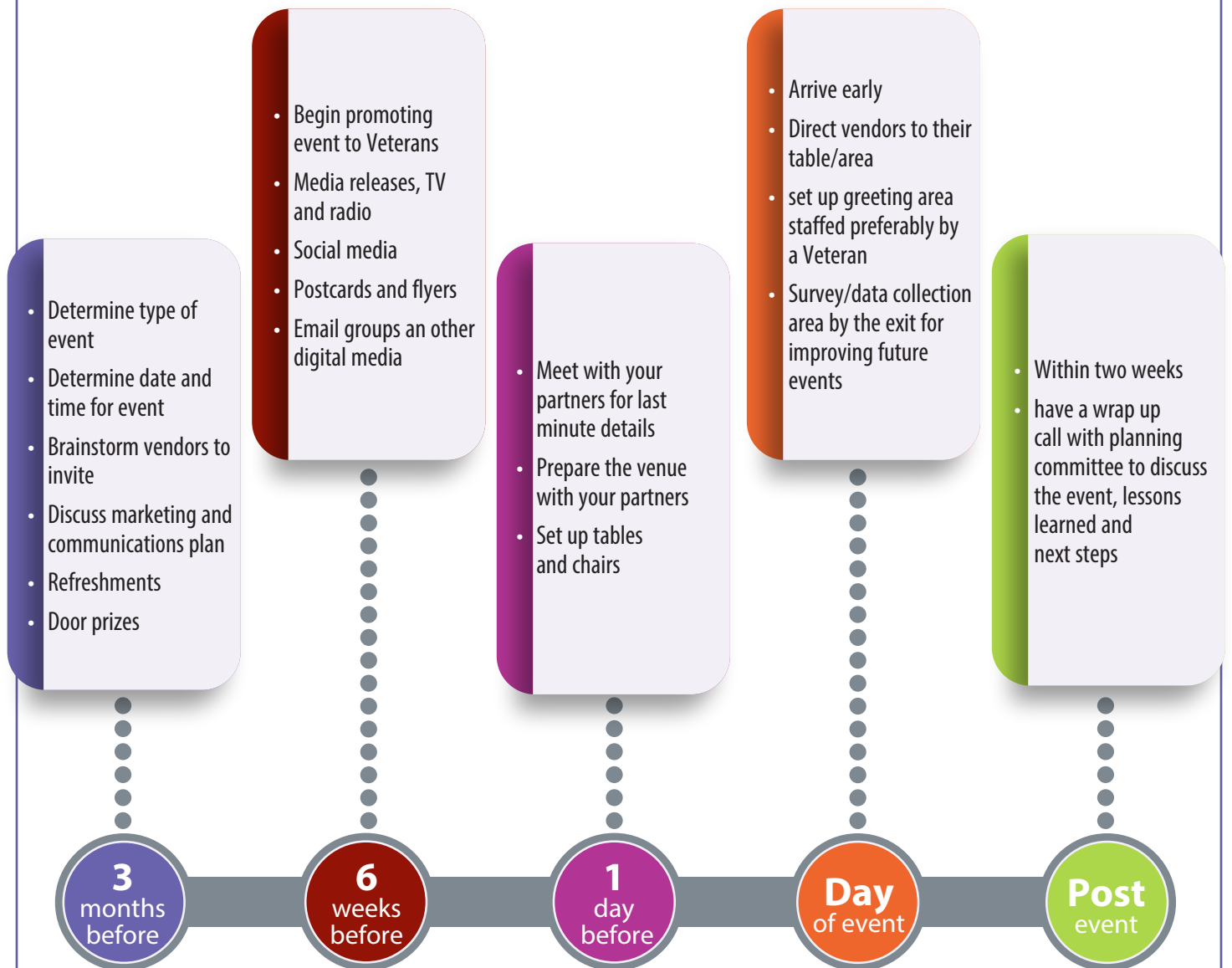
"Wonderful! Thank You! Hope to see again next year."



STEP 4

Second Event

Timeline to Outreach Event





STEP 4

Checklist to Outreach Event

3 Months Before:

- Determine what type of event will draw most Veterans. Consider planning a special Veteran-focused event or tagging onto an existing community event, such as a health fair or job expo. Discussions with your community partners will help guide this decision.
- Determine date and time for the event. Most of our outreach events have been held at midday on a Saturday (10am-2pm).
- Brainstorm vendors and exhibitors to invite. The planning committee will determine who will reach out to exhibitors. Remember to invite local agencies to have a booth at the event so they can inform attendees about the services they offer to Veterans. (See box below).
- Discuss marketing and communication plans. Who are the media contacts in the community? Include radio and TV public service ads/articles in the local newspaper(s). Your Public Affairs Officer can help coordinate publicity activities with the community.
- If possible, provide light refreshments. This allows attendees to stay longer if the event runs over traditional lunch time.
- Consider using door prizes. In many RVO sites, community partners solicited donated door prizes from local businesses. At one site, VA Medical Center employees donated items they crafted for the door prizes. Giving door prizes throughout the day helps keep the energy up during the event.

Brainstorm a list of vendors and organizations that might want to have a booth or table at the outreach event. Will any donate door prizes for the event or help advertise? (Feel free to add rows to this table as you think of more).

Vendor and Organizations		
Name:	Agency:	Contact information:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

"Very good information, found out about stuff I never knew"



STEP 4

Second Event

6 weeks before

- Begin promoting event to Veterans. Contact a VA Public Affairs Officer (PAO) to work with community partners and local media to promote the outreach event.
- Media releases: T.V., radio, local newspaper(s). Print announcements. Write a brief media announcement that can be published or broadcast. In addition to local and regional newspapers, the community will help you identify other outlets for promoting the event such as church newsletters and bulletin-boards.
- Promote the event through important local social media outlets: Facebook, Twitter, etc. Encourage the VA facility to promote the event on their website and other digital media services.
- Mail event postcards. Put up flyers in local hangouts (e.g., cafés, grocery stores, etc.).
- E-mail groups/listservs used by the community about the event.

The Day Before

- Meet with your community partners to go over last minute details. They can be very helpful in problem-solving and making things happen just before the event.
- Preparing the venue: with your community partners, meet with facility management to assure all requirements are met. Think of the optimal layout for your event.
- Set up tables and chairs.

The Day of

- Arrive early to address any last minute issues. We usually arrive about 3 hours early.
- Ensure vendors/exhibitors are directed to their table/area and assist them in setting up, if needed.
- Set up a greeting table with a community partner, preferably a Veteran, stationed in this area throughout the event.
- Set up survey/data collection table close to the exit for communities to request Veterans' comments about whether the event met their needs and how to improve future events.

Post Event

- Have a wrap-up call with your planning committee *within two weeks* of the event.
 - Lessons learned
 - Areas of success
 - Areas for improvement
 - Next steps for addressing future Veterans' issues
- Distribute a final report containing your data collection to your partners.

Tip

Think about ideas for sustainment in preparation for the call.



STEP 5

Sustaining the Partnership

Sustaining community partnerships can offer many opportunities to increase access and service to rural Veterans. Thinking about sustainment throughout the RVO process can generate great ideas. Sometimes new community partnership projects come up in the planning or the implementation processes.

Here are a few examples of programs growing out of RVO community partnerships:

- The My HealthVet coordinator and the local librarian developed a training module on My HealthVet for use at the local/community library so Veterans would not have to drive to the medical center. The training was so successful that it was eventually offered at every library in the state.
- In association with a flu shot event, the local VA in one community developed a small outreach effort for local Veterans to explain VA benefits and services, and provided enrollment assistance.
- The Department of Public Defender in one county connected with VA to begin setting up a Veterans Justice Court.
- The NCA coordinated a workshop for area funeral homes to provide them education about VA burial benefits.





STEP 5

Activity: Advancing sustainment

The Community Information and Referral Workshop and Veteran Outreach Event create a foundation for future collaboration between the VA and the community. "On the next few pages you'll find a couple of key areas for you and your team to brainstorm as you reflect on your RVO experience and build upon your partnership for next steps. Of course, the best way to sustain the relationship is through regular check-ins and conversations. The areas you identify here will give you the opportunity to stay connected.

What are some ideas to assist Veterans in this community?

(Use the wrap-up call to learn more about what the Veterans in the community need.)

Examples: additional trainings, future outreach events, possible clinic expansion, CHOICE provider(s).

What groups in this community share a common goal?

(This will be the planning group that will address Veterans' needs.)



STEP 5

What are our next steps?

Notes, ideas, and action items

*“I came in here today angry,
but I’m leaving with a smile.”*

*Vietnam veteran at an
outreach event*



VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs