

Education and Career Counseling Benefits for Veterans

Communications emphasizing that benefits are earned through their service to encourage Veterans to apply and enroll for an education and career counseling benefit

Agency Objective. Increase the take-up of education and career counseling benefits among interested Veterans using email outreach designed using behavioral insights.

Background. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) is committed to help military Servicemembers fully reintegrate back into society through education, training, and career counseling programs.⁵⁵ VA's Chapter 36 Education and Career Counseling benefit (Chapter 36) is a reintegration service provided by VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Education office (VR&E). Chapter 36 services include personalized counseling on education, career options, and accessing related VA benefits.⁵⁶ The Chapter 36 application process is paper-based and involves multiple steps, which may create barriers to access.

Methods. VR&E, in collaboration with the Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) and academic researchers, identified email as a low cost tool to inform Veterans about Chapter 36 benefits, their eligibility, the application process, and what to expect after an application was submitted.⁵⁷ Eligible Veterans with a valid email address on record were randomly assigned to one of three conditions:⁵⁸ (1) *Business as usual*: sent no email from the VA about the benefit ($n = 21,423$); (2) *Basic email*: sent an email that explained they were eligible for free career counseling and provided a link to download the application form ($n = 21,424$); and (3) *Earned*: sent an email otherwise identical to the basic email, but with an emphasis on the fact

that Veterans had earned the benefit through their service ($n = 21,423$).⁵⁹ To measure the impact of the emails, four outcomes were tracked using existing VA data: email open rates, click rates (on the link to the application form), applications submitted, and Veterans who completed services with counseling.

Results. The *Earned* email outperformed the *Basic* email on open (42.6 versus 40.0 percent, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [1.6, 3.6]) and click rates (4.1 vs 3.6 percent, $p < 0.03$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.89]). The emails increased applications and completion of services with counseling measurably, but overall uptake rates remained low. Without the emails, rates of application remained near 0 (only one person in the *Business as usual* group applied for benefits during the trial period); the *Basic* email increased applications to 0.37 percent ($p < 0.01$) and the *Earned* email to 0.30 percent ($p < 0.01$). There is no meaningful difference between the two emails ($p = 0.79$).

Conclusions. These results suggest that email can be an inexpensive and effective way to share information about Chapter 36 benefits, but that they may not lead to substantial improvements in utilization. More extensive changes may be necessary to promote access to these benefits. However, communication about VA benefits should describe the benefits as those that Veterans have earned through their service.

⁵⁵ See: va.gov/op3/docs/strategicplanning/va2014-2020strategicplan.pdf.

⁵⁶ For more on Chapter 36 benefits, see: benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/edu_voc_counseling.asp

⁵⁷ David W. Nickerson collaborated with OES on this project.

⁵⁸ The random assignment was stratified by branch of service, state of residence, age, years since discharge, and prior benefits used; to improve statistical efficiency, all analysis includes a dummy variable to account for strata of randomization.

⁵⁹ Daniel Kahneman, Jack L. Knetsch, and Richard H. Thaler, "Experimental Tests of the Endowment Effect and the Coase Theorem," *Journal of Political Economy* 98 (1990): 1325–1348. Tanjim Hossain and John A. List, "The Behavioralist Visits the Factory: Increasing Productivity Using Simple Framing Manipulations," *Management Science* 58 (2012): 2151–2167.