

INTERNET AND INTRANET SERVICES

1. **REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Handbook implements the policies contained in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Directive 6102, Internet and Intranet Services.
2. **SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This revision redefines Internet and Intranet Services to include all planning, design, maintenance, support, and any other functions related to the creation and the administration of Websites, Web-based applications, Web-based services, and other applications that use Web technologies (e.g., mobile applications) on behalf of VA regardless of where they are hosted. It also establishes an online repository (<https://www.va.gov/web/>) that provides additional official guidance for content management, technical management, best practices, standards, and requirements for VA Internet Websites.
3. **RESPONSIBLE OFFICES:** Assistant Secretary for the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (002) and Assistant Secretary for the Office of Information and Technology (005).
4. **RELATED DIRECTIVES AND HANDBOOKS:**
 - a. VA Directive 0023, Tier 1 Graphic Standards
 - b. VA Handbook 0023, Tier 1 Graphic Standards, Appendix A
 - c. VA Directive 6001, Limited Personal Use of Government Office Equipment Including Information Technology
 - d. VA Directive 6008, Acquisition and Management of VA Information Technology Resources
 - e. VA Directive 6102, Internet/Intranet Services.
 - f. VA Directive 6221, Accessible Electronic and Information Technology
 - g. VA Handbook 6300.1, Records Management Procedures
 - h. VA Handbook 6300.5, Procedures for Establishing and Managing Privacy Act Systems of Records
 - i. VA Handbook 6310.1, Forms Management Procedures
 - j. VA Directive 6361, Ensuring Quality of Information Disseminated by VA
 - k. VA Handbook 6361, Ensuring Quality of Information Disseminated by VA
 - l. VA Directive 6500, Managing Information Security Risk: VA Information Security Program

- m. VA Handbook 6500, Risk Management Framework for VA Information Systems - Tier 3: VA Information Security Program
- n. VA Handbook 6502.3, Webpage Privacy Policy
- o. VA Directive 6508, Implementation of Privacy Threshold Analysis and Privacy Impact Statement
- p. VA Handbook 6508.1, Procedures for Privacy Threshold Analysis and Privacy Impact Assessment
- q. VA Directive 6515, Use of Web-Based Collaboration Technologies

5. **RESCISSION:** VA Handbook 6102, Internet/Intranet Services dated July 15, 2008.

CERTIFIED BY:

**BY DIRECTION OF THE
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Table of Contents

INTERNET AND INTRANET SERVICES..... 5

- 1. PURPOSE..... 5
- 2. SCOPE..... 5
- 3. POLICY..... 5
- 4. RESPONSIBILITIES..... 6
- 5. E-Government Requirements Relevant to Information Architecture..... 11
- 6. Section 508 Accessibility 12

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INTERNET AND INTRANET SERVICES

1. PURPOSE.

This handbook provides Federal and agency mandates and requirements for establishing and administering Internet and Intranet Web services for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Internet and Intranet services and assets are defined as Websites, Web-based applications, Web-based services, collaborative tools, or other Web-based technologies and have a VA designed or managed, publicly available client interface such as a mobile app or Web-based application depending on the manner in which such tools and technologies are employed.

2. SCOPE.

The handbook applies to all full-time and part-time employees, contractors, interns, and volunteers who design, maintain, or oversee VA Internet and Intranet assets. It applies to assets on the va.gov domain and other domains that have received permission from the VA Assistant Secretary for the Office of Information Technology (AS/OIT) to operate on VA's behalf or with VA funding regardless of where they are hosted. Non-compliance with the standards put forth in this document may result in the removal of assets until they are deemed compliant.

3. POLICY.

- a. VA promotes the secure and effective use of Internet services to improve access to and delivery of information to Veterans, their families, and the general public. VA also promotes the secure and effective use of Intranet services to improve access to and delivery of information to VA employees, contractors, interns, and volunteers. Information will include the policies, programs, activities, and objectives of VA. Internet services will also be used to obtain information from public and private organizations consistent with applicable legal requirements. Internet and Intranet services will be used as a means of empowering employees in their work.
- b. VA has established an online repository that provides additional official guidance for content management, technical management, best practices, standards, and requirements for VA Internet Websites. This online repository (<https://www.va.gov/web/>) will be updated as Federal regulations or policy, Departmental policy, or standards change. The guidance contained in the online repository is an extension of this handbook and shall be considered with the same authority.
- c. VA Websites must use the va.gov domain. Requests for exemptions must be sent to the appropriate approving authority (i.e., for National Cemetery Administration (NCA)-NCA Web Support Team, for Veterans Health Administration (VHA)-VHA Digital Media, for Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)-VBA Web Communications, for Office of Information Technology-IT Strategic Communication, for VA Central Office-All Others-VA Web Governance).

These requests will be forwarded to the AS/OIT and must include a detailed justification for using a domain other than va.gov. Establishment of a new .gov domain requires a written request from the AS/OIT to General Services Administration (GSA) for approval. No waivers for VA Websites developed in collaboration with non-Federal partners (e.g., a local university or medical research facility) are permitted; VA Websites developed in collaboration with non-Federal partners are subject to all Federal rules and regulations and all VA requirements as set forth in this handbook.

- d. Organizational use of Internet and Intranet services must reflect the mission of VA, and support VA's mission, goals, and objectives. These services must support legitimate, mission-related activities of VA and be consistent with prudent operational, security, and privacy considerations. Organizational use of Government office information technology (IT) (equipment, peripherals, etc.) should be consistent with the provisions of any applicable VA Directive or Handbook.
- e. VA Internet and Intranet services operating on behalf of VA must be designed to support the widest range of potential users and computing platforms and must be compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES.

- a. **Secretary of Veterans Affairs.** The Secretary has designated the Chief Information Officer (CIO) as the senior agency official responsible for the Department's IT programs, and the Assistant Secretary of Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (AS/OPIA) as the senior agency official responsible for Web content and presentation.
- b. **Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology (AS/OIT)/Chief Information Officer (CIO).** The CIO is responsible for the effective use of VA's Internet, Intranet, and other IT resources, and Department-wide directives and policies governing the use and implementation of Internet and other IT resources. The CIO shall:
 - (1) Provide technical support consistent with existing CIO responsibilities.
 - (2) Establish policy and procedural guidance for establishing, operating, and maintaining VA IT services, including those operated by non-VA entities for VA.
 - (3) Maintain liaisons with Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key Officials, to ensure effective dissemination of VA information via Internet and Intranet services.
 - (4) Review and approve additions and changes to IT policy and procedures as suggested by the VA Web Governance Board.

- (5) Provide recommendations on IT services and risk management issues.
 - (6) Ensure the monitoring of all VA-wide systems for compliance with security and privacy statements contained in the respective Privacy Act Impact Assessments (PIA).
 - (7) Provide access to internal and external infrastructure resources to host approved VA Websites, Web-based applications, and Web-based services. Ensure compliance with all Federal laws, regulations, and Department-wide policies and requirements regarding IT operational and developmental standards.
 - (8) Maintain liaisons with Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key Officials to ensure effective dissemination of VA information via the Internet.
 - (9) Support and manage VA's Internet and Intranet presence to ensure OIT offices support of VA's Internet and Intranet services and ensure compliance with all Federal laws, regulations, mandates, and guidance, as well as Department-wide policies, requirements, and initiatives regarding IT operational and developmental standards.
- c. **Assistant Secretary for the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (AS/OPIA).** The AS/OPIA manages communications with Veterans, the general public, and VA employees. This responsibility includes coordination and distribution of the information VA communicates to its audiences, especially to the general public through traditional and online media, and the provision of public affairs policy guidance for the Department. The AS/OPIA shall:
- (1) Work with the CIO, Office of General Counsel, Web Communications Offices, and content managers to ensure that all public affairs concerns are addressed regarding the use of externally-facing Web assets.
 - (2) Provide guidance on acceptable content for externally-facing Web assets and direct removal or alteration of content that does not meet Departmental policy and guidance.
 - (3) Work with the CIO to develop an external online strategy ensuring the guidelines set forth within this policy adheres to Federal guidelines.
 - (4) Serve as the office responsible for providing organizations throughout the Department with content standards for the use of online communications.
 - (5) Review and approve or disapprove branding, format, and layout of Department's externally-facing Web assets in coordination with recommendations from the Web Governance Board.

- (6) Work with the appropriate VA records officers and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) to establish a Records Control Schedule (RCS) for VA records generated via VA's externally-facing Web assets that are not covered by an existing RCS.
 - (7) Establish the Department's Web interface, look and feel, and major design elements as approved by the Web Governance Board and obtain funding to secure the development and implementation of the interface for the enterprise.
 - (8) Publish Department-wide materials of significant events and initiatives.
- d. **VA Web Governance Board (WGB).** The WGB will include designated representatives from Administrations and key Staff Offices across VA and membership will be limited to VA staff only. This group will serve as the principal entity which acts on the Secretary's behalf with respect to VA Web policy, procedures, and guidance. This group shall:
- (1) Act as the final authority on all Web-related content outlined in VA directives, policies, and standards.
 - (2) Establish VA Web policies, procedures, and best practices as appropriate.
 - (3) Report to the VA CIO on Web-related technology priorities and the AS/OPIA on all matters pertaining to the dissemination of information and the effectiveness of VA's Web communications.
 - (4) Make recommendations on the use of the Internet or Intranet services within VA to the VA CIO. Coordinate Web efforts between entities and organizations across the enterprise.
 - (5) Escalate requests to the VA CIO for non-va.gov domains and use of non-VA business. Raise issues and request input and guidance from the CIO for issues beyond the scope of the VA WGB.
 - (6) Monitor VA Web registry certifications.
 - (7) Promote shared training resources and planning across Administrations and Staff Offices. Maintain liaisons with Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, Web Communication Officers, and other key officials to ensure effective dissemination of VA information via the Internet and Intranet.
 - (8) Meet quarterly at a minimum; more frequently as needed to provide timely collaboration regarding emergent issues.
 - (9) Provide communications oversight to Web activities within their respective organizations as outlined in this handbook and as designated by their respective organizations.

- (10) Develop and maintain Internet and Intranet Websites that provide additional Department-wide guidance for content management, technical management, best practices, standards, and requirements for VA-funded Websites.
- (11) Ensure the uniform application of the requirements, mandates, and recommendations discussed in related VA directives, handbooks, and associated guidance.
- (12) Conduct periodic reviews of external-facing Web assets to ensure alignment with Department messaging, common look and feel, and priorities, and certify that those assets may continue to operate after audits are conducted.

e. Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key Officials.

- (1) These officials will ensure the implementation of VA Internet and Intranet services policies within their respective Administrations and Staff Offices. These officials will also ensure that VA information and information resources are protected from unlawful and unauthorized use, access, tampering, destruction, and unauthorized release of sensitive information, which is defined as information that requires protection due to the risk and magnitude of loss or harm that could result from inadvertent or deliberate disclosure, alteration, or destruction of the information. The term includes information whose improper use or disclosure could adversely affect the ability of an agency to accomplish its mission, proprietary information, records about individuals requiring protection under the Privacy Act, and information not releasable under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).
- (2) Administrations and Staff Offices will establish more restrictive guidance for use within their respective organizations when deemed necessary. This guidance will be reviewed by the respective authoritative responsible office/group to ensure there is no conflict with Department-wide guidance.

f. Web Communication Offices (WCO). This title refers to the offices/individuals responsible for Internet or Intranet Web communications. The WCOs shall:

- (1) Serve as the liaison for Web and social media related inquiries and requests to OPIA, CIO, and other entities in VA.
- (2) Communicate and enforce Web policy issues as outlined by this handbook and associated online repositories for Internet and Intranet, and other supplemental guidelines which may be issued by the Administrations.
- (3) Approve the creation of new Websites and the major modification of existing Websites, Web-based applications, Web-based services, and other social Websites within their jurisdiction.
- (4) Review and analyze Web data and metrics and recommend improvements as necessary.

- (5) Ensure that Web assets focus on helping the target audience efficiently find the services and information they seek from VA. VA Web pages must help visitors access the content they need with minimal complexity. Content must be intelligible without excessive text or graphics.
 - (6) Ensure that Web hyperlinks are directing visitors to the authoritative source for content and are not duplicated or recreated on the non-authoritative source Web asset.
 - (7) Conduct periodic audits of Web content and branding for compliance with this Handbook, associated online repositories for Internet and Intranet, and ensure needed corrective action is taken. WCOs may enact additional content standards and review cycles or remove content or Web pages deemed not compliant with this policy or supplemental policy or guidelines set forth by the WCOs.
 - (8) Serve as Web management and social media management subject matter experts for their organization.
 - (9) Communicate guidance, policy interpretation, recommendations, and other feedback to ensure effective practices by Web Managers.
- g. **Program Office or Facility Site.** The lead (e.g., Chief Officer, VBA Regional Office Director, VBA Program Office Director, VHA Program Chief Officer, Veterans Integrated Service Network Director, key official, Staff Office Director) of each program office or facility with a Web asset shall:
- (1) Be responsible for the content of the documents posted on the service or Website (including papers, studies, forms, pictures, and graphics), ensuring that information posted on the identified Internet or Intranet Website is current, accurate, factual, relevant to the VA mission, and spell-checked and grammatically correct.
 - (2) Ensure that VA Internet and Intranet services and Websites operating on VA's behalf conform to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended;
 - (3) Ensure that Internet and Intranet service or Website server environments under their purview are secured as outlined in VA Handbook 6500, Risk Management Framework for VA Information Systems - Tier 3: VA Information Security Program, and will coordinate with security personnel issues material to the environments that fall within the purview of the Office of Information and Technology.
 - (4) Appoint an individual for each Program Office/organization with an official Internet or Intranet service or Website to provide management oversight to maintain the Website(s). This individual must provide technical management to maintain the Website(s) and must be knowledgeable about the technical issues regarding the publishing of a Web page, including navigation,

branding, page formats, metatags, graphics, and other attributes that provide the framework and corporate appearance for publishing content.

- (5) Designate an individual for each Program Office/organization for the service or Website who will be accountable for the information disseminated by a particular service or Website that meets the mission of their respective program or organization. This individual must be knowledgeable of VA's communications and public affairs policies, procedures, and organization messages and shall be accountable for the information disseminated by a particular Website that meets the mission of their respective program or organization. Ensures that Web page content is current, accurate, factual, relevant to the VA or Program Office mission, and spell-checked and grammatically correct.

(Note: While it is advised that different people serve in the roles described in (4) and (5) above, they may be combined if suitable.)

- h. **Web Manager.** The Web Manager may include the designation of a Web Content Lead or Web Technical Lead. In this role, the Web Manager (or Web/Technical Lead) must be a Federal employee and be knowledgeable of VA communications and public affairs policies, procedures, and organizational messages. They are accountable for the information published by a particular Internet or Intranet asset that meets the mission of their respective program or organization. The Web Manager must ensure all content is current, accurate, factual, relevant to the VA or program office mission, spell-checked, grammatically correct, and compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Public Law 93-112.

(1) The Web Manager (or Web/Technical Lead) must also be knowledgeable about the technical issues regarding the maintenance or management of the Internet or Intranet asset to include its branding, navigation, page formats, graphics, and other attributes that provide the framework and corporate appearance. The Web Manager may work alone or with a consortium of IT professionals, to design, publish, and maintain its asset.

(2) The Web Manager (or Web/Technical Lead) must maintain and certify Web Registry (vaww.va.gov/webregistry) entries annually or as changes occur for each asset with an assigned Uniform Resource Locator (URL) on the "va.gov" domain, and other domains that have received permission from the AS/OIT to operate on VA's behalf or with VA funding.

5. E-Government Requirements Relevant to Information Architecture.

The E-Government Act of 2002 provides information, guidance, and requirements that apply to a variety of subjects, including the categorization of information, public access to electronic information, standards for agency Websites, usability, and the preservation of Government information. Subject to the requirements of this

handbook, VA will provide guidance, but defer to each Administration on e-Government requirements relevant to information architecture and Website content updates including the following:

- a. Making determinations about and developing inventories, priorities and schedules for Website content, and making Government information available and accessible to the public, in accordance with public comment, and posting this information on an administration's or staff office's Website.
- b. Assuring suitable information and service quality that is consistent with information quality requirements discussed elsewhere in this handbook. This includes clearly identifying the limitations inherent in the information dissemination product (e.g., possibility of errors, degree of reliability, and validity) making users fully aware of the quality and integrity of the information or service being provided, removing the limitations inherent in the information if any, and reconsidering delivery of the information or services. This encompasses establishing and maintaining communications with members of the public and with state and local governments to ensure that the agency creates information dissemination products that satisfactorily meet their respective needs; presenting information on available benefits and services; and determining whether any individual document or documents on their Federal agency public Website(s) requires translation.

6. Section 508 Accessibility

- a. **Section 508 Compliance.** Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires that electronic and information technology provided by the Federal Government be accessible to persons with disabilities, including employees (Intranet) and members of the public (Internet) to the extent it does not pose an undue burden. Section 508 addresses various means, tools, and methods for disseminating information, including but not limited to computers, software, electronic office equipment, page design, and attributes (e.g., the use of graphics, animation, moving images, fonts, page navigation, etc.). It applies to, but is not solely focused on, Federal pages on the Internet and Intranet.

(1) Application of Section 508 to Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

(2) Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act applies to information and communication technologies in the Federal sector, including those used for communication, duplication, computing, storage, presentation, control, transport, and production. This includes computers, software, networks, peripherals, and other types of electronic office equipment. The standards define electronic and information technology, in part, as "any equipment or interconnected system or subsystem of equipment, that is used in the creation, conversion, or duplication of data or information." In addition, it includes telecommunications products including telephones, information

- kiosks, and transaction machines, world wide Websites, multimedia and office equipment (e.g., copiers, fax machines), and also includes the support services for computers, ancillary equipment, software, firmware, and similar procedures and related resources.
- (3) The U.S. Access Board's ICT Accessibility Standards impact on people with disabilities who use VA's electronic and information technology including VA Websites and VA Web-based applications. VA Web managers must ensure that the content and technical standards of all Webpages, files, and any documents or other content made available on VA Websites or via Web-based applications, collaboration tools such as SharePoint or devices conform to Section 508 and the U.S. Access Board's accessibility standards, specifically the requirements of Web-based Intranet and Internet information and applications.
- b. **Section 508 Accessibility Requirement.** Accessibility is ensuring that content can be navigated and read by everyone, regardless of location, experience, or the type of computer technology used. VA Web managers must ensure that all Webpages, documents, and files posted to the Web or to a collaboration tool or the mobile Web must be accessible.
- Note:** A Microsoft Word document that is converted to a portable document format (PDF) for posting usually retains the structure to support access using a screen reader. A graphical pdf, PiCture eXchange (.pcx), Joint Photographic Experts Group (.jpg), or Tagged Image Format (.tif) document, i.e., a scanned document in one of these graphical formats, however, is not in compliance unless the document has been run through a "paper capture" or similar optical character recognition (OCR) routine to make the graphical PDF accessible. Graphical PDF documents are otherwise considered to contain non-text elements which would then need to have an accompanying text equivalent. Web audit tools will be used to monitor compliance. The Section 508 Office can assist with auditing documents and validation services to Web content authors and provide tools that can assist in meeting document accessibility requirements. Many of the document authoring tools have a built-in accessibility checker within the tool that can be used to assess potential accessibility issues within documents authored. It is recommended that the accessibility checker be used to meet Section 508 regulations for document accessibility.
- c. **Contacting VA's Section 508 Office.** For information, guidance, and auditing assistance, contact Section508@va.gov and review the [Section 508 Website](#).