



Digital Navigator Program: Connecting Veterans and their families to earned benefits

Digital Services: Government to Citizen
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs' (WDVA) mission is "Serving those who served." In support of this mission, we connect Service Members, Veterans, and Family Members (SMVF) with their earned benefits, healthcare, and other supportive services that allow Veteran and military households to thrive. However, many SMVF do not have access to critical services due to geographic and transportation barriers. WDVA's Pilot Digital Navigation Program (DNP) provided SMVF with digital equipment, digital literacy instruction, and a digital identity that allows them to fully access the benefits, care, and support they earned through their service.

In October 2022, WDVA received funding from the Washington State Department of Commerce's Digital Equity Program to provide digital equipment and literacy instruction to Veterans across Washington state, focusing on underserved low-income and rural Veterans. Through the grant, WDVA's Pilot DNP distributed 1,213 technology kits to eligible Veteran and military households across 30 counties, including in some of Washington State's most rural areas. The technology kits consisted of Chromebook laptop computers, 5G cellphone with hotspot, and two-year unlimited data/service plan. Additionally, WDVA procured and provided Google Classroom licenses to continue client training on digital technology skills and State and Federal Veteran services.

Low-income and rural Veterans are some of our most vulnerable residents, frequently lacking access to critical healthcare, housing, financial, employment, educational and other services. Access to equipment and training through the DNP eliminated critical roadblocks to these services by removing transportation, geographic and information barriers. The impact of connecting these Veterans cannot be fully described in words and numbers. Giving Veterans a Chromebook and a smart phone doesn't just connect them to resources. As we heard from our participants, it gives them hope, encouragement and a future they can build for themselves.

As a result, over 1,200 disconnected Veterans can now access earned benefits and services such as messaging with medical providers, ordering prescription refills and connecting to other programs previously unavailable to them.

IDEA

Low-income and rural Veterans frequently experience economic and social hardship because of lack of access to benefits, healthcare and other supportive services. Connecting veterans to their earned benefits and providing wrap-around support from other WDVA, Federal, and community programs is critical to ensuring Veterans can thrive. The focus of the Washington Department of Veteran Affairs (WDVA) Digital Navigation Program is to leverage technology to help low-income and rural Veterans access their earned benefits. Through access to equipment and digital connectivity, WDVA Digital Navigator Program removes critical geographic and transportation barriers to access.

This project addresses several state and national mandates including the [NASCIO State CIO Top](#)

WHAT IS THE DIGITAL NAVIGATOR PROGRAM?

- A grant-funded initiative within WDVA, supported by the Department of Commerce, providing technology kits, digital connectivity and digital literacy instruction.
- Aimed at lower-income Veteran and Service Member households in Washington state with incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, to help them access earned benefits, healthcare and other supportive services.
- Veterans receive a Chromebook laptop, a 5G cell phone with hotspot, a 2-year unlimited data/service plan, and 1-year help desk support.



[Ten Priorities](#) – Digital Government/Digital Services, Broadband/Wireless Connectivity, and the goals of the [Washington State Enterprise IT Strategic Plan](#):

Goal #1: Create a Government Experience that Leaves No Community Behind – Through a connected government that emphasizes service delivery and the experience of those we serve, we can achieve equitable outcomes across our communities.

Goal #3: Innovative Technology Solutions Create a Better Washington – Prioritize solutions emphasizing access, technology, and innovation to address systemic societal challenges and align our decision-making for those we serve.

IMPLEMENTATION

WDVA entered into the interagency agreement with the Department of Commerce late in the program grant cycle. This allowed very little time to hire staff, procure equipment and services, and establish business processes to facilitate statewide eligibility determination and distribution. WDVA received significant consultation support from other grantees, most notably Goodwill, to assist with implementing a business model and best practices. Additionally, the WDVA Digital Navigation Program leveraged relationships with other WDVA programs and offices, the Federal VA, local Veteran Service Organizations (VSO's) and VetCorps (AmeriCorps) to quickly scale the strategic reach of our community engagement and distribution efforts.

Lack of ramp-up time also limited our ability to implement automated case management and asset management systems or develop and implement advanced digital literacy instruction support. Consequently, the DNP implemented manual case management and asset management systems and scaled digital literacy instruction to basic introductory training. Guidebooks and resources were also provided to clients at events, and additional resources were published on WDVA's DNP website. Automated systems and advanced training will be implemented in the next grant cycle.

WDVA's DNP partnered with the Federal VA, other WDVA programs and offices, and county, Tribal, and non-profit Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) throughout the state to extend the geographic reach and ensure program access to Veterans living in rural areas. WDVA also provided a supplemental stipend to and utilized Vet Corp (AmeriCorps) members at community colleges and VSOs throughout the state. VSOs and Vet Corps members participated in outreach and marketing to eligible Veterans, helped Veterans submit program applications, and assisted DNP staff (Digital Navigators) to host distribution clinics and work individually with Veterans on equipment setup and distribution. By developing distribution networks with partner organizations, WDVA was able to hold 59 events at 38 sites in 30 counties.

WDVA's equipment and services vendors (T-Mobile and Premier Wireless) were helpful in identifying an effective and efficient balance of equipment and services. WDVA also negotiated for vendors to provide help desk services so that WDVA did not incur any long-term agency support liability. Client eligibility determination was based on client self-attestation of income and discharge status, reducing staff work. The most labor-intensive element was client setup and distribution, with overall time dependent on individual client digital literacy levels and Wi-Fi connectivity at distribution sites. WDVA leveraged staff at partner Veteran Service Organization (VSO) sites and Vet Corps (AmeriCorps) members (for which the DNP paid a supplemental stipend). Digital literacy instruction was simplified, focusing on introductory instruction on how to set up and use basic Chromebook functions, including connecting to the cell phone hotspot for internet connectivity.



WDVA’s Pilot Digital Navigation Program (DNP) was funded through a \$2.5 million grant from the Washington State Department of Commerce. Final program expenditures were:

Staff Salary and Benefits	\$ 255,214
Vet Corps (AmeriCorps) Supplemental Stipends	93,564
Goods and Services	20,325
Travel	28,696
Technology Kit Components and Service Plans	1,938,592
Shared Administrative Services	168,288
Total	\$ 2,504,679

IMPACT

WDVA exceeds technology distribution goal by more than 20%

WDVA’s goal was to distribute 1,000 technology kits with internet access and basic digital literacy instruction to lower-income Veterans within eight months. In partnership with our vendors, WDVA was able to extend funding to purchase 1,250 technology kits with a Chromebook, 5G cellphone with hotspot, and two-year T-Mobile unlimited data/service plan. As a result, WDVA exceeded the target outcomes by more than 20%, providing equipment and introductory digital literacy instruction to 1,213 Veteran and military households by the end of June 2023. WDVA also procured 1,250 Google Classroom licenses to continue client training on digital technology skills and State and Federal Veteran services.

Another goal of the program was to demonstrate capacity to reach underserved rural and vulnerable Veterans. As noted above, by developing distribution networks with the Federal VA, other WDVA programs and offices, and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) across Washington, WDVA was able to hold 59 distribution clinics at 38 sites in 30 counties. Sites included Federal VA facilities and WDVA’s Transitional Housing Program, where we serve some of Washington’s most vulnerable Veterans. In addition, WDVA trained and partnered with over 30 VetCorps (AmeriCorps) members at community colleges and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) across the state. These relationships significantly expanded our strategic reach, enabling WDVA to access Veterans in some of Washington’s most rural areas. This has allowed disconnected Veterans to access many earned benefits including messaging with medical providers, ordering prescription refills, and accessing other supportive services otherwise unavailable to them.

WDVA’s Pilot Digital Navigation Program (DNP) is a model initiative that can and should be replicated across the country. Low-income and rural Veterans frequently experience economic and social hardship because of lack of access to benefits, healthcare, and other supportive services. Connecting veterans to their earned benefits and providing wrap-around support from other WDVA, Federal, and community programs is critical to ensuring Veterans can thrive. The focus of WDVA’s Pilot Digital Navigation Program was to demonstrate that technology can be leveraged to help low-income and rural Veterans access their earned benefits. Through access to equipment and digital connectivity, the DNP removed serious geographic and transportation barriers to access.



Success Stories

U.S. Army Veteran

Challenge: A Veteran who attended the King County Veterans Office Digital Navigator Program kit distribution in April and shared that he is a participant in the WDVA Reentry Program, a program to address the needs of veterans incarcerated in County Correctional Facilities, offering alternatives to jail and referral to housing, employment services and treatment. He was unable to access online certifications for the certification program he wanted.

Solution: He is taking advantage of the resources provided to him by our program to help him transition back into the workforce. His case manager provided job referral and placement services, and he chose to pursue a Certified Personal Trainer and Nutritionist certification to become a Health and Wellness Trainer. He was introduced to the Digital Navigator Program and qualified to receive a kit.

Result: The Veteran received a Digital Navigator Kit and shared the website he planned to receive his certification from with the Digital Navigator assisting him.



“I am thankful for the second chance I was given, and the resources provided by the VA, the Digital Navigator Program, and my case manager. Now, I can look forward to getting my certification and pursuing my passion for fitness. I am truly grateful.”

- U.S. Army Veteran

U.S. Air Force Veteran, Michael Moore

Challenge: Michael Moore attended the King County Veterans Office Digital Navigator Program kit distribution in April and was in critical need of a phone. His personal phone broke, and he was awaiting a call for an apartment with the help of the WDVA Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program. He applied to several jobs and was concerned about not being contacted by employers or hearing from approval authorities for his application for an apartment.

Solution: Michael’s case manager informed him of the Digital Navigator Program and a kit containing a cellphone, laptop, and internet connection. He applied and was approved.

Result: Upon receiving his kit and examining the phone, he immediately thanked the Digital Navigator, who assisted him with the setup. Michael was relieved and talked about how receiving the Digital Navigator kit could not have come at a better time and that he now had the means to check his email for employer and apartment leasing correspondence.



“This is great! I’m finally at a point where I can move into an apartment and can get employed and I broke my phone just a few days ago.” I wasn’t sure how I was going to contact anyone, and this is perfect timing so that I can move forward with getting a job and finally getting a place to live.”

- Michael Moore