

Guidance for Surveys used for VA Operational and Research Purposes

Updated 2016

This document is an “instruction book” meant to provide useful information to assist researchers and other VA employees to conduct pertinent surveys when in compliance with VHA Research Handbook, ORD and ORO policies. This document was created June 2014 and updated August 2016 and should not be used as the final answer in planning or conducting survey research, but rather, a starting place to save the researcher time in seeking the appropriate reviews and approvals for survey research. Current information (including the current year’s employee survey **blackout dates**) should be available at: <http://www.research.va.gov/resources/oasc.cfm>.

When considering survey methodology for research or certain operational projects, especially when **employees** will be surveyed, please be aware of the following information/guidelines.

1. Create your survey and research protocol or Process Improvement/ Quality Improvement (PI/QI) proposed project plan.
2. Determine which VA approved survey platform you will use for your protocol and **VERIFY** they are approved for VA use by contacting the VA Office of Information & Technology (OI&T).

As of this writing, Survey Monkey has been given *unofficial* authorization by VA, meaning that it is not on VA’s TRM. Survey Monkey may be used if querying internal staff on non-sensitive topics (for instance, which topics have priority among staff for upcoming educational in-services on your unit). For questions regarding the use of Survey Monkey, please contact **Joseph Holston, ORD** Information Security Officer, at (202) 443-5622 or Joseph.Holston@va.gov .

3. Surveys of **Employees** must be approved by the Organizational Assessment Sub-Committee (OASC) if the survey will be administered to 1,000 or more VA employees, or in 10 or more VA medical centers (OASC must review if either criterion is met). **Only surveys, and not interviews or observational data collection, require OASC review. See Appendix A. All types of surveys – research, operational, process or quality improvement, or program evaluation - require OASC review, unless they are administered to fewer than 1000 employees and administered in fewer than 10 VA medical centers.**

There is a national VA concern regarding employee survey burden, so OASC will question whether data is already being collected outside of a proposed survey and will look critically at the length of a survey.

4. Obtain all appropriate IRB, VA Information Security Officer, Privacy Officer and Research & Development (R & D) committee approvals according to VHA policy and federal regulations (obtain these approvals prior to OASC review).
 - Please Note: Typically, it is the facility or Central **IRB** (CIRB) who makes the determination between “quality improvement or evaluation” and “research” surveys. “Research” surveys require IRB approval; researchers administering PI/QI surveys require IRB review and determination that the surveys are indeed PI/QI and do not require IRB approval.
 - Educational Class Evaluations given after educational activities (to guide the delivery of future educational offerings) do not typically fall under a “research survey” classification. Requesting Staff to complete course evaluations would not need IRB approval, unless they are part of a pre-test/post-test instrument designed for the purpose of research.

5. Seek Union notification if any VA employees will be surveyed:
 - Local Union notification if only local (within the VAMC) employees will be surveyed. Please contact your local facility's HR department and arrange with them to have any necessary union(s) notified.
 - For studies distributing surveys beyond the a single facility level but still within the VISN level, contact your VISN's HR department and arrange with them to have any necessary union(s) notified
 - VA national Unions (there are 5 Regional Union groups) need to be formally notified of the survey if the survey is distributed across more than one VISN.
 - Do not contact the national/regional unions or National Partnership Council (NPC) directly! - Go through the Office of Labor - Management Relations (LMR); A request for survey notification must be placed in the VA Intranet Quorum (VAIQ) and sent to LMR. That request will be initiated by one of two parties: If the study is HSR&D or QUERI, email guillaume.cheron@va.gov, otherwise email VHA10P9ORDOps@va.gov with all relevant survey documents. Please be sure to include the survey's point of contact so an LMR Specialist can gather pertinent information for the notification. LMR will need to provide at least 30 days advance notice to the Union(s) before the survey can be administered and will need several additional days to gather information from the point of contact and put together the official notification. You will find information here: <http://www.research.va.gov/resources/oasc.cfm>. The documents to send for VAIQ entry are the following attached together in one .pdf:
 - A copy of the survey.
 - A list of the selected sites or of sites that are considered to receive the survey
 - A brief description of the study (including what is being studied and what types of VA personnel will be studied).
 - What participation entails. (e.g., how much time is required for subjects to participate). Please note that the survey **must** be voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Please state this explicitly.
 - Types of data being collected (e.g., survey, interview guide).
 - Study team contact information.
6. Submit your survey to the approved platform (options may include Qualtrics, Sharepoint, or Verint). See **Appendix B**.
 - The VHA National Center for Organizational Development (NCOD; See Appendix A) is an internal VA resource which can help you with the various stages of building your web-based survey: initial planning, development, administration, data collection and analysis, and action planning. They use Verint software, approved for VA use. The web-based survey will be housed behind the VA firewall.
 - This resource is typically free for VA offices – check with NCOD for more information.
 - Their website is http://vaww.va.gov/NCOD/NCOD_Assessment_Consultation_Team_ACT.asp
7. When surveys or interviews collect the same information from more than 9 individuals who are not VA employees, specifically Veterans and others outside VA, they survey requires OMB approval or exemption. NOTE: VA employees are NOT subject to OMB survey requirements. Contact your VA program or research office or consult OMB requirements (see Contacts/Resources below.)
8. Make sure to place all appropriate approvals in your project's regulatory binder (if applicable)!

For other resources for survey options see **Appendix B**.

Important Contacts/Resources:

- ✚ VA research policy and VHA Research handbook is located on:
<http://vaww.research.va.gov/resources/policies/default.cfm>
- ✚ Office of Labor-Management Relations (LMR) contact: Ryan Fulcher, LR Specialist for LMR: Ryan.Fulcher@va.gov
- ✚ OASC contact: OASC via phone at NCOD (513-247-4680) or e-mail (VHANCOD@va.gov). Researchers should contact Dr. David Mohr via phone (857-364-5679) or email (David.Mohr2@va.gov).
- ✚ NCOD: Nate Corley (nathan.corley@va.gov or 513-247-2252 ET).
- ✚ For Office of Management and Budget (OMB) questions regarding RESEARCH related surveys, contact your research service (such as Linda Lipson for HSR&D)
- ✚ The VHA OMB Liaison (10B4) and PRA Liaison is Ms. Joni Mixon Joni.Mixon@va.gov
- ✚ OMB Statistical Programs and Standards website (including Guidelines for Statistical Surveys): http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/inforg_statpolicy

The OASC, a subcommittee of the Workforce Committee of the VHA National Leadership Council, is responsible for reviewing and approving all research and operations surveys that involve employees.

- The OASC is responsible for the coordination and governance of functions contributing to the goals of survey administration within VHA.
- Current options for additional *operational* (in contrast to *research*) surveys include:
 - VA All Employee Survey modules, kept brief (typically 5 or fewer questions) and administered, typically, to a subset of AES respondents (as defined by respondent demographics);
 - Larger sample *or* census surveys, independently administered by the interested VHA stakeholders (e.g., Program Offices), within OASC-specified time windows so as not to conflict with the national assessment efforts (e.g. AES; Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)).
 - Custom-created surveys, administered to a small respondent population or small sample via survey software.
- Approval process for *research* surveys include:
 - Approval through research regulation process (IRB).
 - OASC approves the timing for these surveys, within specified time windows.
 - OASC connects research survey requestors to the appropriate program offices (e.g., ONS for nursing surveys, ODI for diversity surveys). The Program Office then has the option of supporting or disallowing the requested research survey. The connection with and endorsement by an appropriate program office is optional (rather than required) for those research surveys that are already VA-funded. For non-VA funded research surveys, the Program Office approval is required, as it ensures a balance between scientific/research interest and expected benefits to VA.
 - Survey owners are responsible for the entire administration process.
- The OASC serves as the VHA clearing house for employee surveys, providing advice and assistance to requesting organizations. The goal is to manage the survey burden on VA

employees through oversight of the total number and overall frequency and quality of employee surveys administered, especially national census surveys.

- The OASC informs survey requesting organizations about survey datasets/reports/ results available in VA. The OASC encourages collaboration among survey owners and users in VA, to maximize appropriate use of existing assessments.
- The OASC will set the national survey administration schedule within VHA to ensure approved surveys do not overlap in terms of administration timeframe, target audience, and scope.
- OASC ensures quality of surveys planned for VA workforce, by providing consultation on content and measurement aspects of planned surveys. OASC consultation is focused on quality of surveys to help support validity of survey data and valid action applications of the data. OASC advises on organizational alignment of planned surveys with respect to national priorities.
- OASC supports OASC partners in conducting both management and research studies focused on organization development; OASC is briefed on the results.
- OASC supports and assists with identifying and communicating best practices across the organization, as they impact organizational health and performance.

Criteria for OASC Required Consideration and Coordination:**

- All surveys that meet either one of the criteria below is a candidate for OASC review:
 - Any survey administered to VHA employees in 10 or more VA Medical Centers,
 - Any survey administered to 1,000 or more employees.

Operational Guidance of OASC Coordination:

Once it is determined that a survey is approved, the coordination will operate via the following boundaries:

- The Workforce Committee (WC) has approving authority for all surveys; this authority has been delegated to its sub-committee, the OASC.
- The OASC coordination of operational surveys will result in specific recommendations regarding deployment dates and quality and appropriateness of content. A deployment calendar for operational surveys should minimize employee survey burden by controlling the flow of operational surveys. OASC will recommend that operational surveys never overlap in time and be spaced out through the year.
- The OASC creation of a clearinghouse of research surveys targeting employees will result in an inventory of employee targeted surveys both operational and research in one location.
- The OASC will not function as a review board (e.g. an IRB) for “research” surveys that are funded by the Research Service and have IRB approval.
- The OASC will not coordinate surveys that target “patient” and “citizen” populations, as they are not employees. In the case of patient surveys or other populations (e.g. caregivers), the typical human subject protection oversight committees (IRB, R & D, etc.) for the facility or facilities engaged in the research will need to review and approve (or determine that the survey is PI/QI) before these surveys may be conducted. These surveys also require OMB approval or exemption from OMB review.

Process for Coordination of Surveys that Meet Stated Criteria (above):**

- The owner of the survey needs to submit survey information to the OASC mailbox (VHAOASC@va.gov), that is monitored for both operations and research surveys. For questions about operations surveys contact Nate Corley at NCOD ((nathan.corley@va.gov or 513-247-2252); researchers should contact David Mohr via email (David.Mohr2@va.gov preferred contact) or phone (857-364-5679). OASC has delegated approval authority to Dr. David Mohr for research surveys that have had both peer-review (i.e. are VA funded research) and have IRB approval.
- Please use the following format in your subject line: **OASC Survey Clearinghouse – your name.**

Provide OASC with the following information for clearinghouse purposes:

- Purpose of survey: demonstrate this purpose cannot be met by existing data or known results;
 - Operational surveys must demonstrate the purpose is aligned with major national priorities as opposed to molecular, tactical purposes),
- Intended audience and number invited to participate,
- Modality of survey administration (REDCap, etc.),
- Proposed administration dates
 - Please note: Surveys should not conflict with OASC blackout dates (e.g. around AES, FEVS)
- Provide a copy of the actual survey instrument,
- If a research survey, provide a copy of IRB approval,
- Provide details about how you plan to disseminate the survey to your target respondent group
 - Include: Project processes and timing; responsible parties, and evidence of capacity/capability in place; describe the anticipated use of results by the organization; describe your plan to provide feedback to the target audience (if applicable).
 - This will be followed up by OASC to ensure the planned use has occurred and that the anticipated relevance of results was confirmed; this confirmation will be expected before any further survey requests from the same organization are considered/approved by OASC.
 - After the survey is completed and data are processed, a brief summary of the results and how they were applied will be expected to be provided to OASC.
- Have you piloted the survey with the potential respondent group? (Y/N)
 - If yes, with whom and number of respondents.
- Would you like assistance developing your survey? (Y/N)
 - If Yes, provide: Contact person name and email, and Project Director's name and email

Timeframe for Submission:

- Surveys submitted will be reviewed by the OASC Steering Committee on the first Monday of every month. Feedback will immediately follow.

External Review:

- Surveys submitted will be susceptible to content review by the OASC or a panel approved by the OASC.
 - Questions must be practical for the target audience
 - Questions must be technically valid and appropriate (i.e. appropriate response options, no complex items)

- The requesting investigator or program office must show that previous surveys do not address similar scopes of purpose. They must articulate how specifically what they are trying to establish now is different in the context of what is already known from previous surveys.

Marketing and Administration for Operations Surveys:

- The requesting office must assist with the marketing aspects of the survey
 - Provide documentation regarding the purpose of the survey
 - Develop a Frequently Asked Questions document, etc.

Results Availability for Operations Surveys:

- The requesting office agrees to have published survey results available to the field within 2 months of the close of the survey.

Timeframe of Administration:

- For approved surveys, it is required that blackout dates designated for national surveys such as the all employee survey and Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey should be avoided.
- Blackout dates for 2016: Investigators may not distribute surveys to VA employees in the following timeframes: May 16-June 15 and also from July 18-September 16, 2016. These dates change annually and are listed on: <http://www.research.va.gov/resources/oasc.cfm>

Reminders - Please Note:

The OASC has no jurisdiction over surveys to **Veterans**. Do not send OASC research surveys which do not involve VA employees.

OASC only has authority to review surveys (paper and pencil or web based) and not interviews or observational data collection.

National Union Notification:

OASC review and Union notification may be pursued simultaneously. However, the unions must be provided the final version of the survey instrument. OASC review may require changes to the survey content. Therefore, it may be wise to wait for OASC approval prior to submission for Union review. Survey owners should send the survey instrument and a listing of the sites involved for coordination with the Labor-Management Relations group for national union notification, as described above.

Appendix A

VHA National Center for Organization Development (NCOD)

NCOD provides consultation services and support to VA offices interested in assessing their program, area of service, or other business management processes.

1. NCOD Assessment Consultation Team (ACT) Charter

The charter is a detailed overview of NCOD ACT services, timelines, and responsibilities. ACT can consult and assist VA offices at all stages of the assessment/survey process:

- Initial Planning
- Development
- Administration
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Action Planning

2. Program Evaluation Handout

This is a brief, but comprehensive summary of key evaluation elements to consider when conducting surveys in VA.

Both of the aforementioned documents can be found at:

http://vaww.va.gov/NCOD/NCOD_Assessment_Consultation_Team_ACT.asp

Additional questions? Please contact Nathan Corley (nathan.corley@va.gov or 513-247-2252 ET).

Appendix B: Additional Survey Resources

The key issue regarding use of a survey platform/vendor is whether it is approved by the Office of Information & Technology (OI&T) and meets federal information security requirements. The list of approved platforms does change. Your local information security officer should have the latest information and should make the determination of whether the web-based survey platform or vendor is approved.

Using SharePoint Tools for Building and Conducting Surveys: **SharePoint** as a VA web-based tool (<http://vaww.r01.med.va.gov/info/spowners/default.aspx>) has a built-in survey function – anyone with a Windows account could access a SharePoint site set up to collect survey info. You can restrict access to only authorized users as well. The National ISO does not think it is anonymous (and is not sure if there might be a way to make it anonymous).

Sharepoint may be useful for surveying a workgroup about best times to meet or a journal club how they want to divide up the research articles for review or something strictly operational or education.

Here is an interesting list of things SharePoint does better than Survey Monkey:

- You can use any number of questions and receive any number of responses
(The free account of Survey Monkey allows you up to 10 questions and 100 responses).
- You can send respondents a “thank you” or “next steps” page after completion.
(Survey Monkey offers this as a paid service only)
- You can export all data to a spreadsheet.
(Survey Monkey charges you to export the complete survey)
- SharePoint allows branching questions
(Survey Monkey only does this with the paid version)
- SharePoint data is stored in the VA environment - on a secure VA server behind the VA firewall
(Survey Monkey is NOT).

REDCap (Research Electronic Data Capture) - REDCap is a free, secure, web-based application designed to support data capture for research studies. The system was developed by a multi-institutional consortium initiated at Vanderbilt University. Data collection is customized for each study or clinical trial by the research team. <http://vaww.virec.research.va.gov/REDCap/Guidelines.htm>

Advantages of REDCap:

- Secure and web-based. Input data from anywhere in the world with secure web authentication, data logging, and Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) encryption.
- Fast and flexible. Conception to production-level database in less than one day.
- Multi-site access. Projects can be used by researchers from multiple sites and institutions.
- Fully customizable. You are in total control of shaping your database or survey.
- Advanced question features. Auto-validation, branching logic, and stop actions.
- Mid-study modifications. You may modify the database or survey at any time during the study.
- Data import functions. Data may be imported from external data sources to begin a study or to provide mid-study data uploads.
- Data comparison functions. Double data entry / Blinded data entry.
- Export survey results to common data analysis packages. Export your data to Microsoft Excel, SAS, STATA, R, or SPSS for analysis.
- Save your survey or forms as PDFs. Generate a PDF version for printing in order to collect responses offline.

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