TEXAS VETERANS PORTAL

State of Texas Veterans Portal

Texas.gov/Veterans

Texas Department of Information Resources

Category:

Cross-Boundary Collaboration and Partnerships

Contact:

Jennifer Buaas

Director of Digital Government

Texas Department of Information Resources

jennifer.buaas@dir.texas.gov | 512-463- 3602

Project Initiation Date:

January 2016

Project Completion Date:

November 2016

Executive Summary

As home to the second largest veteran population in the nation, Texas is committed to providing more than 1.6 million veterans with the best possible access to crucial veteran-related information and resources. In Texas, there are numerous state agencies and organizations that offer veteran-related services and benefits which cover a diverse range of needs such as education, employment, housing, health and wellness, financial and legal assistance, and more. When military personnel transition out of the armed services, many struggle to find jobs, get health care, and adjust to civilian life. Providing the Texas Veterans Portal as a central resource that connects veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors to the benefits and assistance they have earned through their military service is an important and meaningful way that Texas can help support its veterans.

The first Texas Veterans Portal was launched in 2010 via the Texas.gov program, a public-private partnership between the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) and Texas NIC. While the portal was well-received and functioned as intended for many years, it became outdated over time and lacked many features that are imperative for a modern-day website. In 2015, the Texas.gov Executive Steering Committee, led by DIR, approved a complete redesign of the portal to make it more user-friendly, functional, and accessible for Texas veterans. The Veterans Portal Advisory Committee (VPAC), comprised of representatives from multiple state agencies that provide services for veterans, was responsible for providing oversight for and input into the redesign project.

In January 2016, a VPAC workgroup that included staff from DIR, Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), Texas Veterans Land Board (VLB), Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), and TexVet (a Texas A&M Health Science Center initiative) began collaborating directly with Texas.gov staff on the redesign.

Ultimately, this highly-collaborative effort across numerous state agencies, as well as both public and private entities, resulted in the launch of a brand-new, responsively-designed Texas Veterans Portal with features that were deemed most important to veterans. The website:

- displays a patriotic, respectful look and feel,
- performs beautifully on mobile devices,
- enables users to search for information,
- utilizes a well-organized, logical, and easy-to-navigate information architecture,
- delivers friendly, plain-language content,
- offers an "Immediate Needs" area for veterans in crisis,
- provides a map displaying veteran-specific services, and much more.

Figure 1: Before and After screenshots of the Texas Veterans Portal

Concept

Background

By 2015, the Texas Veterans Portal (originally launched in 2010) was extremely outdated and difficult for many veterans to use. There were long "laundry lists" of text to comb through to find a specific service or benefit, there was not a search tool to aid the information-seeking process, the portal lacked other helpful features such as a map and calendar, and most notably, it was not mobile-friendly, even though web analytics indicated more than 30% of site visits came from mobile devices.

These deficiencies did not adequately or responsibly serve the portal's primary users – veterans ranging in age from their early 20s to late 90s. This population represented a wide and diverse range of needs and expectations, as well as access to and comfort level with technology and using digital government resources to locate information that was important to them.

Process

The VPAC workgroup began by defining a vision statement that guided all decisions related to the project, which read: *"The Texas Veterans Portal will connect service members, veterans, and families to the benefits and services they have earned through their military service."* The group also established criteria to measure the success of the project. Once these guidelines were in place, the workgroup remained closely involved by regularly providing input, feedback, and guidance to the project.

Solution

Due to the wide age range of the portal's primary user group – Texas veterans – the team understood the importance of redesigning the Texas Veterans Portal to make it user-friendly, accessible, and highly-functional across a variety of devices. The website also needed to be highly visual and easy to navigate with a modern, respectful, patriotic look and feel, while also incorporating modern website conveniences.

The portal's usability was improved by:

- taking a mobile-first design approach to ensure that the portal renders beautifully and performs exceptionally, regardless of what type of computer or mobile device a visitor uses,
- using open and closed card sorting exercises to define a new and improved information architecture that is straightforward and logical,
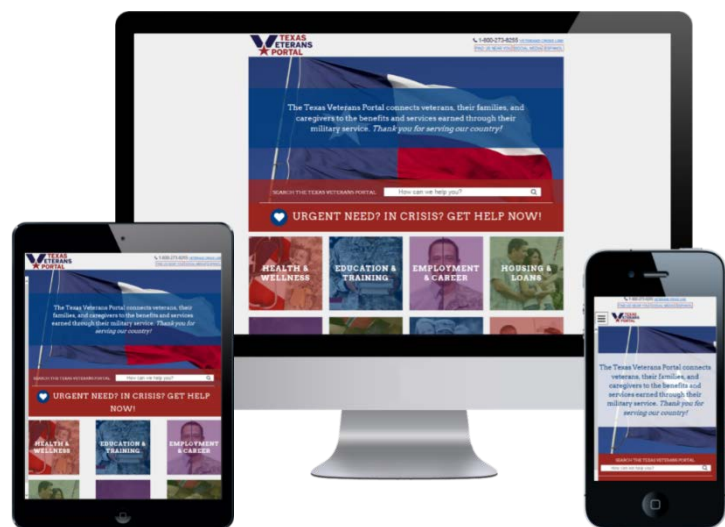- adding a search function to aid users who are comfortable seeking information this way,

Figure 2: Examples of how the responsively-designed Texas Veterans Portal displays on different devices

- condensing and improving content according to plain language guidelines,
- choosing appropriate and accurate images to provide helpful visual cues that align with categories of information, and
- conducting pre- and post-user testing with Texas veterans to guide and validate the direction and outcomes of the redesign project.

Since many veterans have disabilities due to their military service, the Texas Veterans Portal fully conforms to Texas Administrative Code 202 accessibility standards and exceeds 100% compliance with Section 508 requirements, to deliver a more usable experience for assistive technology users. The Texas Veterans Portal also fully complies with state, federal, and industry security standards.

The redesigned Texas Veterans Portal was developed in WordPress, an open-source web publishing framework. WordPress has an easy-to-use, browser-based interface that enables TVC – the agency tasked with maintaining the website post-launch – to readily administer and update the portal as necessary post-launch. WordPress also offers a clean code base and page-level metadata to provide improved search engine optimization for visitors who use a search engine to locate veteran information.

A Texas NIC project manager worked in conjunction with the Texas.gov program's agile delivery teams and the VPAC workgroup to ensure the project was developed on-time and delivered successfully. The Texas Veterans Portal redesign project was completed at no cost to the state. Texas NIC, the private partner that manages the Texas.gov program in cooperation with DIR, provided 900 hours of resource time and availability to design, develop, test, and deliver the portal.

Oversight and Outcomes

The Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) provides oversight of the Texas.gov program and chairs the VPAC workgroup. DIR required that project hours be documented so as not to exceed the allotted 900 hours, and coordinated quarterly meetings of the VPAC to obtain input from agency stakeholders and ensure that the new portal met the requirements laid out in the contractual agreement between DIR and Texas NIC. These requirements included site accessibility, three-click navigation, responsive design, and re-architecture of the site. DIR also holds authority of the website survey tool used to monitor visitor feedback, and oversaw technical training of content and site maintenance by TVC personnel.

Communications Plan

To promote the launch of the new Texas Veterans Portal, Texas NIC staff worked in collaboration with TVC and DIR to develop a custom marketing plan. Activities included:

- Press Release and Media Pitch – Texas.gov distributed a press release via Business Wire as well as a targeted pitch to Texas media promoting the launch of the site. The release generated 10,000+ views, 6,000+ headline impressions, and 300+ story reposts.

- Social Media – Texas.gov promoted the launch with multiple posts across platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The combined impact of this social media promotion was 14,000+ impressions and 150+ interactions (engagements, likes, shares, or comments).

- Tailgate – Texas NIC and TVC co-hosted a tailgate party before the University of Texas vs. Baylor football game. The group provided demos of the new site and 1,000 branded koozies with the site's URL were distributed to fans.

- Texas.gov – The Texas Veterans Portal is prominently featured on the Texas.gov home page.
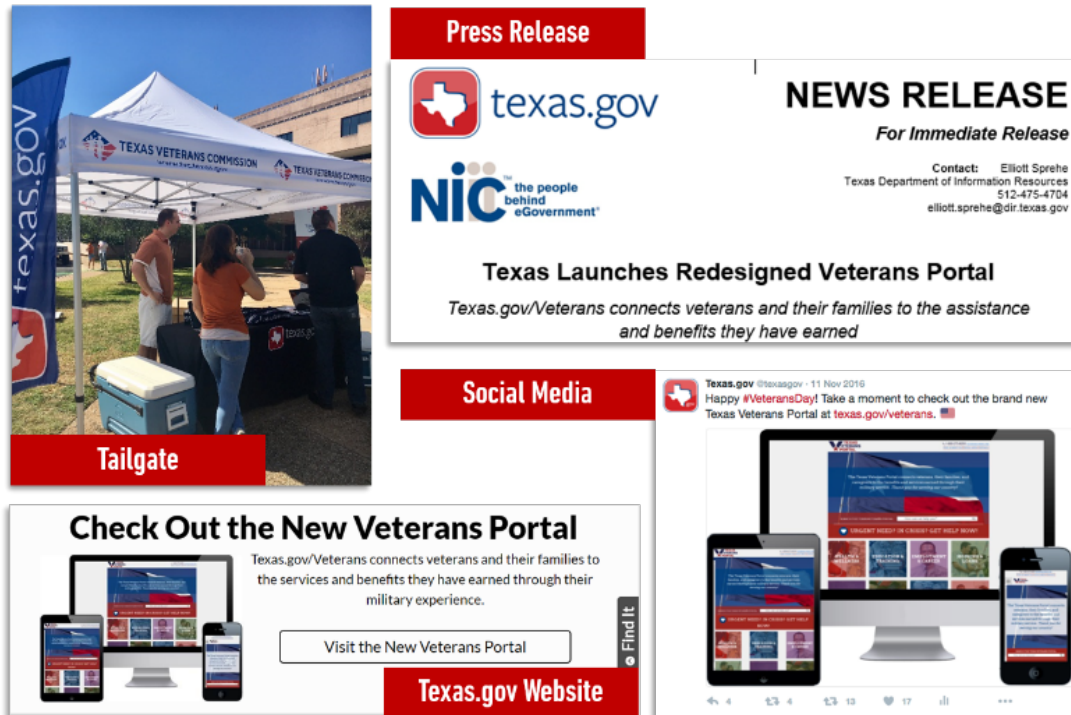

Figure 3: Marketing and communications initiatives to promote the newly-launched Texas Veterans Portal

Significance

Scope and Stakeholders

The scope of this project encompassed a complete redesign of the former Texas Veterans Portal, including a new content management system, new information architecture, new look and feel, new content, and new features and functionality. The primary stakeholders included DIR, the VPAC, and most importantly, Texas veterans, who were the ultimate beneficiaries of this project.

Innovation

The entire approach to the Texas Veterans Portal redesign was an innovative and outstanding example of collaboration and cooperation across agencies for the benefit of a very deserving user base. Eight different agencies and/or institutes of higher education were represented on the project via the VPAC. The project also involved a private entity, Texas NIC, and the assistance of another institute of higher education, the University of North Texas (UNT), along with a multitude of actual veteran users themselves. For more than ten months, these organizations worked together with dogged commitment and determination to produce the best resource possible for Texas veterans.

The multi-agency collaboration enabled the group to use several existing solutions that provided for tremendous gains in efficiency. For example, the Texas Veterans Portal leveraged the TexVet map and events calendar, which saved the development team from expending precious time and resources to build custom versions of these features.

Successful Implementation

Early on, the VPAC workgroup discussed success criteria for the project. The group decided that the project would be deemed successful if the new website met the following criterion:

- feature a mobile-friendly responsive design,
- resolve usability deficiencies identified from research on the previous website,
- decrease the website's size and load time,
- deliver specified enhancements such as a search bar, map, social media, calendar of events, and user survey, and
- attain signoff from actual veterans during the user acceptance testing (UAT) phase.

The new Texas Veterans Portal launched on schedule on Veterans Day of 2016, and the site met and even exceeded the established success criterion. The highly visual, mobile-friendly website features a search tool as well as clearly defined topic tiles with descriptive text to help veterans of all ages access needed resources in the most comfortable method. The VPAC's other wish list enhancements were also included, such as a map, social media, events calendar, and survey features.

Veteran user testing provided positive feedback and supported the design and functionality decisions that were made along the way. Beyond the initial success criterion, the Texas Veterans Portal logo was refreshed to better reflect the crisp, modern look and feel of the website. Most importantly, an area promoting "immediate needs" was created to help veterans in crisis quickly and easily locate and reach support. Post-launch, the team used web analytics to validate that the website's load time had improved by 30%.

Big Picture

Texas is the only state to offer a single portal that serves as a "launching pad" for veterans, their dependents, caregivers, and survivors. Texas Governor Greg Abbott considers the portal such an important asset that he sent a letter to all state agencies requiring them to add a link to the Texas Veterans Portal from the home page of their websites.

Impact

Improving State Government

The real value of the Texas Veterans Portal is in its role as a channel of digital government that offers veterans comprehensive, 24/7/365 access to critically important information, services, benefits, and more. The portal serves as a starting point for veterans and other users to find and connect with the many agencies and organizations that provide services and benefits.

Performance Results and Benefits

The redesigned Texas Veterans Portal has already improved access and usability for veterans. Since its launch in November 2016, the portal has received more than 50,000+ visits with 47% of visitors using a tablet or mobile device. The portal's average page load time has improved by nearly 30%, and about 5% of user sessions involve a search. This affirms that the topic-based information architecture is straightforward and easy-to-understand, minimizing a visitor's need to use the search function to locate information. The average number of pages visited has also dropped from 3.9 to 2.5, indicating that users are finding information quickly and efficiently without having to visit as many pages as before.

Following the new Texas Veterans Portal user testing with actual veterans under the guidance of Professor Michael Gibson at UNT, he reported, *"On the whole, the responses across the sampling of user groups we're seeing in both of our labs have been really positive."* Furthermore, one of the veterans who tested both the old and new sites said, *"Those people in Austin actually look like they listened to what we said."*

In addition to benefiting veterans, the new Texas Veterans Portal is providing efficiencies for TVC, the agency responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the portal post-launch. Prior to the redesign, changes and updates to the portal were fairly difficult for the agency to make, and typically had to be completed by the Texas.gov team. However, by transitioning the website from SharePoint to WordPress, it is now much easier for TVC personnel to securely administer and update the portal as necessary.

TVC's Executive Director, Thomas Palladino, stated, *"We are very proud of the new Texas Veterans Portal. For more than ten months, we have worked together to create a site that we believe will honor and serve our valued Texas armed service members, their families, and their survivors."*