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Determining My VAC Account barriers of entry for veterans

Executive Summary

Prepared for Veterans Affairs Canada

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a telephone survey of 750 clients of Veterans Affairs Canada conducted by Phoenix SPI on behalf of the Department.

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Déterminer les obstacles qui entravent l'accès des vétérans à Mon dossier ACC.

Executive Summary

Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) to conduct a 12-minute telephone survey of 750 clients.¹ This included: 1) clients who are registered for My VAC Account² but who have not logged in over the 24-month period preceding the research; and 2) clients who have not registered for My VAC Account. The fieldwork was conducted from August 21 through to September 6, 2020. Based on a sample of this size (n=750), the overall survey results can be considered accurate to within $\pm 3.6\%$, 19 times out of 20.

The main objective of this research was to understand the barriers faced by members who are inactive and non-registered users of My VAC Account. The Department intends to use the results from this research to improve service delivery and design, and reduce the barriers of entry for new users of My VAC Account. What follows below is a summary of the findings. The full results can be found in the section titled, [Detailed Findings](#).

Profile of Respondents

Sixty-three percent of respondents are non-users of My VAC Account, while 37% are inactive users—that is, they are registered account holders who have not logged in to their account in the 24 months preceding the research. Non-users are most likely to be aged 60 and older (71%), female (71%), and family members who receive benefits (87%). In addition, non-users are least likely to reside in Ontario (54%) and more likely to live in one of Canada's western provinces³ (64%), Atlantic Canada (66%), or the province of Quebec (70%). Not surprisingly, non-users are more likely to not have an internet connection at home (90%). In contrast, inactive users of My VAC Account are least likely to be aged 60 and older (29%) or a family member (13%), and they are more likely to reside in Ontario (46%), to be male (39%), and to have an internet connection at home (40%).

Unaided Knowledge of Methods to Access or Apply for VAC Benefits

To test clients' knowledge of the methods available to access or apply for VAC's benefits, all respondents were asked, in an open-ended manner, to identify which methods can be used to access or apply for VAC's benefits. Exactly one in five (20%) said clients can access or apply for benefits through My VAC Account. In contrast, approximately four in 10 each mentioned that benefits can be accessed or applied for by telephone (42%) or online (42%) through some means. Following this, 20% reported that clients can apply for benefits by

¹ 'Clients' is used to refer to those served by VAC, including Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members, still serving and retired RCMP members, and family members who are receiving benefits directly from VAC.

² My VAC Account is a secure, authenticated web application that allows users to access VAC services from anywhere, and at any time. My VAC Account users include war service Veterans; CAF members and Veterans; still-serving and retired RCMP members; and family members who are receiving benefits directly from VAC.

³ Includes respondents from the territories.

mail, and 12% mentioned benefits can be accessed or applied for in person at an office. Few said that clients can apply or access benefits in person somewhere other than a VAC office (4%) or by email (2%).

Awareness and Knowledge of My VAC Account

Approximately one-third (34%) of clients surveyed who have not registered for My VAC Account (n=473) said they are aware of the online service channel; nearly two-thirds (64%) have not heard of My VAC Account. When non-users aware of My VAC Account were asked what they know about the online service channel, over half (58%) said they know nothing about it. The types of things respondents reported knowing about My VAC Account included that it provides access to VAC benefits and services (12%), that it provides a method to apply for benefits online (11%), that it provides access to account information or one's My VAC Account profile (9%), and that it provides an alternative to using telephone or mail to contact VAC.

Use of My VAC Account

Almost half (47%) of non-users aware of My VAC Account and inactive My VAC Account holders do not use the online service channel because they have no need to do so. Fewer attributed their lack of use to other factors, such as lack of interest (6%), the perception that online interactions are too impersonal and a preference for traditional service channels (5%), the view that registering for My VAC Account is complicated or difficult (4%), and difficulties experienced logging in to their account (4%).

Registration

The majority (55%) of inactive users registered for My VAC Account in order to apply online for VAC benefits and services. Slightly more than two-thirds (68%) said it was at least *somewhat* easy to register for My VAC Account, with 29% saying registration was *very* easy. Among inactive users who found the process of registering difficult, four in 10 (41%) explained that the process was complicated and not user-friendly.

Barriers and Facilitators to Using My VAC Account

For one-third (32%) of all respondents, security of personal information is a potential *barrier* that is a personally important factor in terms of reasons why they might not use My VAC Account to connect with Veterans Affairs Canada. Following security, 27% pointed to lack of interest, 23% to lack of comfort with online services, and 23% to lack of understanding of the benefits of My VAC Account as important factors in terms of reasons why they might not use the online service. Fewer than two in 10 respondents considered internet access (19%) or having a computer (18%) as important factors.

When asked to attribute importance to a list of potential *benefits* of using My VAC Account, respondents were most likely to identify email notifications. Six in 10 (62%) considered

email notifications of application status changes to be an important potential benefit of My VAC Account, including 50% who said it is a *very* important factor. This is closely followed by the ability to check the status of an application anytime and the ability to update profile and direct deposit information: 59% said these are important benefits. At least five in 10 rated uploading documents rather than sending them by mail (55%), receiving documents online rather than waiting for them to arrive by mail (53%), and having a record of a conversation with VAC (52%) as personally important potential benefits of My VAC Account.

Future Use of My VAC Account

Slightly more than half (56%) of survey respondents are likely to register for My VAC Account or start using the online service channel again, including nearly one-quarter (23%) who are *very* likely to do so. Among respondents unlikely to register for, or start using their My VAC Account again, approximately four in 10 (39%) said it is because they have no need.

Conclusions

The research findings do not point to any one barrier that is limiting use of the online service channel; instead, the research indicates that clients' use of My VAC Account is largely need-based. Lack of need, in fact, is the main reason reported by inactive and non-users for not using, or registering for, My VAC Account, and it was the only reason offered with any frequency by those unlikely to register for, or start using again, the service in the future. Indeed, majorities of inactive and non-users indicated that none of the potential barriers explored in the survey were important factors in terms of reasons why they might not use My VAC Account. And, when asked what would encourage them to use My Account, need topped the list.

In addition to lack of need, there is a general lack of awareness of My VAC Account and the features it offers. For instance, when asked what methods can be used to access or apply for VAC's benefits, few respondents noted that this can be done through My VAC Account. Moreover, many who do not use My VAC said they had never heard of the online service prior to this study. Not surprisingly, then, when asked what would motivate them to use My Account, increased awareness and understanding of the benefits followed closely behind need on the list of motivators.

Looking ahead, the results from the survey offer some direction for the Department when it comes to targeted communications about My VAC Account to motivate or encourage clients to register for, or start using, the online service. Specifically, the Department will want to consider ways to increase overall awareness of My VAC Account, including the benefits of using the online service to interact with VAC. This could include highlighting specific features of My VAC Account that non-users and inactive users attributed the most importance to, including email notifications, the ability to check one's application status anytime, and the ability to update profile and direct deposit information. While non-users

and inactive users do not appear to see My VAC Account as offering any service or features they need as part of their ongoing relationship with the Department, many expressed a desire to learn more about the service channel and what it offers account holders. Increased promotion of My VAC Account and selected features, therefore, could help to encourage use of the online service channel.

The contract value was \$48,988.34 (including HST).

Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify as a Senior Officer of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the *Communications Policy* of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not contain any reference to electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leader.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "AWoods".

Alethea Woods, President
Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc.