Building ACORN Resource Guides

Kathleen M. Mitchell, MPH, Lauren E. Russell, MPH, MPP, Alicia J. Cohen, MD, MSc, FAAFP & Meaghan A. Kennedy, MD, MPH

This manual provides guidance on how to compile resources and create high-quality guides for Veterans for each social risk domain on the **Assessing Circumstances and Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)** screening tool.

ACORN BACKGROUND

ACORN aims to systematically identify and address unmet social needs among all Veterans to improve health and advance health equity. ACORN's Veteran-tailored social risk screening tool identifies unmet social needs across nine domains: food, housing, utilities, transportation, education, employment, legal, social isolation/loneliness, and digital needs (device/internet access and digital health literacy).

The objectives of ACORN are to: 1) systematically screen Veterans for social needs across nine social risk domains; 2) provide clinical care teams with real-time information about Veterans' unmet needs; and 3) address identified needs by offering resource guides, support navigating resources, and/or referrals to Social Work or other relevant VHA and non-VHA services. By alerting a Veteran's clinical care team to their social needs, ACORN provides a broader understanding of the social, environmental, and economic contexts impacting individual Veterans.

ACORN RESOURCE GUIDES

Connecting Veterans with VA and community services is an essential step in addressing unmet needs. ACORN resource guides provide Veterans with concise, high-yield lists of federal, state, and community resources for each social risk domain on the ACORN screening tool.

Resource guides can be used in combination with other resources and services, such as social work case management or patient navigation. They can also serve as a stand-alone tool in cases where Veterans may not be interested in or comfortable accepting assistance at the time of screening or may prefer to research and navigate resources on their own.

IDENTIFYING AND COMPLILING THE RESOURCES

Developing an Action Plan

Resource guides can serve as an effective tool to support Veterans in identifying, connecting with, and receiving assistance from VA and community services. Developing and maintaining high-quality resource guides requires both an up-front and long-term investment from your ACORN implementation team and partners.

Teams using resource guides as part of their ACORN workflow should begin by developing a plan of action using the following considerations:

- **Existing Resource Materials:** Does your site have existing up-to-date lists of resources and services? Do they include a variety of quality programs at the VA, federal, state, and community levels? Using existing materials can be a valuable and timesaving starting point.

- **Staff Capacity:** Does your site have at least one staff member who can dedicate time to building and maintaining the resource guides? Who has expertise in VA and community services at your site, and are there opportunities to partner with them?

- **Site Catchment Area:** Does your site serve several geographic regions within your service area? Consider how this may influence the building of resource guides to best serve your Veteran population. Potential approaches may include focusing on VA and state-level resources; highlighting only the highest-yield local resources; or creating region-specific guides for your catchment area (i.e., city, county, or state).

Building Partnerships

Active collaboration with VHA clinical social workers, non-clinical staff, and community program contacts is important to building effective guides. VHA social workers have expertise in local supportive services and can provide recommendations on VA, federal, state, and community programs that have a history of being responsive to Veterans' expressed needs.

Additionally, non-clinical staff, such as Peer Specialists and Whole Health coaches, are equipped with the experience and knowledge of support services that are responsive to Veterans' needs. Assembling an interprofessional team to review available services can ensure the highest yield resources are included on your guides.

Engage Key Partners

Facilities are unique in both their staffing capacities and roles. Engage with an interprofessional team of clinical and non-clinical staff, such as those involved in programs to address food insecurity, housing instability, and transportation access, to identify and compile quality resources.

Aligning with community programs is also critical to confirm the accuracy of program information, and regular contact with community organizations provides an opportunity to address capacity

and workflow concerns that may result from increased referrals or staff turnover. Open communication with various programs and services can also foster connections with additional organizations and resources in the area.

Compiling Quality Resources

Resource guides are intended to be applicable to a broad range of Veterans expressing one or more social needs. There may be local variation in the availability and accessibility of programs and services. Some social risk domains may have an abundance of resources and organizations at federal, state, and/or community levels. Conversely, resources for some domains may be limited in certain geographic areas, which can result in fewer resources listed on a guide. Avoid listing programs with narrowly defined eligibility criteria that may not apply to the majority of Veterans served in your clinical setting.

Understanding the resource landscape reduces the risk of providing resources that are not accessible, not relevant to the Veteran's interest, or not meeting the Veteran's needs. To narrow the list of resources to the highest yield programs, use the following selection criteria:

✓ How comprehensive are the state and community services compared to VA or other federal programs offering similar services? Does the program specifically cater to Veterans?

✓ How easy will it be for a Veteran to contact the service provider to apply, enroll, and receive services? What are their hours of operation and options for modes of contact? Did your team experience multiple failed attempts in connecting with a supportive service via phone or email?

✓ Are the services offered for free or at a reduced cost based on military history (Veteran status), income level, etc.?

✓ Does the service provider have a specific point of contact who may be willing to directly triage calls from Veterans?

✓ If it is a local community service, is it easily accessible by Veterans in the area? If service provision is in person, can Veterans reasonably access the service through public transit and/or rideshares?

***Selecting National-Level Resources***
The [ACORN Social Risk Domains Resource List](#) provides an overview of national-level resources

available to most VHA facilities for each social risk domain included on the ACORN screening tool. While not exhaustive, this list can serve as a starting point to identify relevant resources and referrals for Veterans with identified needs, both in VA and the community or nationally.

RESOURCE GUIDE MAINTENANCE

Resource guides should be updated approximately **every six months** to reflect any changes in program and service information, such as points of contact, hours, location, virtual services, and eligibility requirements. If programs close or offered services become limited, this scheduled review offers an opportunity to add new or alternative programs in their place.

Maintenance also facilitates relationship-building and connections with VA and community service providers. In a sense, resource guides are living documents; on-going communication with designated program points of contact affords sites developing resource guides the opportunity to build relationships, improve presentation of evolving program information, and learn about additional programs in the service area.
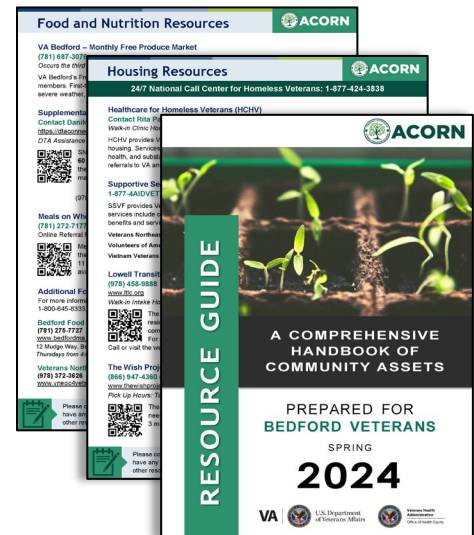
BUILDING THE RESOURCE GUIDES

Content Considerations

While each resource guide may have a unique layout to best utilize the available space, resource guides should include the following key pieces of information for each listed resource:

- Full program title and acronym
- Program and primary point of contact information
  (phone number, email address, website link, and physical address)
- Available contact hours and/or hours of operation
- Concise, informative description of available services, including:
  - Eligibility criteria and application requirements
  - For any virtual programming or phone apps, include whether they are only available on certain phones or platforms (e.g., iOS, Android, requires email, etc.)

Each resource guide should also list contact information for a designated VHA social worker or clinic. Ensure there is an avenue for Veterans to reach out should they later decide they would like assistance or their situation changes.

Optional Additions

Additional elements can be included to help Veterans navigate listed resources:

- **Quick Response (QR) Codes:** QR codes can be included next to program descriptions for Veterans to quickly access the program's website by scanning the code with their phone or tablet. QR codes can be created for free on www.qr-code-generator.com, or by right clicking anywhere on a webpage and selecting "Create QR Code for this page" from the drop-down.

  Be sure that any generated code matches the website link listed on the guide. Test them with your own phone or tablet prior to disseminating guides to Veterans to ensure the QR codes work appropriately.

  Additionally, note that QR codes are best used on printed materials. Determine how your site will be distributing resource guides. If your team plans to only deliver guides electronically, then the use of QR codes may not be necessary.

- **Call-out Boxes:** Often placed at the top of the page, call-out boxes emphasize important information, including hotline numbers or general temporary notes (e.g., specific application deadlines, whether all programs are virtual, etc.)

- **Subheadings:** If there are several programs that are high quality but provide similar services, it may be helpful to group them together under a subheading with a short introductory description. For example, if the resource guide includes several local food pantries, you can group them under an appropriate subheading such as "Local Food Banks and Food Pantries."

- **Notes:** If you wish to highlight an important point in a program description (e.g., application deadlines, if the program has temporarily changed operating procedures or hours, etc.), mark this information in a bold note for the Veteran to quickly locate.

> *KEEP IN MIND:*
> **VERIFY PROGRAM INFORMATION**
>
> Contact all listed resources directly to verify the availability of programs and services, eligibility criteria, location(s), and point-of-contact information, including phone number, email address, and website link.

Formatting Considerations

Visual consistency across ACORN resource guides is key to maximize space and enhance usability. We recommend limiting the length of guides to a single-sided, one-page handout comprising the highest-yield resources.

The following are some tips on layout and design elements to consider when developing your resource guides:

- Color-coordinate the program titles, contact information and website links – use the same font color for each one to visually separate the information.

- There is creative freedom when choosing page layouts for each guide. Design unique layouts that best display resources in a way that is visually appealing and easy for a Veteran to use.

- At the bottom of each guide, visually separate the contact information for the VHA social worker or clinic so that Veterans can quickly locate this information.

ACORN Resource Guide in Action

Below is an example of a housing resource guide built for VA Bedford Healthcare System with corresponding highlighted sections demonstrating use of the guidance provided in this manual.

Title and Call-out Box
Identifies the social need that the included resources address, as well as highlights any important high-level information for the Veteran.

Visual Consistency
All phone numbers and website links have their own matching colors. For handouts with several resources, it is important to visually separate the contact information.

Program Description Layout
Depending on the content included, descriptions can have unique layouts to best present the provided information.

QR Codes
QR codes are used for faster access to the resources by scanning the provided code.

Social Work (or VHA Staff) Contact
Visually separate this section in the same dedicated place on each guide.

Building ACORN Resource Guides

FOR THE FINISHED DOCUMENT

☐ Cover page with facility location listed
(VA medical center or community-based outpatient clinic name)

  ▪ *Particularly useful if creating location-specific guides for multiple counties in your facility service area*

☐ Table of Contents

☐ Color-coordinated program titles, contact information and website links

  ▪ *Use the same font color for each line to visually separate information*

☐ VHA social workers or other VHA staff contact (full name and phone number) should be highlighted in the same place on each guide

KEY COMPONENTS FOR EACH RESOURCE

☐ Full program title and acronym

☐ Program and primary point of contact information
(phone number, email address, website link, and physical address)

☐ Available contact hours and/or hours of operation

☐ Concise, informative description of available services

☐ Eligibility criteria and application requirements

☐ For any virtual programming or phone apps, include whether only available on certain phones or platforms (e.g., iOS, Android, requires email, etc.)

OPTIONAL ADDITIONS

☐ QR Codes for applicable resources with website links
(www.qr-code-generator.com)

☐ Alternate program contacts and/or locations, if applicable

☐ Call-out boxes and Notes can be used to emphasize information, including hotline numbers or general temporary notes (e.g., specific application deadlines, whether all programs are virtual, etc.)

☐ Subheadings for grouped resources and quick summaries