

# Assessing Circumstances and Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)



## ACORN BACKGROUND

ACORN is a national Veterans Health Administration (VHA) quality improvement initiative conducted in partnership with the Office of Health Equity and the National Social Work Program, Care Management and Social Work Services.

ACORN aims to: 1) systematically screen Veterans for social needs in nine social risk domains; 2) provide clinical teams real-time information about Veterans' unmet needs; and 3) address identified needs through the provision of resources and referrals.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF ACORN

Long a leader in the integration of medical care and social services, the VHA is well-positioned to identify and address Veterans' unmet social needs. VHA routinely screens Veterans for food insecurity, housing instability, and intimate partner violence but lacks a systematic screening process to broadly identify social needs.

Building upon VHA's existing social risk screening processes and social needs interventions, ACORN enhances clinical care teams' capacity to understand and address the social and economic factors impacting individual Veterans.

***ACORN aims to systematically identify and address unmet social needs among all Veterans to improve health and advance health equity.***

## THE ACORN MODEL

ACORN consists of two core components: 1) a standardized screening tool to identify social risks at the point of care and 2) provision of relevant resources and referrals to help address identified social needs.



ACORN screens across nine social risk domains: food, housing, utilities, transportation, education, employment, legal, social isolation/loneliness, and digital needs (device/internet access and digital health literacy). Veterans can complete ACORN screening prior to or during clinic visits as a self-administered screener on paper or as a staff-administered screener in the VA electronic health record (CPRS).

Veterans who express needs are offered referrals for further assessment and intervention to Social Work, Nutrition and Food Services, Mental Health or other VA services; support navigating VA and community resources; and/or geographically-tailored resource guides.

## USE OF ACORN IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

ACORN was first piloted in 2018 and has been implemented in a variety of clinical settings nationally, including Primary Care (Patient-Aligned Care Teams [PACT]), Mental Health, Geriatrics, Whole Health, and a range of specialty clinics, as well as in emergency departments and inpatient settings.

For more information on the ACORN initiative and implementation standards, the ACORN Leadership Team is available at [VHAACORN@va.gov](mailto:VHAACORN@va.gov).



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration



Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Health Equity



The following shows the questions included on the ACORN screening tool. Responses highlighted in green indicate which responses demonstrate a “positive” unmet need.

(1) In the past two months, have you been living in stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?<sup>1</sup>

a. Yes – Living in stable housing

(1.1) Are you worried or concerned that in the next two months you may NOT have stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?<sup>1</sup>

i. Yes – worried about housing near future

(1.2) Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months?<sup>1</sup>

a. Apartment/House/Room (no government subsidy)

b. Apartment/House/Room (with government subsidy)

c. With Friend/Family

d. Motel/Hotel

e. Short-term Institution like Hospital, Rehab Center, Drug Treatment Center

f. Homeless Shelter

g. Anywhere outside (e.g. Street, Vehicle, Abandoned Building)

h. Other

ii. No – Not worried about housing near future

b. No – Not living in stable housing

Collect answer for the question “Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months?”<sup>1</sup>

➤ If respondent endorses either “not living in stable housing” OR “worried about housing near future” for (1):  
(1.3) Are you currently without a place to stay?

a. Yes

b. No

(2) I’m going to read you two statements that people have made about their food situation. For each statement, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last 12 months.

(2.1) Within the past 12 months, you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more.<sup>2</sup>

a. Often true

b. Sometimes true

c. Never true

(2.2) Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn’t last and you didn’t have money to get more.<sup>2</sup>

a. Often true

b. Sometimes true

c. Never true

➤ If respondent endorses “often true” or “sometimes true” for either “food would run out” (2.1) OR “food didn’t last” (2.2):  
(2.3) Do you need help getting food for this week?

a. Yes

b. No

(3) How often do you have trouble paying for your utilities (e.g., electric, gas, oil, water, or phone)?<sup>3</sup>

a. Often

b. Sometimes

c. Never

d. Not applicable/I don’t pay for utilities

➤ If respondent endorses “often” or “sometimes” for (3):

(3.1) Has the electric, gas, oil, water or phone company threatened to shut off services in your home?<sup>4</sup>

a. Yes

b. No

c. Already shut off

d. Not applicable/I don’t pay for utilities

(4) How often has lack of transportation kept you from medical appointments, meetings, work, or from getting things needed for daily living?<sup>5</sup>

a. Often

b. Sometimes

c. Never

➤ If respondent endorses “often” or “sometimes” for (4):

(4.1) Do you need assistance with transportation for an upcoming appointment?

a. Yes

b. No

(Continued)



## ACORN SCREENING TOOL QUESTIONS SOURCE TABLE

**Table.** Sources of the social risk domains used in the Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) screening tool.

When derived from the [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(CMS\) Accountable Health Communities \(AHC\) Screener](#), the original source is cited per [AHC guidance](#). Questions without citations were developed by the VHA ACORN Team and collaborators across multiple VHA offices and medical centers.

| Domain  | Question  | Original Source                                    | Citation  |
|---------|---|--|---|
| Housing | In the past two months, have you been living in stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes – Living in stable housing</li> <li>• No – Not living in stable housing</li> </ul>  | VHA Clinical Reminder                              | VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans. "Homeless Screener." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, September 2020.<br><a href="https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/resources/prevention/homeless-screener.asp">https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/resources/prevention/homeless-screener.asp</a>   |
|         | Are you worried or concerned that in the next two months you may NOT have stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes – worried about housing near future</li> <li>• No – not worried about housing near future</li> </ul>  |  |   |
|         | Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apartment/House/Room (no government subsidy)</li> <li>• Apartment/House/Room (with government subsidy)</li> <li>• With Friend/Family</li> <li>• Motel/Hotel</li> <li>• Short-term Institution like Hospital, Rehab Center, Drug Treatment Center</li> <li>• Homeless Shelter</li> <li>• Anywhere outside (e.g. Street, Vehicle, Abandoned Building)</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul> |  |   |
|         | Are you currently without a place to stay?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>   | Developed by VHA ACORN Team                        | Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.<br><a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>  |
| Food    | Within the past 12 months, you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more.<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often True</li> <li>• Sometimes True</li> <li>• Never True</li> </ul>  | VHA Clinical Reminder, based on Hunger Vital Signs | Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. E., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146. |

| Domain                | Question  | Original Source  | Citation  |
|-----------------------|---|--|---|
|                       | <p>Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn't last and you didn't have money to get more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often True</li> <li>• Sometimes True</li> <li>• Never True</li> </ul>                                    | VHA Clinical Reminder, based on Hunger Vital Signs                     | Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. E., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146.   |
|                       | <p>Do you need help getting food for this week?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>   | Developed by VHA ACORN Team  | Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>   |
| <b>Utilities</b>      | <p>How often do you have trouble paying for your utilities (e.g., electric, gas, oil, water, or phone)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> <li>• Not applicable/I don't pay for utilities</li> </ul> | WellRx   | Adapted with permission from Page-Reeves J, Kaufman W, Bleecker M, Norris J, McCalmont K, Ianakieva V, Ianakieva D, Kaufman A. Addressing Social Determinants of Health in a Clinic Setting: The WellRx Pilot in Albuquerque, New Mexico. <i>J Am Board Fam Med</i> . 2016 May-Jun;29(3):414-8. doi: 10.3122/jabfm.2016.03.150272. PMID: 27170801.  |
|                       | <p>Has the electric, gas, oil, water or phone company threatened to shut off services in your home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• Already shut off</li> <li>• Not applicable/I don't pay for utilities</li> </ul>   | Children's Health Watch – Household Energy Security Screener (via AHC) | Adapted with permission from Cook, J. T., Frank, D. A., Casey, P. H., Rose-Jacobs, R., Black, M. M., Chilton, M., . . . Cutts, D. B. (2008). A Brief Indicator of Household Energy Security: Associations with Food Security, Child Health, and Child Development in US Infants and Toddlers. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 122(4), 867-875. doi:10.1542/peds.2008-0286.  |
| <b>Transportation</b> | <p>How often has lack of transportation kept you from medical appointments, meetings, work, or from getting things needed for daily living?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> </ul>                 | PRAPARE  | Adapted with permission from the national PRAPARE® social determinants of health protocol developed by the National Association of Community Health Centers, the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations, and the Oregon Primary Care Organization and their development partners. <a href="http://www.nachc.org/prapare">www.nachc.org/prapare</a> . ©National Association of Community Health Centers. All Rights Reserved. |
|                       | <p>Do you need assistance with transportation for an upcoming appointment?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>  | Developed by VHA ACORN Team  | Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>   |

| Domain                                 | Question  | Original Source   | Citation  |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Legal</b>                           | Do you currently have any legal matters you need help with (e.g., child support or custody, divorce, debt or credit problems, or need for a discharge upgrade)?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>  | Developed by VHA ACORN Team in collaboration with VA Legal Services for Veterans Program  | Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a> |
| <b>Social Isolation and Loneliness</b> | How often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> </ul>  | AARP Survey (via AHC)   | Adapted with permission from Anderson, G. Oscar and Colette E. Thayer. Loneliness and Social Connections: A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older. Washington, DC: AARP Research, September 2018. <a href="https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00246.001">https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00246.001</a>  |
| <b>Employment</b>                      | Do you want help finding or keeping work or a job?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, help finding work</li> <li>• Yes, help keeping work</li> <li>• No, I don't want help finding or keeping work</li> </ul>   | Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services - Accountable Health Communities Technical Expert Panel  | Identifying and Recommending Screening Questions for the Accountable Health Communities Model (2016, July) Technical Expert Panel discussion conducted at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Baltimore, MD.                            |
| <b>Education</b>                       | Do you want more information about educational benefits and resources for Veterans?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>  | Developed by VHA ACORN Team   | Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a> |
| <b>Digital Needs</b>                   | Do you have access to any of the following devices?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landline</li> <li>• Simple cell phone (flip phone)</li> <li>• Smartphone (a cell phone with a touchscreen and internet)</li> <li>• Computer (laptop, desktop, or tablet such as an iPad)</li> <li>• None</li> </ul> | Developed by VHA ACORN Team in collaboration with VHA National Social Work Program, VHA Office of Connected Care, VHA Office of Health Equity, and VA Homelessness-Modified ACORN Screening Tool Project Team | Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a> |
|  | Do you have access to affordable and reliable internet where you live?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• Not applicable/I don't want internet access at home</li> </ul>  |   |   |
|  | Would you like help learning to use a smartphone, tablet, or computer to access VA healthcare online (e.g., video visits, medical record, secure messaging)?<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• Not applicable/I don't have any of these devices</li> </ul>                   |   |   |



### **ACORN Screening Tool Overview Document Citation:**

Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Russell LE. "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

[https://www.va.gov/HEALTH/EQUITY/docs/ACORN\\_Screening\\_Tool.pdf](https://www.va.gov/HEALTH/EQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf)

### **For more information on the development and initial piloting of ACORN:**

Russell LE\*, Cohen AJ\* (\*co-first authors), Chrzas S, Halladay CW, Kennedy MA, Mitchell KM, Moy E, Lehmann LS. Implementing a Social Needs Screening and Referral Program Among Veterans: Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN). *J GEN INTERN MED* (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-023-08181-9>

**For any questions about ACORN, contact the ACORN Leadership Team at [VHAACORN@va.gov](mailto:VHAACORN@va.gov).**

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The numerous other VA clinical, operations, research, and administrative partners who have contributed to the development and implementation of ACORN, including the ACORN Partner Engagement Group, as well as the Veterans who have provided invaluable feedback to support this quality improvement initiative.

*Funding: Initial funding for ACORN was provided by the VHA Innovators Network Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment Program in 2018. The VHA Office of Health Equity has funded the continued implementation and evaluation of ACORN since 2019.*