OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

VAIRRS
VA Innovation and
Research Review System

**Communications Strategy
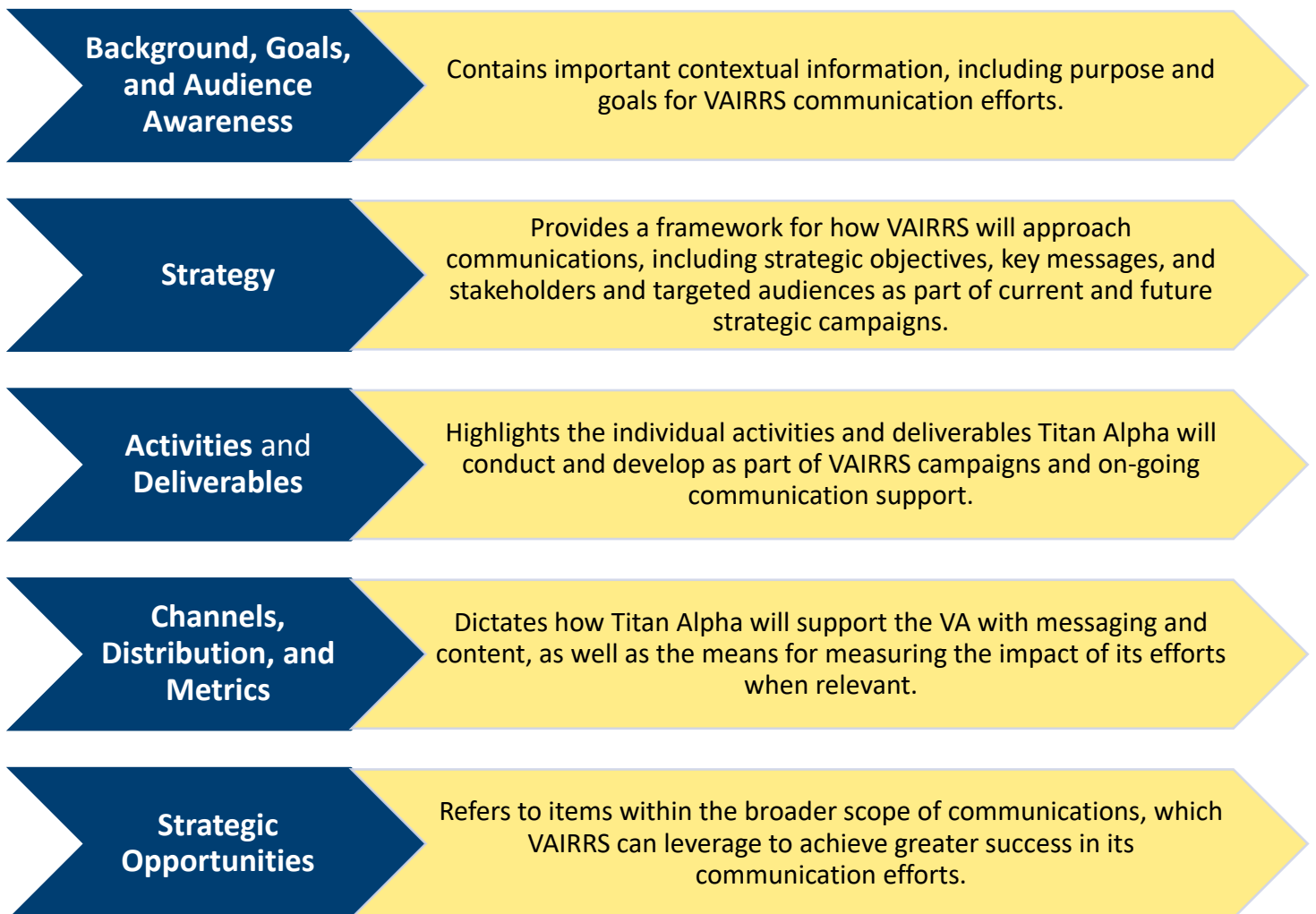2021-2024**

C O N T E N T

1.0   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the **VAIRRS Strategic Communications Plan** is to establish a standardized initiative to amplify tactical, educational, and promotional communications to Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Leadership and the Veterans Administration Medical Centers (VAMC) Field regarding training and programmatic updates to the various systems within the VA Innovation and Research Review System (VAIRRS) program. Part of this plan includes VAIRRS using an interconnected system of shared technologies to leverage capabilities and create new opportunities for communication products.

At its core, this plan is designed to be responsive—to provide enough guidance to achieve these objectives while supporting adaptation to new information or priorities. This Strategic Communications Plan is structured around five core pillars:

Background, Goals, and Audience Awareness	Contains important contextual information, including purpose and goals for VAIRRS communication efforts.
Strategy	Provides a framework for how VAIRRS will approach communications, including strategic objectives, key messages, and stakeholders and targeted audiences as part of current and future strategic campaigns.
Activities and **Deliverables**	Highlights the individual activities and deliverables Titan Alpha will conduct and develop as part of VAIRRS campaigns and on-going communication support.
Channels, Distribution, and Metrics	Dictates how Titan Alpha will support the VA with messaging and content, as well as the means for measuring the impact of its efforts when relevant.
Strategic Opportunities	Refers to items within the broader scope of communications, which VAIRRS can leverage to achieve greater success in its communication efforts.

This plan will prioritize communications efforts that make VA's research activities more accessible and express the systemic importance of VAIRRS to many healthcare stakeholders. The strategies and tactics outlined in this plan are designed to maximize the reach of existing communications vehicles and develop new ways to reach various audiences. The plan will be

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executed through support from the marketing and communications team, internal VA communications staff, and the Titan Alpha Site Support team.

1.1   Background

The VHA contracted Customer Value Partners (CVP) to support VAIRRS, the VA's new online submission and review system, the enterprise instance of **IRBNet**.

Key benefits of the VAIRRS program include:

- Electronic Data Capture
- Standard Forms and Letter Templates
- Reduced Regulatory Risk
- Decreased Staff Transition Time
- Policy Application
- Authoritative Enterprise Data Set
- Standard Processes
- Improved Efficiencies
- Improved Transparency

Mission:
Support the management of research oversight committees across all VAMCs that support research programs.

Vision:
Deliver VAIRRS foundational message as the enterprise-wide research platform that transforms Veteran healthcare.

1.1.1   IRBNet Journey

IRBNet is a web-based software used by administrators, committee members, and researchers for electronic protocol submission, management, and review. IRBNet enhances research oversight, improves transparency, and expedites Veteran access to clinical trials. VAIRRS will be used by all VAMCs with research programs and will provide an enterprise platform to support the management of research oversight committees.

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Figure 1: IRBNet 2021 Timeline

The transition to this new online submission and review system began in October 2020. As of September 2021, 106 VA research sites were onboarded with the support of the Office of Research Protections, Policy, and Education (ORPP&E).

VAIRRS is uniquely positioned to assist VA facilities in the conduct of VA research and can withstand the changing pressures of their research needs, including:
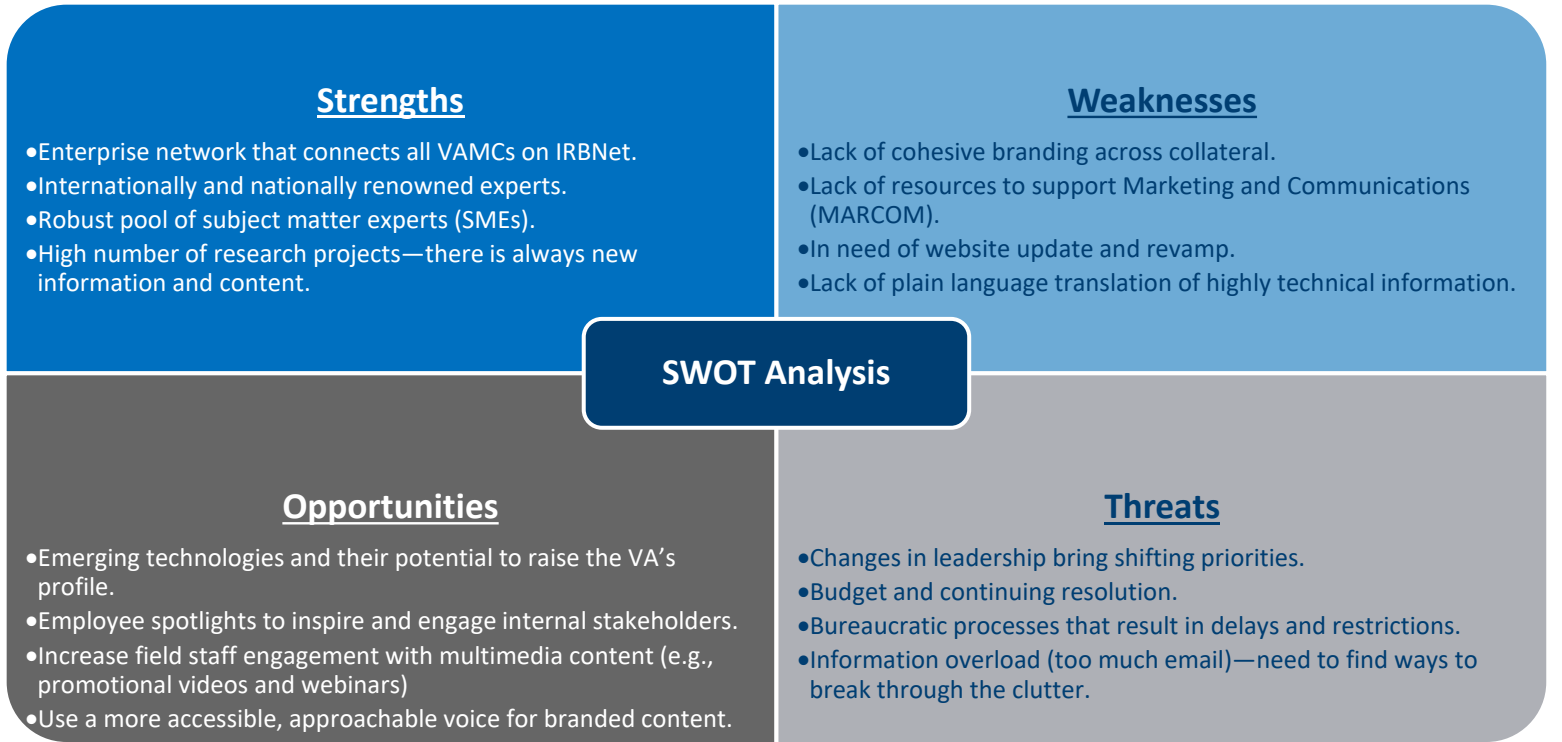
- Oversight needs of the research programs and institutions
- Collaborative needs of dually appointed VHA investigators
- Regulatory changes of the new Common Rule (2019)

1.2   Situation analysis

A communications audit informed the Office of Research and Development (ORD) plan, including an environmental scan and analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). In addition, Titan Alpha conducted a content analysis of the VAIRRS website landing pages and other communications vehicles, newsletter opportunities, and internal communications. Information on the communications needs of VAIRRS was gathered through ongoing discussions with VHA Leadership and interaction with the VAIRRS Change Management Strategy. The following needs were identified as a part of the communications audit:

- New ways to reach key stakeholders
- Improved content for new and existing communication vehicles
- Improved coordination across VAMCs to help inform the content being delivered to key stakeholders.

The SWOT analysis serves as a critical tool in uncovering the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats when communicating about VAIRRS to stakeholders. Below are some of the key findings from the SWOT analysis.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths
- Enterprise network that connects all VAMCs on IRBNet.
- Internationally and nationally renowned experts.
- Robust pool of subject matter experts (SMEs).
- High number of research projects—there is always new information and content.

Weaknesses
- Lack of cohesive branding across collateral.
- Lack of resources to support Marketing and Communications (MARCOM).
- In need of website update and revamp.
- Lack of plain language translation of highly technical information.

Opportunities
- Emerging technologies and their potential to raise the VA's profile.
- Employee spotlights to inspire and engage internal stakeholders.
- Increase field staff engagement with multimedia content (e.g., promotional videos and webinars)
- Use a more accessible, approachable voice for branded content.

Threats
- Changes in leadership bring shifting priorities.
- Budget and continuing resolution.
- Bureaucratic processes that result in delays and restrictions.
- Information overload (too much email)—need to find ways to break through the clutter.

2.0   STRATEGY

Titan Alpha will design high-profile strategic communications collateral and campaigns to educate and inform target audiences about VAIRRS updates, initiatives, and accomplishments through an innovative mix of communications channels.

This integrated communications plan supports activities and outreach by leveraging communications best practices and change management methodologies. These include the Prosci ADKAR® (awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, reinforcement) model—to organize and focus communications activities to drive individual change and achieve desired outcomes.
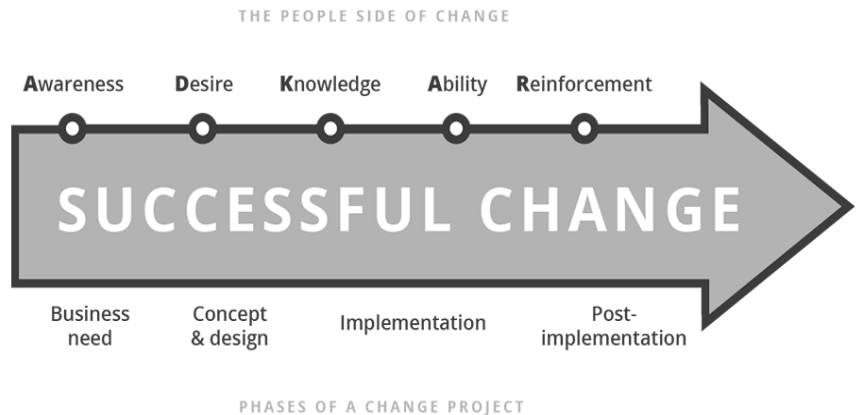

Figure 2 ADKAR Model

This plan will utilize the model in collaboration with the VAIRRS Change Management Strategy to present VAIRRS key messages aligned to priority issues and harness the strength of VHA's strategic partnerships. This approach further strengthens the VAIRRS brand and increases awareness.

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2.1 Strategic Objectives and VAIRRS Communications Priorities

The strategies and tactics outlined in this plan are driven by storytelling and visual consistency. The goal is to engage VAIRRS users with accessible, relatable, and engaging promotional and educational material. One way to accomplish this is to translate highly technical information (in the form of research reports technical briefs) into smaller, more digestible pieces to reach a greater number of stakeholders.

To achieve the long- and short-term strategic communications goals, Titan Alpha will focus on:

- **Key audiences:** Who is the information most relevant to? Other researchers? Field engineers? Veterans? Other audiences? The answer will determine the content and channel.

- **Content:** Can the information be broken up into more digestible pieces according to the bite, snack, meal approach? What is the call to action? This will determine the channel.

- **Channel:** Which intended audience uses channels? Does this channel support the content you want to create (digital, print, public)? This will determine the effective methods of message delivery.

The desired outcomes of the communications plan include:

- Making key audiences aware of opportunities, trainings, templates, and general programmatic updates and requirements.

- VHA leadership will have the tools and branding to express programmatic status updates and programmatic scope adequately.

- Consistent key messaging is developed for each audience and specific campaigns.

- Keep stakeholders informed of new policies and procedures changes with a bi-monthly newsletter and alternatively bi-monthly supplemental program update email correspondence, resulting in one collaborative communication piece each month.

1.3   Target Audiences

VA Leaders
- Ensure VA leadership has communications presentations and other high-level collateral to effectively communicate VAIRRS systems and inspire confidence in positive program usage.
- Provide programmatic implementation analysis based on communications efforts for VA leaders to make informed decisions.
- Proactively identify opportunities to use boilerplate language and talking points.

- Demonstrate examples of how their work contributes to the overall performance of the health system via **multimedia assets** and *employee spotlights* in the e-newsletter
- Ensure the VHA field staff has a solid grasp of VAIRRS's role in day-to-day operations and the value of the programs with target communications efforts.
- Increase field staff engagement through e-newsletters, a message board, and the promotion of video tutorials and webinars.
- Use a more accessible, approachable voice for branded content.
- Facilitate VHA field staff access to sufficient, consistent, and timely information regarding program plans, updates, and activities so that they are well informed and able to work efficiently and effectively.

External audiences will be engaging periodically for reasons including, but not limited to:
- The Office of Research and Development (ORD) leadership and researchers identified newsworthy research results and technologies.
- Relevant news and information, as requested by stakeholders.

Messaging and tactics will be strategically planned, developed, and disseminated to audiences based on the content and channel. In some instances, audiences will be further segmented to help meet communication goals and objectives.

1.4   Branding

It is essential to start with a broad goal of raising awareness during the first year or more of this plan to establish a baseline for future communication plans and serve as an umbrella for the numerous and **varied measurable objectives.**

Titan Alpha will develop brand communications collateral and promote and inform key stakeholders about updates, education, or calls-to-action calls.

Titan Alpha will leverage capabilities and create new opportunities for standardized communications collateral such as newsletters, presentations, placemats, and SharePoint sites.

Titan Alpha has produced a VAIRRS Branding Guide to better inform visual and stylistic elements for all templates and general collateral as part of foundational actions. Future documents and templates shall include consistent imagery, style, and tone.
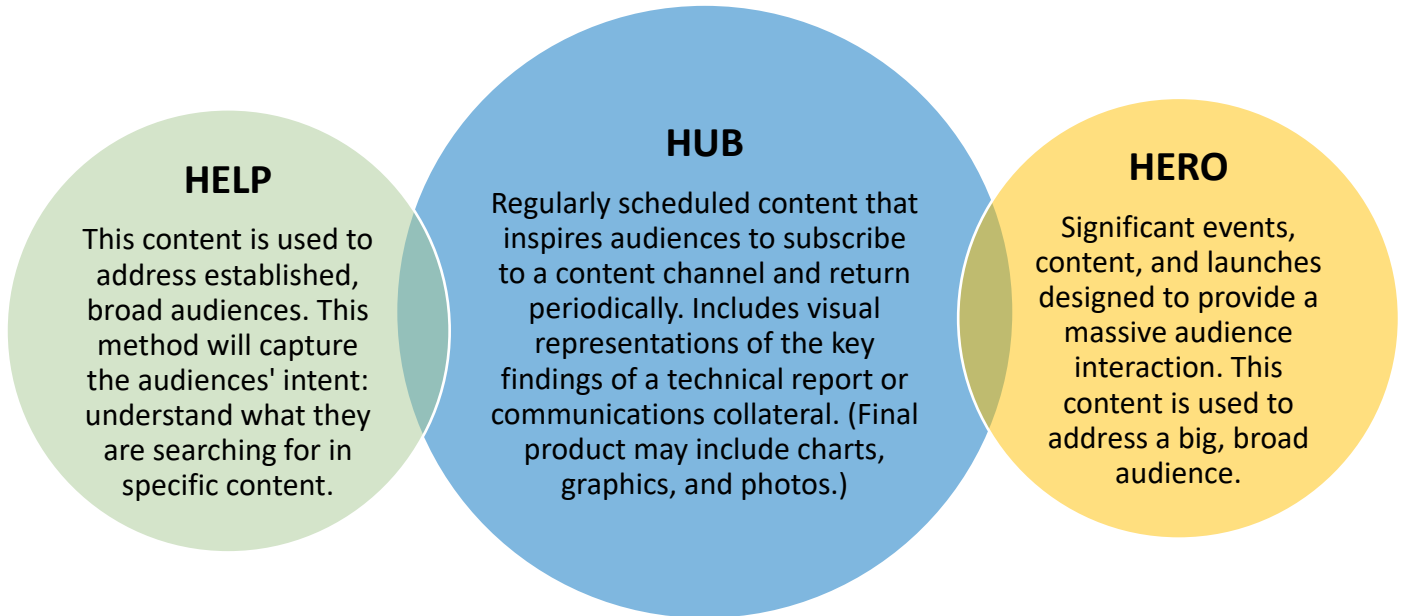
VHA leadership will have the tools and branding to express programmatic status updates and programmatic scope adequately.

Titan Alpha has developed a **VAIRRS presentation template** with talking points and program summaries to be used by staff when communicating to key stakeholders about VAIRRS.

1.5   Key Messaging and Content

Titan Alpha will utilize content production's "help, hub, hero" framework. This approach refers to having a scheduled release of written and multimedia content as part of a daily, weekly, seasonal, or program-based timeline. It includes pre-production and production activities, what type of content to produce, and how to publish and share it.

See an example of the **"help, hub, hero" framework** for a VAIRRS communications collateral

HELP

This content is used to address established, broad audiences. This method will capture the audiences' intent: understand what they are searching for in specific content.

HUB

Regularly scheduled content that inspires audiences to subscribe to a content channel and return periodically. Includes visual representations of the key findings of a technical report or communications collateral. (Final product may include charts, graphics, and photos.)

HERO

Significant events, content, and launches designed to provide a massive audience interaction. This content is used to address a big, broad audience.

below

CONTENT EXAMPLES		
• Recorded/written tutorials • Live how-to lessons/webinars • Customer service/ FAQs	• Factsheet • Project summary • Short video • Newsletter	• Major product launches • Seasonal/occasional outputs • Live-streamed event • Cross-promotion with other paid and earned media
BEST PRACTICES		

• Use word-of-mouth insights, polls, interviews, and focus groups to address relevant concerns and interests with targeted and branded content when necessary. • Create pre-recorded help videos that address specific high-volume queries. • Include clear calls to action for further education or assistance in each collateral output.	• Create a consistent editorial voice and visual elements with a distinctive style. • Communicate on a regular schedule frequency. • Develop an active promotion strategy that includes social media, cross-promotions, and incentives for subscribers to share the content.	• Develop a programming calendar covering all the proposed content that will be created or curated for the event. • Produce a launch plan and create promotional content leading up to an event. • Reach external stakeholders, earned, and paid when needed with the "hero" content. • Have a call to action in content.
OCCURRENCE		
"Help content" means that it consists of **essential, evergreen content** that is continually available. This includes programming that is relevant throughout the year.	"When needed" throughout the year. These tend to occur at a higher frequency. Episodic or multi-part series designed to give a fresh perspective on your audiences' passions and interests. This is often staggered throughout the year.	Most likely only a few hero moments per year.

1.5.1 Build Your Content Distribution Strategy

Content Distribution involves using different channels to promote your content to audiences. Below are channel types and examples:

- **Owned**: Distributing content through owned properties (e.g., VAIRRS website, VAIRRS Newsletter, SharePoint).
- **Shared**: Using third-party channels to distribute content. Shared channels include social, professional, and messaging networks (e.g., social media).
- **Earned**: Organically earned coverage and promotion (e.g., published articles, speaking opportunities, events, and awards).
- **Paid**: Any medium that requires payment to reach the audiences (e.g., social media advertisements).

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In collaboration with the "help, hub, hero" framework, VAIRRS audiences, content, and channels are also dependent on the calls to action, which will be included when needed in all content. The content approach will follow the **"bite, snack, and meal"** framework, which provides digestible pieces of information to different audiences.

An example of the **"**bite, snack, and meal" approach for a VAIRRS communications collateral is in the chart below:

BITE	SNACK	MEAL
A visual representation of the key findings of a technical report, in the form of an infographic or short update.	A visual representation of the key findings of a technical report in the form of a factsheet, project summary, or short video. The final product may include charts, graphics, and photos.	The technical research is in the form of a report, technical note, or tech brief.
AUDIENCES		
• Veterans (External) • VHA Field Staff and VA Leadership (Internal)	• Societies and associations (External) • Industry partners (External) • VHA Field Staff and VA Leadership (Internal)	• VAMC's (Internal) • VHA Field Staff, Division offices, and administrators (Internal) • Award Submissions (External)
CHANNELS		
• Social Media • External/Internal Newsletters	• Email • Leadership Presentations • Program Summaries/Updates	• Webinar • Promotional/Educational Video Overview
CONTENT EXAMPLES		
• GIFs • Facts/Insights • Event Updates • Product/Service Updates • Quotes/Testimonials • Videos (7 seconds or less)	• Video (30 seconds or less) • Articles (500 words or less) • E-blast • Press Release	• Articles/Point of View • Reports/Micro-site • Case Studies • Videos (2 minutes or more) • Webinar/Live Video • Infographics • E-Books

3.0   TACTICS AND TIMELINE

VAIRRS will need to create engaging, visual content to capture the attention of target audiences and must captivate their attention to move them to a call to action (e.g., click, download, or sign up). This plan may be subject to technical limitations because of VHA policies; however, it

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will maintain an attempt to leverage digital storytelling whenever possible. In addition to emphasizing accessibility, relatability, and engagement, there will be an emphasis on a more robust digital presence for VAIRRS-related content.

Once fully integrated, the Communications Strategy will include building awareness around VAIRRS systems, including IRBNet, and future implemented programs. The goals and objectives will drive various strategies and tactics to reach the identified key audiences. These audiences play an important role as stakeholders and/or partners; however, not all VAIRRS programs and initiatives are appropriate for all audiences.

Promote stakeholder communications in order to drive awareness of training initiatives.

Effectively engage with VAIRRS stakeholders to communicate programmatic updates.

Prioritize ongoing updates of the VAIRRS system, including IRBNet and VAEDA, to foster a positive user experience.

Figure 3: VAIRRS Communications Priorities

3.1   Short-term communications

The overarching **short-term communications goal (FY 2021–FY 2023)** of the VAIRRS 2021 Strategic Communications Plan is to raise awareness of the ongoing programmatic updates and educational opportunities among **internal audiences**.

Below is a list of the short-term priority activities. A complete timeline of strategies and tactics will be developed and finalized in Phase 1.

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Phase 1—Short-Term Priorities (July 2021 through January 2022): Communications Collateral

Strategy: Monthly recognition program celebrating completion and achievements:

> Tactic: Showcase achievements through *VAIRRS Ambassadors* spotlight featuring exceptional sites and best practices for VAIRRS program deployment.

> Tactics: Identify opportunities for **Federal recognition and awards** to publicize individual achievements.
> - Identify forums for award recognition.
> - Submit award write-ups.

Stategy: Leverage capabilities and create new opportunities for standardized communications collateral such as newsletters, presentations, placemats, and SharePoint site:

> Tactic: Document **style guide and document templates** for all written communication.

> Tactic: Develop a **presentation template** with talking points and program summaries to be used by staff when communicating to key stakeholders about VAIRRS.

Phase 1—Short-Term Priorities (July 2021 through January 2022): Multimedia Content

Strategy: Update the VAIRRS landing page; rearrange content and establish for traffic from e-newsletters; develop graphics and engaging visuals, and utilize referral traffic:

> Tactic: **Increase the e-newsletter open rates by 5% by February 2022.**

> Tactic: **Record monthly metrics and insights beginning August 2021.**

Strategy: Foster technical guidance for VAMC Field with customized messaging through video series:

> Tactic: Develop a consistent **e-newsletter publishing schedule** to ensure a regular digital presence and share information about updates and key features by September 2021.

> Tactic: Transition to the GovDelivery email system with updated template by August 2021.

> Tactic: Produce e-blast *VAIRRS Program Update* **bi-monthly** to supplement the off-cycle publication of the *VAIRRS Newsletter*.

Phase 1—Short-Term Priorities (July 2021 through January 2022): Digital Media

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Strategy: Promote **technical guidance** for VAMC Field through several mediums such as webinars, Wizard Guides, and Energizers:

> Tactic: Promote quarterly live webinars to answer questions, address updates, and facilitate live tutorials.

Strategy: Develop **web content updates** including:

> Tactic: Implement branding to existing platforms.

> Tactic: Align content with subpages.

> Tactic: Provide SharePoint reorganization.

3.2   On-going Communications Support

The overarching **long-term communications goals (fiscal year (FY) 2022–FY 2026)** of the VAIRRS 2021 Strategic Communications Plan are to:

- Raise the visibility of VAIRRS systems, opportunities, and updates among key stakeholders.
- Establish VAIRRS systems as the go-to resources for advancements in the healthcare enterprise.
- Illustrating the value of VAIRRS in the healthcare industry and highlighting VHA's efforts to improve the lives of Veterans with access to shared research.

Phase 2—Proposed Long-Term Priorities (2022 – On-going): Communications Collateral

Strategy: Monthly recognition program **celebrating completion and achievements:**

> Tactic: Showcase achievements through **VAIRRS Ambassadors spotlight featuring** exceptional sites and best practices for VAIRRS program deployment.

> Tactics: Identify opportunities for **Federal recognition and awards** to publicize individual achievements.
> • Identify forums for award recognition.
> • Submit award write-ups.

Stategy: Leverage capabilities and create new opportunities for **standardized communications collateral** such as newsletters, presentations, placemats, and SharePoint site:

> **Tactic:** Document **style guide and document templates** for all written communication.

> Tactic: Develop a **presentation template** with talking points and program summaries to be used by staff when communicating to key stakeholders about VAIRRS.

Phase 2— Proposed Long-Term Priorities (2022 – On-going): Multimedia Content

Strategy: Foster technical guidance for VAMC Field with customized messaging through video series:

Tactic: Liaise with site support to determine topical needs.

Tactic: Create short recap cinematic reels that summarize updates, best practices, and **quarterly live webinars.**

Strategy: Develop a library of video and photo footage to be stored and distributed:

Tactic: Develop **annual video announcements**: In Case You Missed It (ICYMI) recap, distributed December 2022/January 2023.

Tactic: **Public Service Announcement (PSA)** on the research benefits of VAIRRS implementation will be ready for distribution by September 2022.

Phase 2— Proposed Long-Term (2022 – On-going): Digital Media

Strategy: Develop a platform for internal collaboration among staff:

Tactic: Develop **a message board platform to facilitate open dialogue among system users**. This would be a place for internal discussions and around VAIRRS products, as well as serve as another format to disseminate quick updates, direct resources, and make users aware of upcoming live webinars.

Strategy: Gauge audience satisfaction and communication efforts.

Tactic: Distribute **User Satisfaction Survey** for feedback on VAIRRS communications in September 2022.

4.0   EVALUATION

Titan Alpha will continue monitoring and evaluating essential communications outputs on an ongoing basis. Titan Alpha will also measure the impact of activities and identify areas for improvement.

VAIRRS collateral performances, user surveys, webpage metrics, and email correspondence insights will be collected throughout the campaign. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will provide service level measures of VAIRRS activities. Titan Alpha will report to VAIRRS POC with updates, risks, and analytic metrics every month. Titan Alpha will distribute an optional User Satisfaction Survey to gather feedback on communications efforts.

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