Service Delivery Innovation and Diffusion in U.S. Military Veterans Policy: Case Studies of Leading Practices in U.S. States

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To advance the post service lives of America’s military service members, veterans and their families
Research Questions
Research Questions

Question #1:

• How do service delivery innovations in veterans affairs diffuse across jurisdictional boundaries?

Question #2:

• Do innovations of different types diffuse via the same mechanisms, or does the nature of the diffusion process vary from one type to another?
Context and Background
System of Veterans Service Delivery in the U.S.

- Federal—U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and federal agency partners
- State—State Departments of Veterans Affairs and state agency partners
- Community—Local governments, VSOs, nonprofit human service organizations, civic groups, individuals
System of Veterans Service Delivery in the U.S.

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- Community—Local governments, VSOs, nonprofit human service organizations, civic groups, individuals
U.S. State Departments of Veterans Affairs

- Post-WWII—states develop departments dedicated to facilitating veterans’ access to earned benefits and care
- Benefits and claims assistance, cemeteries and burials, and state veterans homes
- Post-9/11—innovation around VA strategic priorities
• Eliminating the claims backlog
• Improving access to VA benefits and care
• Ending veteran homelessness
Theory
Policy Diffusion

• “…any process where prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for the remaining non-adopters.”
  - (Strang, 1991: 325)

• “…occurs when government policy decisions in a given jurisdiction are systematically conditioned by prior policy choices made in other jurisdictions.”
  - (Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett, 2006: 787)

• “…policies in one state are influenced by the policies of other states.”
Policy Diffusion

• Stems from interdependence

• Concerned with *process*—not just outcome of policies being adopted in one jurisdiction or another

• Different from convergence—not just about policies across jurisdictions becoming more like one another (which could happen independently)
Policy Diffusion

- Learning—prior experiences with policy in other jurisdictions (e.g., Gilardi, 2010)
- Emulation—normative acceptance of policy, “right thing to do” (e.g., Cao, 2009)
- Competition—attract resources vis-à-vis other jurisdictions (e.g., Simmons and Elkins, 2004)
Policy Diffusion

- “As the building blocks of diffusion are fairly clear... [future research] should aim to explain more precisely how they operate in different contexts.”
  - (Gilardi, 2016: 14)
Service Delivery Innovation

- Administrative process—e.g., creation of new organizational forms (e.g., Meeus and Edquist, 2006; also see De Vries et al. 2015)

- Conceptual—e.g., new concepts or means of framing problems (e.g., Bekkers et al. 2011; also see De Vries et al. 2015)

- Governance—e.g., public-private partnerships, CGRs, policy networks (e.g., Moore and Hartley, 2008; also see De Vries et al. 2015)

- Product or service—new goods or services (e.g., Damanpour and Schneider, 2009; also see De Vries et al. 2015)

- Technological process—new technologies (e.g., Edquist et al., 2010; also see De Vries et al. 2015)
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Data and Methods
Motivation for Approach

• “…we caution against excessive reliance on standard procedure for empirical analyses and recommend the development of research designs tailored to specific diffusion mechanisms in a specific context.”
  - (Maggetti and Gilardi, 2015: 89)

• “The marginal pay of standard research designs, especially quantitative designs, is decreasingly sharply.”
  - (Maggetti and Gilardi, 2015: 103)
Data and Methods

• Survey of state directors of veterans affairs—part of broader project examining state DVA organizational attributes, needs of veterans populations across different service areas, service delivery challenges, innovations, and cross-state interactions

• Case studies examining diffusion mechanisms—across- and within-case analysis using “diverse cases” sampling strategy to examine operation of alternative diffusion mechanisms
Qualitative Analysis—A Closer Look

- “Diverse cases”—select purposefully to maximize variation along several dimensions (Seawright and Gerring, 2008); test for operation of multiple alternative mechanisms, not just one (Starke, 2013)

- Within-case analysis—process tracing to discriminate among alternative mechanisms, rule out alternative explanations, e.g., independent adoption (Starke, 2013)

- Observable implications—indirect testing—what would evidence look like were a particular mechanism at work; “folk Bayesianism” (Bennett 2009; Starke 2013)
Qualitative Analysis—A Closer Look

- Eliminating the claims backlog
- Ending veteran homelessness
- Improving access to VA benefits and care
Preliminary Findings and Observations
Needs of Veterans Population

- Benefits and claims assistance universally listed as in the Top 5 Needs of veterans
- Mental health, employment, outreach, and long-term care also listed as Top 5 Needs by a majority of respondents
- Finances, education, physical health, and family/community relationships less frequently listed as Top 5 Needs

Preliminary Findings: Veteran Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
<th>Service Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Benefits and claims assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82%</td>
<td>Behavioral and mental health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64%</td>
<td>Employment and training</td>
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<tr>
<td>61%</td>
<td>Veterans homes (long-term care)</td>
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<td>50%</td>
<td>Communication and outreach</td>
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<tr>
<td>46%</td>
<td>Housing and shelter</td>
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<tr>
<td>36%</td>
<td>Cemetery and memorial services</td>
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<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>Women veterans services</td>
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<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>Physical health and wellness</td>
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<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Support for disabilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
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<tr>
<td>14%</td>
<td>Community/peer support</td>
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<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>Legal services</td>
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<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>Family and relationship support</td>
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<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Money management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Practice Adoption and Outside Learning**

- Reported adoption of practices and innovations from other states lies in areas of common state responsibility.

- Service areas featuring notable adoption activity include communications/outreach, memorial services, and long-term care.

- Indication of some practice adoption in strategic priority areas.

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**% of Respondents Indicating Adoption of Practices from Other States in the Following Areas (n=28)**

- Communication and outreach: 44%
- Cemetery and memorial services: 38%
- Veterans homes (long-term care): 38%
- Women veterans services: 35%
- Benefits and claims assistance: 35%
- Employment and training: 29%
- Housing and shelter: 26%
- Community/peer support: 25%
- Entrepreneurship programs: 18%
- Higher education: 17%
- Support for disabilities: 13%
- Money management: 9%
- Behavioral and mental health: 9%
- Legal services: 9%
- Physical health and wellness: 5%
- Food and nutrition: 5%
- Family and relationship support: 5%
Preliminary Findings

Eliminating the Claims Backlog
“Strike Teams”

• Administrative process innovation—creation of full-time teams dedicated to resolving oldest, most complex claims

• Originating state: Texas
Eliminating the Claims Backlog
Claims Backlog “Strike Teams”

2012

TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION

2013

CAL VET
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Eliminating the Claims Backlog
Claims Backlog “Strike Teams”

• Concerted efforts by California to replicate successes of the “Texas model” with respect to allocating full-time intensive resources to claims backlog

• In-depth engagement between each state’s DVA to share information about constructing teams, arrangements with regional VA offices

• Suggestive of learning mechanism
Improving Access to VA Benefits and Services

Veteran Benefit Enhancement Programs

• Technological process innovation—leveraging VA and other federal data to identify veterans receiving benefits through state Medicaid program, make matches, and facilitate access to VA benefits and care

• Originating state: Washington
Improving Access to VA Benefits and Services
Veteran Benefit Enhancement Programs

2003

2011

2012

2014
Improving Access to VA Benefits and Services
Veteran Benefit Enhancement Programs

- Widespread uptake over short period of time by other states
- Similar legislative efforts—uptake through mechanisms such as CSG Suggested State Legislation (SSL)
- Suggestive of learning, or potentially of emulation (similarities in legislation)
Ending Homelessness
Housing and Homelessness Collaboratives

• Governance innovation—state-centric, multi-actor collaborative governance program to identify and assist homeless veterans through public-public and public-private partnerships

• Originating State: Washington
Ending Homelessness
Public-Private Partnerships

- Complex intervention involving addressing a problem through a similar model
- Multiple variations in actors, partnership arrangements, and resources
- Adaptation to local circumstances—suggestive of learning?
Challenges and Next Steps
Outstanding Challenges

• Case selection—examine multiple types of innovation in a single service area?

• Coding choices—what constitutes an innovation of one type versus another? What about cases with traits of multiple types?

• Nature of evidence—what are the observable implications of alternative diffusion mechanisms at work? What would we expect to see?
Next Steps

• For each case, further map out diffusion patterns and develop evidence base

• Consider additional innovations, within and/or across issue areas

• Build and test theory aligning diffusion mechanisms and innovation attributes
In Search of an Enterprise Approach to U.S. Federal Veterans Policy
Question:

- What are the prerequisites for an “enterprise approach” to U.S. federal veterans policy?
Defining “Enterprise Government”

- “…cross-agency collaboration to tackle complex policy problems that lie inherently across agencies…streamlining and integration of administrative services, processes and functions that share common or identical elements”
  - (Fountain, 2016: 7)
Key Building Blocks of Enterprise Veterans Policy

- Building Block #1: Comprehensive Vision of the Policy Challenge—understanding that the challenge of supporting veterans is multi-dimensional and should be defined in terms of meeting a range of needs (to include health and benefits but also education, employment, family support, housing, and others) rather than any need one in isolation.

- Building Block #2: Use of an Appropriate Inter-Agency Collaboration Mechanism—working under an inter-agency structure that ensures sustained leadership engagement and participation, effective cross-agency planning, and accountability for implementation actions.

- Building Block #3: Coordination of Effort Based on Agency Core Competencies—allocating effort and responsibility across agencies based on expertise, capabilities, and mission focus.
Key Building Blocks of Enterprise Veterans Policy

• Building Block #4: Robust Engagement with Community-Level Stakeholders—regularly engaging with state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and private sector stakeholders supporting veterans at the community-level.

• Building Block #5: Effective Use of Technology and Data—harnessing technology solutions that capture the perspectives of disparate actors, facilitate sharing of information and insight, and enable data-driven decisions in strategic planning and service delivery.
For questions or comments, please contact:

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