



# VA Core Values and Characteristics Questions & Answers



*Note: Shown below are some basic Questions and Answers pertaining to the VA Core Values and Characteristics. They are not meant to be all-inclusive; there are many other questions the VA workforce and other audiences could and will likely have on this topic. However, these Qs & As provide enough information to be able to understand the general gist of this effort, and should enable someone to at least partially address a lot of the questions on this important effort.*

## What are Core Values and why do we need them?

Core Values describe an organization's culture and character. Values serve as the foundation for the way individuals in an organization interact with each other and with people outside of the organization. They also influence an organization's mission, strategy and day-to-day operations. Most successful organizations have core values and they form the foundation on which everything else in the organization is built. Values also serve as a common bond between all employees regardless of their grade, specialty area, location, etc. In the case of our VA Core Values and Characteristics, they also remind us of the special commitment we have to Veterans, their families and other beneficiaries.

## What are VA's Core Values and Characteristics?

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA's) Core Values and Characteristics apply across the entire VA enterprise. They essentially define "who we are" and also how we are different from other organizations. The Values help define our culture and underscores our commitment to Veterans. Our Core Values are: **I**ntegrity, **C**ommitment, **A**dvocacy, **R**espect and **E**xcellence ("I CARE"). The Characteristics define "what we stand for" and help guide the execution of our mission, shape our strategy, and influence resource allocation and other key decisions made within VA. Our Core Characteristics are: Trustworthy, Accessible, Quality, Innovative, Agile and Integrated.

## What are the differences between the Core Values and Characteristics?

Core Values define "who we are" and Characteristics define "what we stand for." Values represent our beliefs and provide a baseline for the standards of behavior expected of all VA employees. They are relevant, meaningful and actionable and are enduring. Core Characteristics are a common set of principles around which our actions are organized and describe the traits all VA organizations should possess and demonstrate. The VA Characteristics are relevant today and they are also forward-looking. They identify the qualities needed to successfully accomplish today's missions and also support our ongoing transformation to a 21st Century VA.



## **How were the Core Values and Characteristics Developed?**

This transformational journey began in 2009 by asking important questions, such as, “How well are we performing our mission?”, “What is changing in our operating environment and how do we respond to that change?”, “What is working, and what isn’t working so well, and why?”, etc. Included in this process were two productive off-sites – one in New Orleans and one at Fort McNair in Washington DC.

The participants from the many different VA organizations provided considerable input into the development of the Core Values and Characteristics. Additionally, critical thinking around these Core Values and Characteristics included input from the VA workforce through surveys and feedback as well as discussions on myriad of topics. Based on these activities, and the recommendations of the different panels and groups, the Secretary approved the Core Values and Characteristics presented in this packet and on the enclosed DVD. These Core Values and Characteristics reflect the consensus views as to the existing culture of VA and what the workforce believes VA should look like in the future. Once the Core Values and Characteristics were approved, a communications plan was developed to disseminate the information to the VA workforce as well as to other audiences.

## **Why was this initiative undertaken?**

A primary motivation in developing one set of Core Values and Characteristics was to unify the entire VA workforce on one set of principles. These Core Values and Characteristics will help focus all members of the VA workforce on these important and desirable principles; they will also eventually influence behavior. Additionally, they will influence how people outside of VA view our organization. These Core Values and Characteristics provide a common ground and compass by which we can all communicate with each other and with external audiences. Although everyone working in VA is unique and possesses different skills, backgrounds and roles within our organization, the Core Values and Characteristics apply equally to all of us. Every single worker in VA plays a critical role in supporting the overall strategic vision and mission of the VA – to better serve our Veterans, their families and caregivers – and also contributes to our professional reputation as an organization.

## **Why are we making this announcement now?**

The VA Core Values and Characteristics were developed through a comprehensive and collaborative process during the last two years. Now that all of those activities have concluded and a common set of Core Values and Characteristics has been developed and approved by the Secretary, there is no better time to introduce these principles to the VA workforce. In other words, there is much to be gained by introducing these Core Values and Characteristics now and nothing to be gained from delaying their introduction to our VA workforce.



## **Why was it necessary to codify our Core Values and Characteristics ?**

Throughout its history, VA's dedicated and professional workforce has always demonstrated a strong commitment to Veterans and exhibited many worthwhile values aimed at providing the best-possible services, care and support to Veterans. However, there has not been one set of Core Values and Characteristics that applied to all VA employees until now. The Core Values and Characteristics are more than just words. They represent an individual and an organizational commitment to do the best we can every day to perform our crucial mission of taking care of Veterans, family members, and other beneficiaries. By codifying these Core Values and Characteristics, we ensure they receive the proper emphasis at all levels within the organization, are clearly understood by the workforce, and most importantly, become an enduring part of our VA culture.

## **Are these Core Values and Characteristics permanent?**

Core organizational values are enduring – they are written to withstand the test of time. They are not linked to any particular person or group, so although people come and go within VA all the time, our Core Values will endure. They become the foundation of our VA culture and are the foundation on which everything we do as an organization is built. As part of a healthy and introspective process, all successful organizations should occasionally review their environment, missions, workforce structure, organizational design, business practices, standardized procedures, and other key enablers to verify if any revisions are appropriate in an ever-changing and complex world. This type of analytical process could include reviewing the Core Characteristics to verify if all existing characteristics are still serving the initial purpose for which they were created and relevant in the current environment. If so, they should remain unchanged; if not, they can be revised.

## **Will the Core Values and Characteristics change VA, or change how we serve Veterans, their families, and other beneficiaries?**

These new Core Values and Characteristics do not change our fundamental mission of caring for Veterans and other beneficiaries. The new Core Values and Characteristics are in large part derived from many values VA has demonstrated throughout its existence. The Characteristics are also not entirely new concepts. By announcing these Core Values and Characteristics, the entire VA workforce will be aware of their existence, can look for opportunities to demonstrate them in the workplace, and be more confident discussing and displaying them to Veterans and other people outside of our organization. Also, the Values and Characteristics and "I CARE" logo – which will be prominently displayed in all VA facilities – send a strong signal to Veterans, family members, and other beneficiaries that we take pride in what we do and we care deeply about our mission. They underscore our commitment to "caring" and are ways we demonstrate that VA is a "people-centric" organization and not an insensitive bureaucracy.



## **How will the Core Values change my job?**

These new Core Values and Characteristics are not intended to change anyone's job description or routine duties. Over time, starting in FY 12, VA will begin implementing a formalized program enterprise-wide to recognize VA personnel and organizations which best exemplify the Core Values and Characteristics.

## **How will we know if we are living up to the Core Values?**

Most VA employees already display one or more of these Core Values and Characteristics every day. However, now that they have been approved, all of us can and should look for opportunities to publicly demonstrate our Values in the workplace. This effort is not just about knowing what "I CARE" stands for and being able to recite the words. That is the easy part. It is about "actions." It is about every VA employee living and exemplifying these Core Values and Characteristics every day in the workforce. There is no simple litmus test to verify if someone is living these values. But over time, it will be fairly easy for supervisors, co-workers, subordinates, and the Veterans and other beneficiaries we serve to identify who among us is exemplifying these Core Values.

## **Will I ever be formally measured against these Core Values and Characteristics?**

There are no immediate plans to change the existing formal processes (annual performance reviews, etc.) based on these Core Values and Characteristics. If the VA's senior leadership decides at some point to incorporate Core Values and Characteristics into these types of products, the concepts would first be tested as a "pilot program" with a small percentage of the VA workforce (i.e. the SES population) before expanding to include the wider VA workforce. Appropriate inter-governmental coordination (OPM, etc.) would occur before such steps were taken. Appropriate notifications (to employees, labor representatives, etc.) would also be made before any changes to the existing formal assessment procedures were implemented.