

## 5. DATA COLLECTION

Nearly 300 interviewers collected data for the 2001 National Survey of Veterans (NSV 2001) over a 9-month period. This chapter describes the computer system we used to collect the data, the procedures we employed to ensure successful interviews with respondents, and the special operations we instituted to enhance response rates.

### 5.1 The CATI System

#### Questionnaire Administration

Westat's proprietary Cheshire computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system is designed to handle very large and complex survey instruments. Not only does this system greatly enhance data quality by automating most data collection tasks, it also reduces respondent burden by streamlining the questions. The CATI system is particularly appropriate for the NSV 2001, with its complicated questionnaire, List and RDD Sample types, and household screening requirements for RDD Sample cases. By using the CATI system, we ensured that the NSV 2001 instrument was administered correctly, the samples were managed efficiently, and data were recorded properly. For example, the software guided interviewers through the programmed skip patterns; performed range, logic, and consistency checks; determined when cases should be called and how often; kept track of which cases belonged to each sample; and stored all data to a common database. Detailed descriptions of these and other CATI system capabilities follow.

**Display.** The standardized display of survey questions, interviewer instructions, and response options contributed to better data quality by helping to ensure that each interviewer administered the instrument in the same manner. The program also displayed all relevant respondent information, automatically inserting into question text personalized data such as the respondent's name.

**Sample Management.** The CATI system differentiated between the RDD and List Samples, and provided the appropriate questions for the interviewer to ask. RDD Sample respondents automatically received the household screening questionnaire (see Appendix A), while List Sample members were administered a verification question (see Appendix B). The program implemented decision rules based on military service questions in the screening questionnaire and the extended questionnaire to determine eligibility. It then selected eligible persons for an interview and prompted interviewers

to terminate the interview for ineligible respondents. The CATI system also was able to evaluate the samples separately in reference to their target production goals.

**Online Data Entry.** Data were captured instantly in the CATI system when interviewers typed respondent answers as they conducted the interview. The program offered a variety of ways to correct keying errors. Interviewers corrected data entry mistakes immediately by backing up through the CATI screens, reentering information, then moving forward again through the corrected question path. For mistakes discovered after the interview was over, or those too time consuming to correct during the interview, interviewers entered online comments for review by the database manager, or submitted a hard copy problem sheet to their shift supervisor. (See Chapter 7 for a more thorough discussion of database management.)

**Skip Patterns.** The NSV 2001 questionnaire contained numerous, often complicated, skip patterns. Once the questionnaire was programmed into the CATI system, however, these skips were administered automatically and consistently. As the interviewer entered a respondent's answers, the program determined and then displayed the correct question path. The CATI system accessed the sample file or other data collected from the respondent and presented specific sections of the instrument or different versions of the questions in accordance with programming instructions. The software also used existing data to determine whether or not to administer certain questions. For example, if the veteran provided exact dates of induction and release from active duty in the Military Background section of the main interview, the CATI system calculated and automatically entered that veteran's periods of service. This feature reduced response burden for some veterans, which decreased overall survey administration time.

**Range Checks.** The CATI system is capable of performing both hard and soft range checks. Hard range checks set the upper and lower limits of allowable item responses. Hard ranges were required for all variables. A question with response categories of 1 through 12 accepted only those values, in addition to the required missing values of "Don't Know" and "Refused." Exhibit 5-1 is an example of a hard range check. Soft range checks queried implausible responses but allowed the entry to stand if unchanged after being probed by the interviewer. We used soft ranges for questions about dates or quantitative information. Exhibit 52 is an example of a soft range check.

**Logic and Consistency Checks.** Logic checks ensured that data collected at different points in the interview were internally consistent. If responses were inconsistent, interviewers were prompted through a series of custom screens to verify the recorded data. The program accepted corrected data when obtained. If the responses remained inconsistent, the case was flagged for review by the database manager and the interview continued. Exhibit 5-3 is an example of a logic check.

Exhibit 5-1. Example of CATI specifications with hard range

**PROGRAMMER NOTE 1:**

**IN ALL MONTH FIELDS, HARD RANGE = 1 – 12.**

**IN ALL INSTANCES WHERE OTHER SPECIFY = YES PROVIDE 30 CHARACTER OTHER SPECIFY FIELD.**

**IN MB0a, RANGE FOR YEAR = 1885 – (1983).**

**VETS.DOBMM, VETS.DOBYYYY**

MB0a. First, I'd like to ask you for the month and year you were born.

|\_|\_| MONTH

|\_|\_|\_|\_| YEAR

REFUSED..... -7

DON'T KNOW..... -8

- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1. JANUARY  | 7. JULY      |
| 2. FEBRUARY | 8. AUGUST    |
| 3. MARCH    | 9. SEPTEMBER |
| 4. APRIL    | 10. OCTOBER  |
| 5. MAY      | 11. NOVEMBER |
| 6. JUNE     | 12. DECEMBER |

Exhibit 5-2. Example of CATI specifications with soft range

**PROGRAMMER NOTE 63:**

**IN (SD13) DEPEND HARD RANGE = 0 – 15. SOFT RANGE = 0 – 10.**

[O6a.]

**VETS.DEPEND**

SD13. During the year 2000, how many children depended on you for at least half of their support?

NUMBER .....|\_|\_|

REFUSED..... -7

DON'T KNOW..... -8



Exhibit 5-3. Example of CATI logic check

1.1501 MB15A 100010300101 - (410) 555-7834 - 16:13

I have recorded that you were released from active duty on January 5, 1934. That date is earlier than the date you began active duty. Please tell me the date you began your active duty.

( 5 ) ( 5 ) ( 1931 )  
MONTH DAY YEAR

- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1. JANUARY  | 7. JULY      |
| 2. FEBRUARY | 8. AUGUST    |
| 3. MARCH    | 9. SEPTEMBER |
| 4. APRIL    | 10. OCTOBER  |
| 5. MAY      | 11. NOVEMBER |
| 6. JUNE     | 12. DECEMBER |

1.1502 MB15B 100010300101 - (410) 555-7834 - 16:13

And again, what was the date you were released from active duty?

( 1 ) ( 5 ) ( 1945 )  
MONTH DAY YEAR

- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1. JANUARY  | 7. JULY      |
| 2. FEBRUARY | 8. AUGUST    |
| 3. MARCH    | 9. SEPTEMBER |
| 4. APRIL    | 10. OCTOBER  |
| 5. MAY      | 11. NOVEMBER |
| 6. JUNE     | 12. DECEMBER |

**Data Storage.** The CATI system stored all administrative and substantive data collected during each interview administration. One segment of the software recorded each attempted contact with every respondent. It stored the date and time of the call attempt, interviewer identification, work class, disposition code, and termination information. Another segment recorded every keystroke made during every interview. If an interview was interrupted and data lost due to computer failure, this file was used to restore the original responses. The system also stored all hard range failures and soft range overrides.

### **CATI Case Management and Call Scheduling**

Telephone numbers loaded into the CATI system became available to interviewers through the CATI scheduler. An autodialer dialed the numbers, reducing interviewer dialing time as well as eliminating the possibility of dialing a telephone number incorrectly. The CATI scheduler kept track of the number of calls made to each telephone number and automatically closed out those that had reached the maximum number of contact attempts without completing an interview. The CATI scheduler also ensured that cases were called at the appropriate times, using rules developed to minimize the number of calls to any given household and to reduce nonresponse. For example, the week was divided into day and time period categories through which the system moved each case in a specified pattern of call attempts. If the first call attempt was in the evening and resulted in no answer, the CATI scheduler automatically set the next call attempt for another time of day and a different day of the week. For cases where the interviewer made contact and scheduled an appointment to complete the screener, or to begin or continue the extended interview, the system held the case then released it to the next available interviewer at the scheduled day and time. Screener interviews that were interrupted were restarted at the beginning of the screening questionnaire when the household was reached again. Interrupted extended interviews began again at the beginning of the questionnaire section from which the case had exited. Cases with scheduled appointments were given priority over all other cases.

Another function of the CATI scheduler was to manage the flow and assignment of cases to interviewers. The scheduling system analyzed a number of factors when determining what case to assign to a particular interviewer, including interviewer skills required, call history, time zone of the respondent, day of the week, time of day, and priority weighting of cases by sample group. This analysis required no in-depth knowledge on the part of the interviewer, and it maximized the number of completed interviews while minimizing the number of nonproductive interviewer hours. The CATI scheduling system also appropriately assigned to specially trained interviewers those cases that needed to be traced, refusal cases,

language problems, and cases requiring proxy interviews. Finally, the system maintained a log of all call attempts and their results.

The CATI scheduler was customized to accommodate the two NSV 2001 samples in a variety of ways. First, we programmed the CATI system to track multiple telephone numbers for each List Sample veteran. When an interviewer learned of a new telephone number for a veteran, it was entered directly into the system and dialed at the next call attempt. Project staff or the database manager entered telephone numbers collected offline from sources other than household members (such as the VA and directory assistance). Multiple telephone numbers were also tracked for RDD veterans (for example, veterans who had moved out of the household they were living in at the time the screener survey was completed).

We further programmed the CATI scheduler to optimize when and how often a case was called based on sample type. Calls to List Sample members were made primarily in the evenings and on weekends because we were much more likely to contact a household resident during those hours. Initial calls to the RDD Sample were made primarily during the day. While this did not optimize household contact, interviewers were able to quickly close out the nonworking and business numbers that remained even after the sample had been prescreened for them.

### **Programming and Testing the CATI System**

The CATI development staff was led by a systems analyst who was responsible for coordinating all survey programming and testing activities. The systems analyst worked closely with the questionnaire designers to ensure that the CATI program specifications addressed every aspect of the NSV 2001 instrument. The specifications included variable name and location, valid response categories, and instructions for item nonresponse. The programming staff then used those specifications to program the instrument, verifying that the resulting instrument conformed to the specifications and ensuring that no errors were hidden in the specifications.

Westat thoroughly tested all features of the system, including those associated with scheduling, interviewing, data storage, and editing. After each section was programmed, it went through multiple rounds of intensive internal testing. In the first round, the programmers used the specifications to proof the screens, check the data dictionary, and match the programmed language flow against the survey

instrument's skip patterns. The next round of testing focused on transitions from one questionnaire section to another. We also tested restart points to ensure that the flow between sections and topics was smooth, and that questionnaire sections appeared in the proper sequence.

For the final round of testing, result codes, randomization routines, standard function keys, database fields, flags, array variables, timing variables, audit trails, and database structure were validated. We proofed all text on the screens a final time and confirmed the accurate collection of data into the survey database. Testing scenarios also targeted the questionnaire delivery system (the CATI scheduler). The focus here was on the proper delivery of cases to interviewers, whether appointments were correctly made and kept, and how interview break-offs were treated.

Just as during the data collection period, forms were filled out whenever a potential problem was found. These problem sheets described the situation, listed key variables, indicated expected results, and documented the actual result. The database manager logged each problem sheet and routed it to the appropriate person. Once the problem was resolved and the changes were implemented in the testing environment, the database manager sent the problem sheet back to the originator so that the test could be rerun. This process ensured that at least two people verified that a problem had been resolved. Westat kept its CATI program and systems documentation, test plans, and test sets up to date, thus ensuring that changes to the instrument could be easily incorporated and tested. CATI system version control software maintained a history of changes.

## **5.2 Interviewing Operations**

Data collection for the NSV 2001 began on February 12, 2001 and ended November 12, 2001. Interviewing was conducted from six of Westat's Telephone Research Center (TRC) facilities. The telephone centers operated seven days a week.

### **Management, Staffing, and Scheduling**

The telephone operations manager coordinated all training and interviewing activities with supervisory staff in the six TRCs. For training, the operations manager prepared the agenda, produced the manuals, scripts, and interviewer forms, and created exercises and role plays. The operations manager



also developed procedures for special operations such as refusal conversion, proxy interviewing, and tracing. During data collection, the operations manager reviewed and resolved problem cases. To help evaluate the progress of data collection, the operations manager produced and presented to the project team a weekly summary of the status of all cases by screener and main interview, by interim and final results, and by sample type. Finally, the operations manager oversaw all interviewer scheduling and staffing.

Interviewers made most calls in the evenings and on weekends, when people were most likely to be home. We assigned primary responsibility for handling language problem cases to experienced Spanish-speaking interviewers. A case was coded as a language problem if an interviewer was unable to communicate with the respondent in English. Spanish-speaking interviewers then recontacted the case to determine if an English-speaking person lived in the household. We trained interviewers who had clear, deep voices to follow up with hearing problem cases. We chose skilled interviewers at all six TRC facilities to conduct refusal conversion interviewing. We selected interviewers at one location to perform the majority of tracing calls, and updated the CATI system with the List Sample telephone numbers obtained through those efforts.

### **Interviewer Monitoring**

Supervisors regularly monitored interviewer performance. Because most refusals occur at the point of contact, supervisors paid particular attention to the initial contact. Monitoring sessions lasted a minimum of ten minutes, during which supervisors made notes of interviewers' strengths and weaknesses on a monitoring form. Supervisors discussed the results with each interviewer immediately following a monitoring session. They provided positive feedback along with pointers for improvement in areas such as gaining cooperation and probing. Supervisors also used a weekly interviewer productivity report to identify candidates for training on more difficult tasks such as refusal conversion, as well as interviewers who needed additional training.

### **Confidentiality**

All Westat personnel, including interviewers and professional staff, signed a statement that they would maintain the confidentiality of all survey data. During data collection, interviewers assured

each respondent that his or her answers were protected under the Privacy Act (see Exhibit 58) and informed respondents that a copy of the Privacy Act statement was available upon request (see “Providing a Privacy Act Letter” later in this chapter).

### **5.3 Special Operations**

In addition to the standard data collection operations described in the previous sections, Westat employed a variety of strategies unique to the NSV 2001 for achieving the maximum possible response rates. These special operations included contact information update measures, proxy interviewing, and response rate enhancement measures such as refusal conversion and data retrieval.

#### **Contact Information Update Measures**

##### *Cleaning the List Sample and Matching Addresses*

Before loading the List Sample contact information into our CATI system, we processed the file through a series of automated and manual cleaning procedures that standardized the appearance of all addresses. Once the sample was cleaned, we matched cases with address information against the National Change of Address Registry to ensure that we had the most recent address. We also matched all cases with address and/or telephone information against the databases of two address matching vendors. This step allowed us to either obtain a telephone number for those cases with no telephone numbers or to update existing telephone numbers. Those veterans for whom we had a telephone number but no address were loaded into the CATI system without mailing an advance letter. Those cases for which we had a Social Security number and an address, but no telephone number, were sent to a credit bureau for telephone information searching by Social Security number. Those cases for which we had an address but no telephone number were sent an advance letter, which asked for updated contact information, including a telephone number. These cases, along with those for which we had neither a telephone number nor address, were sent immediately to our tracing operation. During the cleaning process, veterans identified as institutionalized were coded as out of scope so that no further contact attempts would be made.

### *Sending an Advance Mailing*

After List Sample cleaning and address matching, we sent each List Sample veteran an advance mailing that included a letter from the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs and a letter from the Westat project director (see Exhibits 5-4 and 5-5). The letters informed veterans about the study and the importance of their participation. We included an address update form and postage-paid envelope so that veterans could update their names, addresses, or telephone numbers by mail. Veterans were also given the option to call the NSV 2001 dedicated toll-free number to provide their current address and telephone information. To help us identify institutionalized veterans, the address update form also asked veterans to indicate whether the address was for a private residence, hospital, assisted living facility, retirement home, or nursing home. (As discussed in Chapter 3, we did not interview List Sample institutionalized veterans.)

We mailed 13,010 advance letters in two waves. In response to the advance mailings, we received 4,061 address update forms through the mail. Of those, however, less than half contained contact information updates. Those with no update did indicate whether their address was for a private residence or some other type of residence. We reviewed all additional information we received about a veteran, then entered it into the CATI Update system where it became effective immediately. Table 5-1 shows the type of information received on the address update form.

Table 5-1. List Sample advance mailout responses

Address update	825
Telephone number update	917
Name correction	48
Deceased	197
Not a veteran	1
Form returned with no update	2,073
Total responses received	4,061



**THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON**

March 28, 2001

Dear Veteran:

As the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs, I am pleased to write you and ask for your help. In the next few weeks, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will begin a very important National Survey of Veterans. This letter outlines why we're doing this survey, who will conduct it, what type of information will be collected, and who you can call for questions. ***I'm requesting your personal participation. Your response to the survey is crucial to its success.***

**Why Are We Conducting a Survey?**

We are conducting a National Survey of Veterans to get an accurate, up-to-date picture about the U.S. veteran population so we can improve our benefits and services to veterans. We'll use this updated picture as a basis to ensure that VA benefits and services meet your needs.

**Who Will Conduct the Survey?**

VA selected an independent contractor, Westat, to conduct the National Survey of Veterans. Westat was chosen based on its reputation, the assurance of courtesy to you, and the guarantee that the information you give will be treated confidentially and protected under current laws and regulations, including the Privacy Act. Your participation is voluntary and you may ask to skip any question that you do not wish to answer or stop the discussion at any time. The responses you give may only be used to evaluate VA programs—not for any individual claim or other purpose. Within the next few weeks, a representative of Westat will contact you by telephone to conduct the interview (survey).

**What Type of Information Will Be Collected?**

Westat will collect information from veterans of all services and service periods. The survey will ask about different situations experienced by veterans, such as military background, health, disabilities, and education. Westat will also collect information about your needs for services like medical care, housing, and education.

**Who Can You Call if You Have Questions?**

If you want to speak to someone at VA to verify the survey and Westat's role, you may call the following toll-free number: 1-800-827-1000. You don't need to identify yourself.

With your help, I'll be in a better position to improve veterans' benefits and services. Please accept my personal thanks for your time and thoughts to this important survey.

Sincerely yours,

  
Anthony J. Principi

Exhibit 5-5. Westat advance letter

# WESTAT

National Survey of Veterans

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1650 Research Blvd. • Rockville, MD 20850-3129 • 301 251-1500 • FAX 301 294-2040

<<DATE>>

<<BASMID>>  
<<FULLNAME>>  
<<ADDR1>>  
<<ADDR2>>  
<<CITY>>, <<STATE>> <<ZIP>>

Dear <<FULL\_LOWER>>:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has chosen Westat to conduct its National Survey of Veterans. The enclosed letter from Anthony J. Principi, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, explains that the VA is conducting this survey to obtain information for planning benefits and services for all veterans.

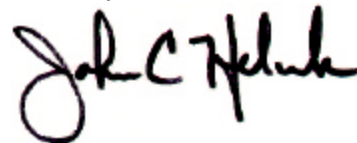
A Westat interviewer will call you in the next few weeks to conduct a telephone interview. Your answers, and those of other participating veterans, will give the VA an up-to-date picture of the whole U.S. veteran population. If you wish to verify Westat's role in the survey, please call the toll-free VA number mentioned in Secretary Principi's letter: 1-800-827-1000.

While your participation is voluntary, you are one of only a few thousand randomly selected veterans whose answers will represent all 25 million veterans. Your individual participation will have a significant impact on the survey's outcome. We cannot interview another veteran in your place. I want to assure you that the information you provide is protected under the Privacy Act and section 5701 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code. The VA will use the information you provide to evaluate current VA policies, programs and services for veterans and in deciding how to help veterans in the future.

Enclosed is a National Survey of Veterans Address Correction and Update Form. Westat will call you at the phone number printed on this form. If this phone number or address is incorrect, please provide the correct information and mail the form to Westat in the postage-paid envelope provided. If you prefer, you may call Westat toll-free at 1-888-258-2194 to provide a correct phone number and address. Ask to speak with the Veterans Survey Manager.

Thank you. We greatly appreciate your help.

Sincerely,



John C. Helmick  
Project Director

### *Conducting Tracing Operations*

Tracing is a process by which we attempt to find valid contact information for veterans for whom we have no or incomplete information in our records. For some List Sample veterans, we did not have a valid telephone number, the existing number was nonworking, or we did not have a telephone number at all. In an effort to contact these veterans, we placed directory assistance calls. We pursued two leads per tracing case. If the veteran was not listed at the address in our records, and there were six or fewer listings with that veteran's last name in the town or surrounding area, tracing interviewers requested the first two telephone numbers. The interviewers called both households asking for information about the veteran. When we identified new telephone numbers, we entered them into the CATI system within 24 hours. Over the course of data collection, tracing interviewers worked 5,350 cases.

### *Contacting Cases With Unpublished Telephone Numbers*

During the tracing operation, we often encountered List Sample veterans who had an address in our records but whose telephone number was not published. We mailed these veterans a letter requesting their participation in the study and providing a toll-free number for them to contact us (see Exhibit 5-6). We mailed these letters to 555 veterans, of whom 124 completed the extended interview. We also learned that 17 of the 555 had died and 4 were institutionalized.

### *Contacting Cases With No Telephone Numbers*

We had no telephone number and only a Post Office Box address for 65 List Sample veterans. Without a street address, we were unable to process these cases through our tracing operation. Instead, we mailed a letter to these veterans asking them to call the NSV 2001 toll-free number for an interview (see Exhibit 5-7). Of the 65 veterans who received this letter, 15 completed an extended interview. One was reported deceased.

# WESTAT

National Survey of Veterans

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1650 Research Blvd. • Rockville, MD 20850-3129 • 301 251-1500 • FAX 301 294-2040

DATE

«BASMID»  
«FULLNAME»  
«ADDR1»  
«CITY», «STATE» «ZIP»

Dear «FULL\_LOWER»:

**We need your help.** The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has chosen Westat to conduct its National Survey of Veterans. We would like to interview you for the survey. Unfortunately, we have been unable to reach you because your telephone number is unpublished.

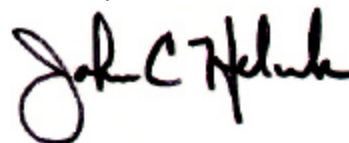
The VA is conducting this survey to obtain information for planning benefits and services for all veterans. While your participation is voluntary, you are one of only a few thousand randomly selected veterans whose answers will represent all 25 million veterans. Your individual participation will have a significant impact on the survey's outcome. We cannot interview another veteran in your place. Your answers, and those of other participating veterans, will give the VA an up-to-date picture of the whole U.S. veteran population.

I want to assure you that the information you provide is protected under the Privacy Act and section 5701 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code. The VA will use the information you provide to evaluate current VA policies, programs and services for veterans and in deciding how to help veterans in the future.

We understand your desire to keep your telephone number closely guarded. For that reason, we invite you to call Westat toll-free at 1-888-258-2194 to begin an interview or schedule an appointment at a time that is convenient for you. Please ask to speak with the Veterans Survey Manager. Or, you may provide us with your telephone number on the enclosed National Survey of Veterans Address Correction and Update Form and mail it to Westat in the postage-paid envelope. Your telephone number will only be used to contact you for completing the National Survey of Veterans and will not be disclosed for any other purposes.

Thank you. We greatly appreciate your help.

Sincerely,



John C. Helmick  
Project Director

# WESTAT

National Survey of Veterans

1650 Research Blvd. • Rockville, MD 20850-3129 • 301 251-1500 • FAX 301 294-2040

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DATE

FNAME LNAME  
ADDRESS  
CITY, STATE ZIP

Dear Mr./Ms./Mrs. LNAME:

Thank you for your recent reply to our letter regarding the National Survey of Veterans. Westat is conducting this study for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Based on your response, we understand that you are not able to receive a telephone call in order to complete the survey. Since it is necessary that all surveys be completed by telephone, and your responses are very important to us, we would like to provide you an option that would make it possible for you to participate in the survey.

To allow us the opportunity to complete a survey with you, we are asking that you call our toll-free telephone number and ask to speak to one of our telephone interviewers. Please tell our staff that you are calling to complete the **National Survey of Veterans**. Once you have identified the survey for which you are calling to participate, you will need to give your survey identification number. This number is listed below as the **ID Number**. Please try to call within the next 2 weeks and during the hours outlined below.

Phone Number: **1-888 258-2194**

Project: **National Survey of Veterans**

ID Number: **BASMID**

Calling Hours:

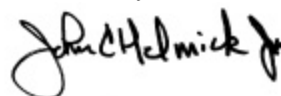
**Monday-Friday 9:00 am – 10:00 pm (Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Saturday 10:00 am – 4:00 pm (Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Sunday 2:00 pm – 8:00 pm (Eastern Daylight Time)**

Thank you very much for helping us with this important study. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



John C. Helmick, Jr.  
Project Director



### *Searching Credit Bureaus*

We sent the Social Security numbers of veterans for whom we had no telephone number (or an invalid telephone number) to a credit bureau. Toward the end of data collection, we performed the same operation on all cases coded as nonlocatable and all cases in our tracing queue. Some of these nonlocatable and tracing cases were likely the same ones that had been processed through the credit bureau at the beginning of the study. Most, however, were cases for which we had incomplete contact information. The cases returned from the credit bureau with addresses were then sent to our address matching vendors for telephone numbers. Table 5-2 shows the results of the end-of-data collection credit bureau search.

Table 5-2. Results of end-of-data collection credit bureau search

Number of cases sent to the credit bureau	3,197
Number for which a telephone number was obtained	513
Complete extended interviews	150
Deceased	6
Institutionalized	5

### **Proxy Interviewing**

The NSV 2001 data collection plan permitted veterans with serious health, cognitive, or communication problems to be represented in the final sample, despite the fact that many of these veterans were unable to respond for themselves or, at least, unable to respond to a telephone interview. Veterans with such disabilities were:

Too mentally incapacitated to understand the questions or to remember or formulate their responses;

Too physically incapacitated, too ill, or too weak to listen and respond to the questions for the duration of the interview;

Too hearing-impaired to hear the interview questions; or

Too speech-impaired to communicate their responses to the interviewer.

We included the responses of veterans with these disabilities (referred to as the sampled veterans) by allowing proxy respondents to participate in the survey for them. Our estimates of the number of cases that would require proxies, while large enough to confirm the need for a proxy interview

protocol, did not justify an entirely separate data collection instrument and methodology. Instead, the proxy interview protocol used a modified form of the existing CATI data collection instrument and telephone methodology.

We established rules to help interviewers determine when a proxy interview was appropriate, permitting them only under the four circumstances described above. We did not interview proxy respondents for any other reason, such as convenience, personal preference, temporary unavailability of the veteran, or temporary illness from which the veteran would recover before the end of the data collection period. The most common way in which interviewers identified the need for a proxy was when a friend or relative (and occasionally the veterans themselves) reported that the sampled veteran was incapable of participating in the study. In much rarer situations, the veteran was willing to be interviewed, but during the course of the interview it became apparent that he or she could not comprehend the questions or remember any reasonable amount of information about himself or herself.

We also trained interviewers to identify a suitable proxy for veterans who could not participate and to secure the telephone number needed to call the proxy. Such a proxy needed to be familiar with the sampled veteran's circumstances and possess some specific knowledge of his or her health and medical history. In most cases, the person who informed the interviewer of the veteran's inability to respond was the appropriate proxy, and the proxy was often located at the same telephone number. If the potential proxy was not knowledgeable enough about the veteran or was unavailable, interviewers attempted to find another proxy. If no proxy could be found or the suitable proxy refused to respond, the final result of the case reflected the sampled veteran's situation, not the outcome of contacting the proxy.

We trained a small group of interviewers to conduct proxy interviews. If a proxy interviewer identified the need for a proxy in the course of ordinary contact attempts, and the proxy was available, he or she proceeded directly with the proxy interview. If, however, an interviewer without proxy interview training identified such a need, an appointment was made and the case was held in the CATI scheduler proxy work class for a proxy interviewer. To accommodate the time needed to identify and train proxy interviewers, we did not begin proxy interviewing until April, 2001. All proxy cases from the beginning of data collection were held in the proxy work class until that time, and proxy interviewing continued through the end of data collection.

As noted earlier, we knew that relatively few veterans would require a proxy interview. This fact, coupled with our desire for comparable data from the proxy cases and the self-respondents, led us to modify the existing questionnaire rather than create a separate proxy instrument. We identified all questions in the NSV 2001 questionnaire that proxies would likely be able to answer for the sampled veterans. We eliminated some questions (such as the VSF12 items in the Health Background section) that were too personal for a proxy to answer adequately. Finally, we trained proxy interviewers to rephrase select questions in the third person to remind proxies that while the questions were directed at them, they were in fact about the sampled veteran. Rather than program the CATI instrument to display all the third person pronouns, we trained the proxy interviewers to use the third person as they read the questions. We chose this cost effective measure because few questions actually needed rephrasing, and any rephrasing usually occurred within a pattern of repeating questions. Furthermore, the interviewers doing the rephrasing, in addition to being highly skilled, also had at least 2 months of experience administering the questionnaire before proxy interviewing began.

We expected “Don’t Know” responses to be more common among proxy respondents than self-respondents. We found, however, that proxy respondents were often very knowledgeable about the sampled veteran’s background information, military service, medical conditions, and treatment. When proxies did have limited knowledge in certain areas, interviewers encouraged them to provide the best response they could. In a few cases, attempts to contact the proxy resulted in the discovery that a sampled veteran could, after all, respond for himself or herself. In these instances, we conducted the interview with the veteran, and the case was correctly coded as a regular, nonproxy interview.

We identified 1,031 cases as needing a proxy respondent. We completed interviews with 734 proxy respondents. Another 28 cases turned out to be ineligible for the study. Of the cases initially identified as needing proxies, an additional 45 interviews were eventually conducted with the sampled veteran. Thus, only 3.7 percent of all interviews were conducted with proxies.

### **Response Rate Enhancement Measures**

#### *Establishing a Toll-free Telephone Number*

We established a toll-free telephone number dedicated solely to the NSV 2001. Only supervisory staff answered this number. We included this number on all mailout materials, and provided it to respondents who wanted more information about the study before consenting to an interview.

Veterans with no telephone in the household called the toll-free number to complete an interview (see the previous sections on “Contacting Cases with Unpublished Telephone Numbers” and “Contacting Cases with No Telephone Numbers”). Difficult-to-reach respondents often called the toll-free line to participate, or at least tell us when they would next be available for an interview.

Respondents who wished to contact the VA directly about the NSV 2001 were also provided with the VA’s main toll-free number (800-827-1000). This number offered an automated menu where veterans could obtain information about various VA benefits, or remain on the line for the next available counselor. Because information about the NSV 2001 was not part of the automated menu, veterans had to wait for a counselor in order to inquire about the legitimacy of the survey. This posed two, somewhat isolated, problems. The first is that veterans were only able to get help with their questions during business hours, when customer service representatives/benefits counselors were available. The second is that a few VA customer service representatives were unaware of the study, and hence unable to reassure respondents of its legitimacy.

#### *Developing a Brief and Effective Introduction to the Survey*

In our experience, most telephone survey refusals occur in the first few seconds of the call. With that in mind, we scripted an introduction that briefly stated who Westat is, the sponsoring agency, and the importance of the study. With such an introduction, we intended to quickly provide respondents with enough information to decide, at the very least, to listen to and answer our screening questions (or in the case of the List Sample, the verification question).

#### *Preparing a List of Frequently Asked Questions*

We developed a list of what we anticipated would be Frequently Asked Questions about the NSV 2001, Westat’s role in the study, and VA goals (see Appendix D). We then required interviewers to learn the answers to these questions well enough that they could talk about the study with respondents naturally, instead of sounding like they were reading the answers.

### *Providing a Privacy Act Letter*

Some veterans requested written information about the study, saying they would not participate until they received it. Within one business day of such requests, we mailed a letter that described the NSV 2001 and respondents' rights under the Privacy Act (see Exhibit 5-8) or a background letter (Exhibit 5-4). We assigned a "mailout needed" code to these cases and held them for two weeks before calling them again. We mailed letters to 3,923 households over the course of data collection.

### *Developing Standard Refusal Conversion Procedures*

If, at the initial contact, a respondent (or anyone in the household) refused to participate in the survey, the CATI scheduler moved that person's case to the refusal work class and put it on hold for a period of time. After this "cooling off" period, the CATI scheduler assigned the case to a refusal conversion interviewer. The cases of respondents who refused again, after one conversion attempt, were held for another cooling off period and released again. We rereleased some cases up to two times. We did not attempt to recontact hostile refusers. Overall, our rate of refusal conversion was 33.0 percent for screener cases, 80.9 percent for RDD Sample extended interviews, and 82.1 percent for List Sample interviews.

### *Mailing Letters to Refusals and Hard-to-Locate Veterans*

About halfway through data collection, we began mailing letters to cases that had refused twice and cases that were hard to locate. The refusal conversion mailout was conducted weekly from late July through late October, 2001. We mailed a letter in a business size envelope with first class postage, addressed "To the Family At" to RDD Sample cases with whom we had been unable to make contact, or that had refused during the household screening interview (see Exhibit 5-9). We sent a letter by overnight delivery to List Sample and RDD Sample cases that we had been unable to recontact for an extended interview, or that had refused to complete an extended interview (see Exhibit 5-10 and Exhibit 5-11). Our address matching vendor provided addresses for 70 percent of the RDD Sample. We did not have reliable names for these cases, though, so we addressed the letters "To the Veteran At." We personalized the List Sample letters. Along with the letters to extended interview refusers (or hard-to-locate cases), we enclosed the same letter from the Secretary of the VA that we included in the advance mailing to List Sample members. Between 2 and 5 days after we mailed the letters, we made available for calling these

September 5, 2001

«TRC\_ID»  
«F\_NAME» «L\_NAME»«SUFFIX»  
«ADDR1A»  
«ADDR1B»  
«CITY1», «STATE1» «ZIP1»

Dear «F\_NAME» «L\_NAME»«SUFFIX»:

Recently you were contacted by a Westat interviewer as part of a study being conducted for the Department of Veterans Affairs. At that time you stated you would like to receive a copy of the Privacy Act Statement that applies to this study. The text of this statement is provided below.

**Privacy Act Statement – National Survey of Veterans 2001**

Authority: 10 U.S.C 2358; E.O.9397

**PRINCIPAL PURPOSE:** This survey collects veteran current demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, veteran health status, medical services usage and needs, health insurance coverage, and veteran knowledge about and use of various VA programs. Social Security Numbers are requested and will be used for two purposes. First, it will be used to ensure that each respondent is interviewed only once. Second, it will be used to obtain additional information from VA files and other sources to better understand veteran needs.

**ROUTINE USES:** None.

**DISCLOSURE:** Voluntary. Maximum participation is encouraged so that data will be complete and representative, but there are no adverse consequences for individuals who decline to participate.

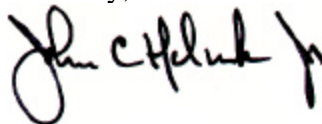
I hope that the information provided here answers any questions you have regarding this study. Should you wish to obtain additional information you may contact:

Department of Veterans Affairs  
Office of Policy and Planning  
Attn: Ms. Susan Krumhaus 008A Phone: (202) 273-5108  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

If you need general information on programs and benefits offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, you may call their toll-free hotline: **(800) 827-1000**.

Thank you for your assistance in this important study.

Sincerely,



John C. Helmick, Jr.  
Senior Study Director

Exhibit 5-9. Screener refusal letter (RDD Sample)

# WESTAT

National Survey of Veterans

1650 Research Blvd. • Rockville, MD 20850-3129 • 301 251-1500 • FAX 301 294-2040

«DATESENT»

ID #«MAILID»

To the Family At

«ADDRESS»

«CITY», «STATE» «ZIP»

Dear Respondent:

**We need your help.** Recently, one of our telephone interviewers called and asked you or someone in your household to take part in a survey about veterans of the United States military. At this time, we have not finished an interview with you. This survey is sponsored by The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It will help the VA to evaluate their current policies, programs and services.

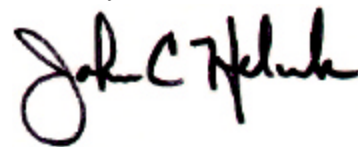
Your answers to this survey will help us determine whether there are any veterans in the household. We can't talk to every person in the country. Instead, we scientifically selected a few people to represent the nation as a whole. This means no other person can take your place. Your individual participation will have a significant impact on the survey's outcome. Thus, even if there are no veterans in your household, we would still like to speak with you briefly.

I want to assure you that the information you provide is protected under the Privacy Act and section 5701 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code.

We would be happy to speak with you at a time that is convenient for you. If you would like to begin an interview or schedule an appointment, please call Westat toll-free at 1-888-258-2194. Ask to speak with the Veterans Survey Manager.

Thank you. We greatly appreciate your help.

Sincerely,



John C. Helmick  
Project Director

Exhibit 5-10. Extended refusal letter (List Sample)

# WESTAT

National Survey of Veterans

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1650 Research Blvd. • Rockville, MD 20850-3129 • 301 251-1500 • FAX 301 294-2040

«DATESENT»

ID #«MAILID»

«NAME»

«ADDRESS»

«CITY», «STATE» «ZIP»

Dear «LOWERNME»:

**We need your help.** Recently, one of our telephone interviewers called and asked you to take part in the National Survey of Veterans. At this time, we have not finished an interview with you. This survey is sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It will provide valuable information for planning benefits and services for all veterans.

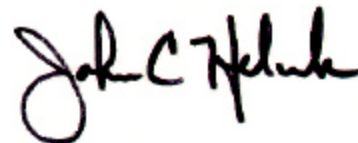
While your participation is voluntary, you are one of only a few thousand randomly selected veterans whose answers will represent all 25 million veterans. Your individual participation will have a significant impact on the survey's outcome. We cannot interview another veteran in your place. Your answers, and those of other participating veterans, will give the VA an up-to-date picture of the whole U.S. veteran population.

I want to assure you that the information you provide is protected under the Privacy Act and section 5701 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code. The VA will use the information you provide to evaluate current VA policies, programs and services for veterans and in deciding how to help veterans in the future.

We would be happy to arrange an interview at a time that is convenient for you. If you would like to begin an interview or schedule an appointment, please call Westat toll-free at 1-888-258-2194. Ask to speak with the Veterans Survey Manager.

Thank you. We greatly appreciate your help.

Sincerely,



John C. Helmick  
Project Director



## WESTAT

National Survey of Veterans

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1650 Research Blvd. • Rockville, MD 20850-3129 • 301 251-1500 • FAX 301 294-2040

«DATESENT»

ID #«MAILID»

To the Veteran At

«ADDRESS»

«CITY», «STATE» «ZIP»

Dear Veteran:

**We need your help.** Recently, one of our telephone interviewers called and asked you to take part in the National Survey of Veterans. At this time, we have not finished an interview with you. This survey is sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It will provide valuable information for planning benefits and services for all veterans.

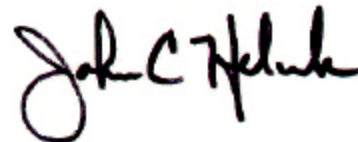
While your participation is voluntary, you are one of only a few thousand randomly selected veterans whose answers will represent all 25 million veterans. Your individual participation will have a significant impact on the survey's outcome. We cannot interview another veteran in your place. Your answers, and those of other participating veterans, will give the VA an up-to-date picture of the whole U.S. veteran population.

I want to assure you that the information you provide is protected under the Privacy Act and section 5701 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code. The VA will use the information you provide to evaluate current VA policies, programs and services for veterans and in deciding how to help veterans in the future.

We would be happy to arrange an interview at a time that is convenient for you. If you would like to begin an interview or schedule an appointment, please call Westat toll-free at 1-888-258-2194. Ask to speak with the Veterans Survey Manager.

Thank you. We greatly appreciate your help.

Sincerely,



John C. Helmick  
Project Director

screeener and extended cases. RDD Sample cases for which we were unable to obtain an address received the telephone followup without a mailout. The release of the refusal conversion mailout cases occasionally overlapped with the release of new sample. This created a huge volume of work such that the refusal cases sometimes did not get called until up to several weeks after they received the letters. Table 5-3 shows the number of RDD screener, RDD extended, and List Sample extended interview cases to which we mailed letters, and the percentage of those cases for which we were able to complete an interview.

Table 5-3. Results of mailout to refusal and hard-to-locate cases

Interview Type	Number of cases to which a letter was mailed	Percent of mailed cases with a completed interview
Screener interview	28,482	2.2
RDD Sample extended interview	2,746	20.6
List Sample extended interview	1,571	28.4

#### *Matching Deceased Veterans to the SSA Date-of-Death File*

During the course of data collection, we noticed that a large number of List Sample veterans were reported as deceased either on the advance letter update form or when we attempted to contact them over the telephone. To ensure that we had the most accurate information possible about our List Sample cases, toward the end of data collection we matched all List Sample cases against the Social Security Administration (SSA) Date-of-Death File. Through this effort, we were able to identify 317 cases of previously unknown status as deceased. We also confirmed that 202 cases we had already identified as deceased were, indeed, deceased.

#### *Retrieving RDD Screener Data*

For 24 RDD Sample cases, we discovered that some screened interview information required to determine whether someone in the household was eligible for an interview was missing. We called these households again to collect the missing information. We retrieved the missing data in all 24 cases, identifying 13 of them as eligible for the study. As a result of this effort, we completed seven additional interviews. The other six eligible veterans refused to participate.

### *Scheduling Additional Releases of Cases*

The CATI scheduler followed certain rules for determining when to close cases with which we did not make contact. At the same time, we wanted to ensure that we made every attempt to reach respondents who might have been out of town or otherwise unavailable during our initial contact attempts. Therefore, we programmed the CATI scheduler to automatically release such noncontact cases after a designated “resting” period. Doing so improved our chances of making contact with these difficult-to-reach cases.

### *Conducting End-of-Study Measures*

Toward the end of data collection, we used three additional methods to increase the number of household contacts. First, on one day during each of the last 4 weeks of data collection, interviewers left a message every time they reached an answering machine. Second, 2 weeks before the end of data collection, we increased the number of times we called outstanding List Sample cases, of which there were 498. To do this, we removed all outstanding (noncompleted) cases from the CATI scheduler. We continued to try to make contact using a paper call record. Doing so permitted us to identify the cases with which we had had little or no contact, attempt to call them at times different from the previous calls, and call multiple times during one day. Third, on the final Saturday of data collection, we asked interviewers to let telephones ring longer than usual before hanging up.