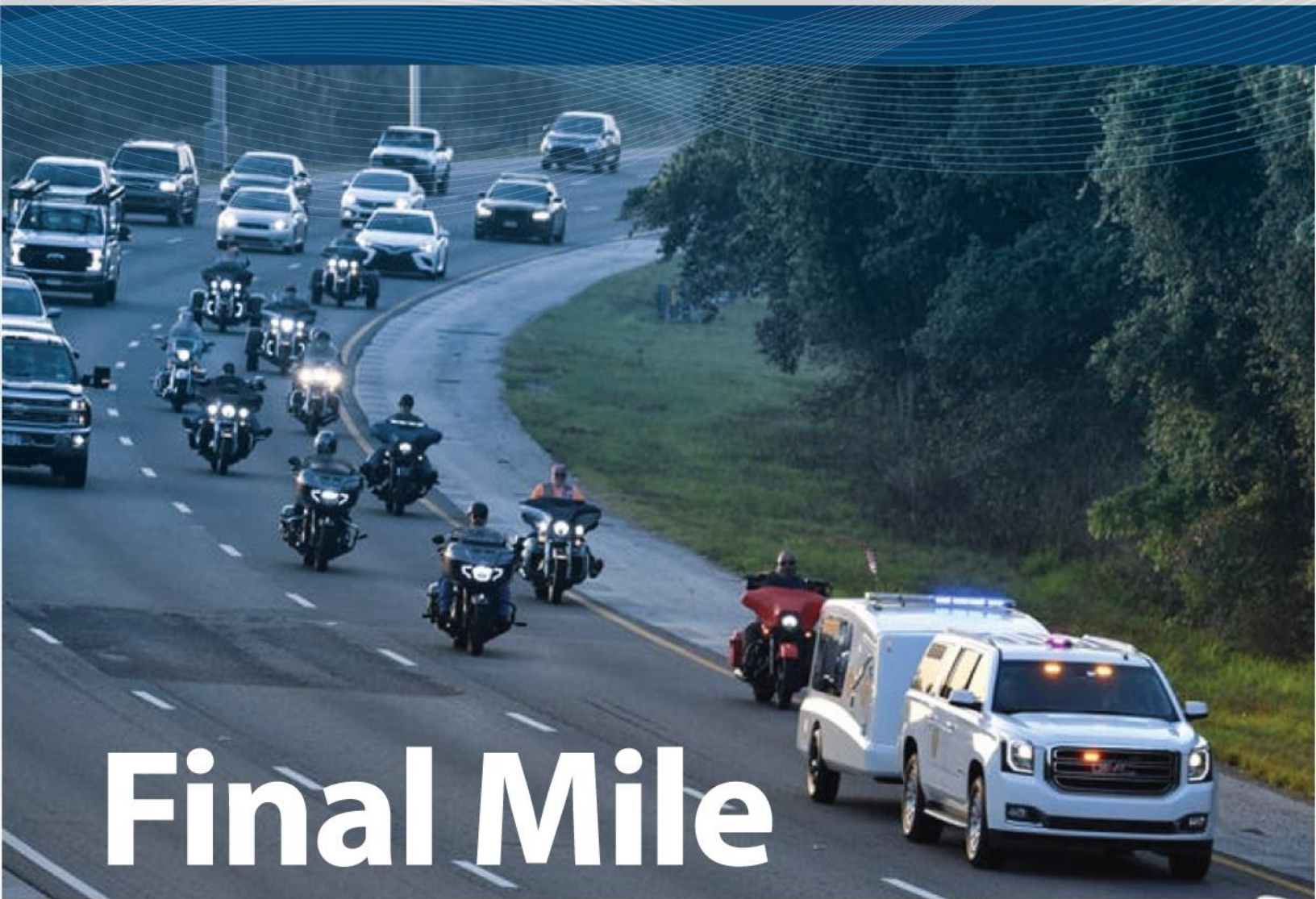


Diffusion of **EXCELLENCE**

Diffusing Promising Practices Across VHA



Final Mile

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLKIT

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration

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WELCOME

Welcome and thank you for participating in the implementation of the Final Mile Promising Practice! This practice originated at James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital (JAHVA) in Tampa, FL and aims to ensure that all Veterans receive a dignified burial. This toolkit contains insights designed to aid your facility in adopting this practice and is intended for Veterans Experience Officers, Chaplains, Voluntary Service Chiefs, Decedent Affairs Leads, VFAC (Veterans and Family Advisory Council), or other equivalent roles suitable for leading implementation at your facility. The goals of this toolkit are to provide:

- ▶ Background on the Final Mile Promising Practice
- ▶ Instructions on how to implement this practice at your facility

Please refer to the information ahead to learn how you can implement this practice and continue to serve and honor Veterans at your Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facility!

What is the Final Mile Promising Practice?



CVMA members attend funeral services for Ms. Rose Phillipp at Sarasota National Cemetery.

First implemented by a team at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in Tampa, FL, this practice gathers community members and Veterans to honor the lives and service of unclaimed Veterans. This Practice establishes a protocol that can be initiated when a Veteran passes with no known next of kin (NOK). Specifically, the Final Mile Promising Practice combines the efforts of your facility's Decedent Affairs team with community support to provide memorial services for those Veterans that would otherwise receive little recognition upon their passing. With the help of facility staff and Veterans groups, such as the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association

(CVMA), a procession can be organized to ensure that Veterans without next of kin receive care and concern upon passing.

The Problem

Currently, VHA directive 1601B.04 designates individual VA Medical Facility Directors as responsible for ensuring procedures are followed for unclaimed Veterans who pass under VA-authorized care; this policy can be found in the [Attachments](#) section. While the policy empowers directors and their designees to make funeral arrangements and offers guidance on the allotted cost for unclaimed Veterans' funeral services, the policy does not give guidance on how these facilities can best honor unclaimed Veterans. Despite a lack of next of kin, Veterans deserve to be honored as they are laid to rest.

The Solution

Implementing this practice ensures that all Veterans cared for by your facility are honored at the end of their lives. By implementing this Practice, VHA facilities can demonstrate their ongoing commitment to honor Veterans through providing extraordinary care. This Practice recruits Community Veteran Service Organizations to participate in services for unclaimed Veterans. Groups such as these assist VHA facilities in honoring the lives of Veterans through funeral escorts and memorial services.



Tuskegee Airman, Cornelius Davis, is assisted by members of Florida's CVMA group. The riders escorted Mr. Davis over 200 miles to Vann Funeral Homes in Marianna, FL.

How Does This Practice Work?

Once implemented, the Final Mile Practice will ensure that all Veterans at your facility receive a dignified funeral procession and service. Following the death of an unclaimed Veteran, the facility's Decedent Affairs group will arrange with the funeral home to prepare the deceased for burial and procure a gravesite. Concurrently, Decedent Affairs will notify the Final Mile team that an unclaimed Veteran requires services. The Final Mile team then orchestrates the procession and ceremony—coordinating with facility leadership, community partners providing the processional, Chaplain Services, Public Affairs, facility and community police, and hospital staff. The service begins at the VAMC facility, with the ceremonial playing of taps, followed by a procession to the burial site, and a ceremony at the gravesite.

The process for implementing this practice involves building support amongst staff and community partners. Most of the implementation team's time will be spent creating the standard operating procedure (SOP) that will be put in place in the event of an unclaimed Veteran's passing. To achieve project implementation success, it is important to create a plan that delineates various team members, their roles and responsibilities, and project milestones. Later in this toolkit, we will share more detailed information on how to create a project plan primed for success.



Wallace Taylor

To fulfill the wishes of one unclaimed Veteran, the JAHVA Final Mile team collaborated with CVMA and Jennings Funeral Home to transport WWII and Korean War Veteran, Colonel Wallace Taylor, to Louisville, KY. This journey allowed for Mr. Taylor to be laid to rest alongside his mother. Volunteers from the local CVMA chapter rode 2,000 miles over the course of three days as a part of JAHVA Final Mile's longest procession to date.

Why Should My Facility Implement This Practice?

This practice continues VHA's commitment to provide superior care and concern as a means of serving Veterans. Upon his swearing in, VA Secretary Denis McDonough emphasized VA's commitment to "honoring our Veterans with a final resting place that's a lasting tribute to their service" (McDonough, 2021). By ensuring that all Veterans, regardless of whether they have next of kin, are buried in a dignified and consequential manner, your facility can continue to make good on this commitment.

Final Mile Promising Practice Origin

This practice was first implemented by staff at the James A. Haley VAMC in Tampa, FL. In February of 2019 Dave Allen, a Biomedical Information Systems Specialist at JAHVA, noticed a hearse on the loading dock located in the rear of the facility. The driver informed Mr. Allen that he was there to transport an unclaimed Veteran. Immediately following this interaction, Dave devoted himself to ensuring that unclaimed Veterans receive dignified funeral services.



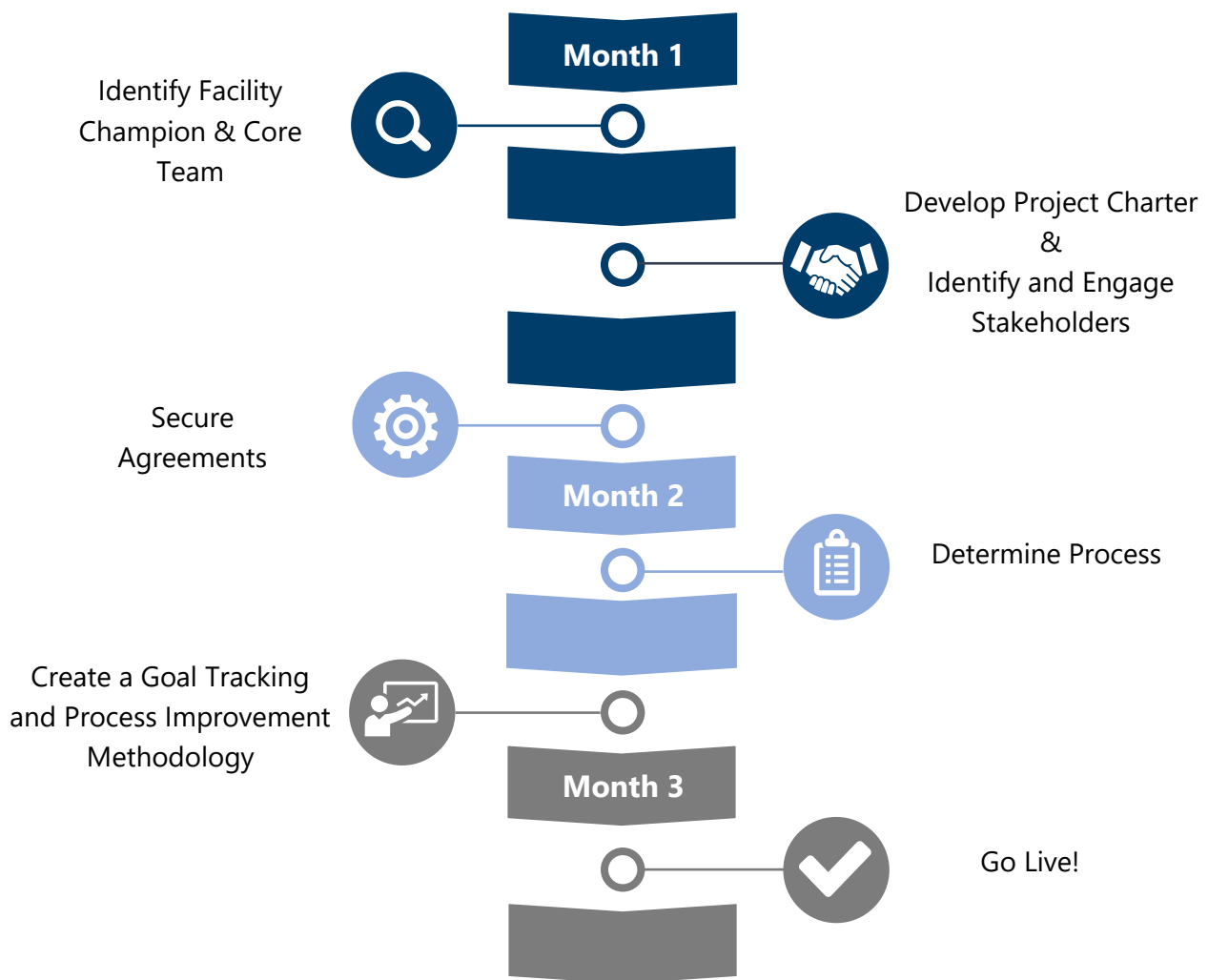
Several weeks following Mr. Allen's discovery, the Final Mile practice received initial support from James A. Haley VAMC facility leadership. As this practice formed, Mr. Allen worked closely with the Decedent Affairs Office at his facility. Additionally, he engaged a funeral home and the local chapter of the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association as potential processional partners. Following three months of intensive planning and coordination, the program began to honor Veterans.

Initially, these funeral services did not include a ceremony at the hospital facility before the procession. However, the team altered their process to give hospital staff the opportunity to pay their respects before the procession moved to the gravesite. As a result of their hard work, the team has been covered by local news media numerous times; a compilation of these stories can be found in the [Attachments](#) section of this guide. Over the course of developing this process, the JAHVA team has maintained a vision of providing superior care and concern for all Veterans and prioritized this mission as they navigate challenges.

IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

From start to finish, you can expect the launch period of the Final Mile Promising Practice to take **approximately three months**. This may differ slightly due to local factors, including facility leadership and governance processes. Setting target deadlines will assist in encouraging accountability among practice stakeholders and ensure a successful and timely implementation.

Below is a **high-level roadmap** for implementation:



IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

As you will see in subsequent steps, most of the work involved in implementing the Final Mile Promising Practice occurs on the front end. Once you coordinate with the appropriate stakeholders and make the necessary organizational and administrative changes, implementation and sustainment follow seamlessly.

Step 1: Identify Practice Champion and Core Team

Leading the implementation team is the **Practice Champion**. Their goal is not only the successful implementation of the Final Mile Practice, but also ensuring that the VAMC community collaborates to give Veterans the dignified services they deserve. The Practice Champion is also responsible for resolving and reducing barriers that will inevitably arise when adopting a new practice. Furthermore, the Practice Champion must advocate for the practice and work to engage stakeholders for their critical input and potential resource investments.

Practice Champion Responsibilities:

1. Serving as a coach to facilitate the implementation, coordination, tracking, and evaluation of Final Mile
2. Promoting the value of the practice among facility staff and leadership
3. Overseeing the Core Team and facilitating check-ins

A Best-Practice Tip from the Original Practice Champion:



Always be ready to explain what an unclaimed Veteran is and why it's so important that we honor their service. If we don't who will? This is our last opportunity to serve these Veterans.

Collaborating with the Practice Champion, the **Core Team** is a group of individuals representing various stakeholder groups actively participating in the implementation process. These team members may be delegates that will work to diffuse their knowledge into their group, or they may be a leader. Examples of facility roles that may be considered for the Core Team include:

- ▶ Decedent Affairs Point of Contact (POC)
- ▶ VA Police POC
- ▶ CVMA POC
- ▶ Funeral Home POC

Tip: Build an interdisciplinary team or council to support implementation of the Final Mile Practice. The individuals in your core team may look different, based on the needs of your facility, and may include representatives from various service lines depending on the structure of your facility.

Step 2: Develop Project Charter

The **Project Charter** is composed of the project scope, goals, and timeline. With this guide, the team can refer to agreed-upon goals and ensure that the project is on track for timely implementation. Below are several attributes which the team's Project Charter may include:

- ▶ A general project description
- ▶ The problem/opportunity statement to be addressed by implementing the Final Mile Practice
- ▶ The scope of implementation (i.e., a policy regarding which Veterans will qualify and the components of each Final Mile service)
- ▶ Your facility's goals for implementing the Practice
- ▶ Your facility's timeline for implementing the Practice
- ▶ The resources your facility will need to obtain
- ▶ The team members and leadership who will support implementation



12/30/2020—Two Unclaimed Veterans are laid to rest by CVMA

A key part of this step will include defining implementation scope—indicating when it is appropriate for your team to host a Final Mile ceremony. This decision will be informed by facility policy, VHA policy, and your team's connections to community organizations. As indicated in VHA directive 1601B.04, in the instance of an unclaimed Veteran's passing *under authorized admission*, facility Directors are empowered to request funeral and burial

services at VA expense. While this policy will influence the monetary aspects of an unclaimed Veteran's burial, please note that the Final Mile Practice is supported exclusively by community volunteers and dedicated staff. Therefore, while there may be a Veteran connected to your facility that passes outside of an authorized admission, **this practice can commemorate their life and service regardless of their admission status.**

With the key elements of the practice implementation determined, action items and decisions can be mapped into a more detailed project plan. Doing this will inform the implementation timeline and allow the team to identify key dates. Remember to build in some flexibility with these deadlines, as circumstances may arise that interfere with implementation. Regardless, this timeline will foster accountability within the team and encourage successful results.

In addition to creating a timeline for implementation, the team should formulate a goal statement. With your team, first ask: how will your facility benefit from participating in this project, and when? Once your team has come to agreement on general aspirations for the project, then you can create a more structured framework that will allow your team to succeed.

We recommend following the best Practice of using the "SMART" goal framework. Specify the targeted improvement by stating a "SMART" goal (i.e., a goal that is **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**esults-focused, and **T**ime-bound). Please see below for more information on how to create this goal:



As your team formulates goals, think about the impetus for this project and how you can continue to improve this practice. Some examples of goals are:

1. Hold a trial run service with all stakeholders one month before launch to identify and remedy potential issues with the SOP
2. Engage the facility's Public Affairs Office, work to gain at least biannual media coverage of services to encourage wider community participation
3. Create a multi-disciplinary review board that meets quarterly to review the services held and address any issues

A major component of the Project Charter is identifying team members and leadership who will support implementation. Include these individuals in your Project Charter, along with their required time commitment.

Step 3: Identify and Engage Stakeholders

Several different departments or Service Lines must be engaged to ensure a successful implementation of this practice. Refer to the following table for a list of commonly involved stakeholder groups. Please note that your facility may have additional stakeholders that will need to be included. When you initially engage these groups, consider what you will be asking of them, and how you can best communicate to get the response you need.



Day 3 of Wallace Taylor's Final Mile procession, near London, KY, on April 18, 2021.

STAKEHOLDER <i>(Who do I need help from?)</i>	DEPENDENCIES <i>(What do I need from them?)</i>
Executive Leadership Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provides general support and buy-in ▶ Approves initial implementation ▶ Assists with procurement of resources
Veterans Experience Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Manages the Final Mile Program
Decedent Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Oversees communication and contracting with Funeral Home for funeral preparations and burial site ▶ Contacts National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
Funeral Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provides transport, embalming, arranges military honors, and schedules service at National Cemetery
Chaplain Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Prepares and leads a prayer during the Final Mile Ceremony
Public Affairs Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ensures social media and local news media (TV or print) coverage of services
VA Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Controls on campus traffic, escorts the procession off campus, supplies an Honor Guard at ceremony (if available)
Community Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Escorts the procession to the grave site
Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (or other Veterans' group such as American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Military Jeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provides escort to cemetery, acts as pall bearers, provides flag fold, and plays taps if no military detail is present
Community Veteran Service Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide military honors at national cemetery
Hospital Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Attend funeral services
Community Members (optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Attend funeral services

Once you have determined the stakeholder groups and individuals to engage, you may want to host a meeting with involved parties to provide background on the practice, present the Project Charter, and discuss the mechanics of the implementation process and their specific role.

After meeting with team members and working to refine the Project Charter, meet with your facility's leadership and present the final Project Charter to obtain their buy-in and approval. Leadership may also be able to provide support around addressing potential barriers and obtaining resources.

It is important to maintain regular stakeholder engagement, so we recommend biweekly or monthly updates. Additionally, during your first meeting, ask how they would like to stay engaged in this process (email updates, in-person meetings, etc.).

A Best-Practice Tip from the Original Practice Champion:



Don't be afraid to ask! The answer is ALWAYS "no" until you ask! **You will be surprised how often you hear "yes" when asking for support for the Final Mile Program.**

Ask at every level of leadership, they will thank you for caring about Veterans and for taking action to fix a problem.

Ask for community police involvement, they will thank you for the opportunity to participate.

Ask the media to cover the stories of these veterans, they will show up.

Ask!

Step 4: Secure Agreements

Once you have an engaged the Core Team and relevant stakeholders, the next step is to obtain outside organizations' pledge of support. This step will require increased outreach and effort on behalf of the Practice Champion; thus, their time should be allotted accordingly. The main inputs needed are:



Time
commitment
from Veterans'
Groups



Agreement with
Funeral Home

While working with Community Veteran Service organizations and funeral homes, your focus should be on creating a strong working relationship that will yield mutual benefit for all involved

partied. Communication is critical to maintaining these ties; establishing a set of guiding principles for implementation and sustainment will help to keep this relationship healthy.

As an element of this step, you and your team should consider creating an agreement with these organizations to outline each parties' expectations for the partnership. Depending on your relationship, this may be an informal understanding, or the situation may require more formal documentation, such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Regardless of the method you use, open and clear communication will keep you and your partners accountable and successful.

Step 5: Determine Final Mile Initiation and Ceremony Process

Plan to engage the Core Team, along with frontline stakeholders, to create and test your proposed workflow. We recommend creating a specific SOP for this process, beginning with the steps that Decedent Affairs will take to contact the funeral home. Additionally, ensure that documentation of this practice is included in training materials for new staff. Please see below for the SOP employed by the team in Tampa:

- i. When an unclaimed Veteran expires as a patient at JAHVA, Decedent Affairs will contact the Veterans Experience Officer (VEO) at 813-XXX-XXXX. The VEO will then contact the CVMA Chapter, Chaplain Service, the Public Affairs Office, and Police Service
- ii. The CVMA Representative will contact Veterans Funeral Care [JAHVA's contracted funeral home] to schedule the escort and arrange for honors. Veterans Funeral Care notifies the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) to schedule the funeral
 1. All escorts will be scheduled Monday through Friday within NCA's normal business hours
- iii. Veterans Funeral Care will transport the remains to JAHVH for final inspection and safety brief. CVMA will stage the funeral escort at an appropriate location on campus starting 45 minutes before departure
- iv. VA Police will provide traffic control in the staging area and will assist the procession's exit from JAHVH
- v. Chaplain Service will provide a chaplain for a prayer 15 minutes prior to departing the facility. Chaplain Service can be reached at 813-XXX-XXXX
- vi. VEO will schedule an overhead announcement to afford staff an opportunity to pay their respects
 1. The hospital will provide employees time off to attend the ceremony

- i. Please note that under VA Handbook 5011 Part 3 Chapter 2 Section 12a. (1)
"An employee may be given authorized absence without charge to leave when: The activity is considered to be of substantial benefit to VA in accomplishing its general mission or one of its specific functions..."
- vii. VEO will coordinate a bugle player and bugle for the playing of Taps just prior to departure
- viii. Proceed to burial site, perform services
 - 1. The ceremonial flag can be given to friends of the Veteran, representatives of other VSOs that assist with honors, posts of VFW, American Legion, etc.

Please note that the SOP above is specific to Tampa and should simply serve as inspiration for your team. For example, Tampa's funeral home partner contacts the National Cemetery Administration to schedule funeral services, whereas this may be a responsibility that your team designates to your facility's Decedent Affairs team. When creating your SOP, understand that your team will likely have multiple iterations of the process over time.



Officers assist in a Final Mile Ceremony for VA Police Officer and US Army Combat Veteran, Jonathan "JB" Hickman, on January 22, 2021.

The SOP created by your team should take account of your facility's capabilities, as well as other outside forces. For example, the process that your team adopts may need to include weather contingency plans. Additionally, your team may have relationships with multiple groups, in which case, there could be an "on-call" schedule for the organization that will ride in the procession. When you consider implementing this program, understand that while you may alter the practice workflow or include different types of team members, the Final Mile Promising Practice will culminate in a critical service for the Veterans you serve.

Tip: If possible, consider gathering your team and stakeholders to perform a trial run of the process before launch. This exercise will allow your team to identify potential issues with the SOP and remedy them in a low stakes environment.

Step 6: Create a Goal Tracking and Process Improvement Methodology

As a part of developing a Project Charter, your team may decide to create goals. Keep these goals in mind when creating a Final Mile process and consider how you can embed tracking methods to ensure your team will succeed. These goals will advance your team's implementation efforts and promote cohesion amongst stakeholders.

Tracking your team's progress toward implementation goals can be both an informal and formal practice. Meeting regularly with stakeholders can provide a space for the team to share accomplishments and ask for help with barriers to success. Additionally, your team may choose to provide email updates to stakeholders and others involved in the practice to increase collaboration and communication across the effort. When recognizing the team's efforts, you may consider keeping track of how many Veterans the practice has helped and thanking the team for their time and effort put towards performing these services.

Implementing new practices into preexisting workflows can be challenging. For example, implementation can negatively affect workflow and workload if the expected adjustments are not carefully accounted for, planned for, and communicated to all those involved. Obtaining input and buy-in from multiple stakeholders, especially those on the frontline, is critical to:

- 1) Ensure implementation is working
- 2) Identify problems during implementation
- 3) Promote continuous quality improvement

Implementation is an ongoing process of planning, practicing, evaluating, and adjusting to facilitate continuous quality improvement. Eliciting prompt staff and community participant feedback is crucial after you go-live to continue addressing concerns, problems, and misunderstandings, as well as to celebrate successes. After each service, consider debriefing with the Core Team and stakeholders to improve upon your process for subsequent events.

Step 7: Go Live!

After you have coordinated with the appropriate stakeholders and created an optimized SOP, your team is ready to honor Veterans with the Final Mile Promising Practice!

SHARE SUCCESS WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND CELEBRATE!

Use the experiences of previous events and stakeholder feedback to celebrate, share, and build upon your successes! Think back to all the stakeholders and team members involved in implementation – everyone should be a part of celebrating the success of the Final Mile Promising Practice. The more you share your accomplishments, the greater opportunity you have to grow your program and help more Veterans!



The Final Mile Escort Team, Funeral Director, and US Army reps commemorate US Army Private James Belch, Korean War era Veteran, on November 10th, 2020, at Florida National Cemetery. This was the team's eighteenth Final Mile ceremony.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. What costs are associated with this practice?
 - a. There are no outright costs attributed to this practice. However, your facility may decide to provide employees time off to attend ceremonies, therefore some indirect costs may arise
2. What are some tactics to elicit community and Veterans' group participation?
 - a. Schedule meetings with local VSOs to talk about the program and ask for support. Reach out to your Voluntary Service liaison for a list of all VSOs
3. What are best practices for maintaining contact and disseminating information amongst the Core Team and stakeholders that are not VA staff?
 - a. At Tampa, they use email distribution lists, Facebook event calendars, and personal calls to put the word out for Final Mile escorts

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS?

Do you have additional questions or need advice about implementing the Final Mile Promising Practice at your facility?

Check out the Final Mile Diffusion Marketplace Site linked below!

[Final Mile](#)

<https://marketplace.va.gov/practices/the-final-salute#overview>

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Special thanks to our CVMA partners who demonstrate their commitment to the Final Mile Program at every opportunity.

Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association

Florida Chapter 20-10
Florida Chapter 20-4
Florida Chapter 20-15

ACRONYM KEY

ACRONYM	DEFINITION
AA	Authorized Absence
CFIR	Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research
CVMA	Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association
NCA	National Cemetery Administration
NOK	Next of Kin
POC	Point of Contact
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VAMC	Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center
VBA	Veterans Benefit Affairs
VEO	Veterans Experience Office (local)
VHA	Veterans Health Administration

ATTACHMENTS

DOCUMENT	FILE
James A. Haley VAMC Final Mile Practice Media Links	 James A. Haley VAMC Final Mile Prac
Organizational Readiness Assessment	 Final Mile_Toolkit_Organizæ
VHA Directive 1601B.04	 VHA DIRECTIVE 1601B.04.pdf

REFERENCES

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