Literacy — Agencies: The Department of Veterans Affairs

The largest integrated healthcare system in the United States — and the only federal department with a statutory program that gives verified veteran-owned small businesses priority over every other supplier. The VA is two markets in one: the healthcare-systems market of the Veterans Health Administration, and the benefits-and-services market of the Veterans Benefits Administration. This profile maps both, and the Veterans First set-aside world that makes the VA distinctive.

Culture: service to veterans

The VA's mission is to serve the men and women who served — through healthcare, benefits, and burial. Two durable facts about the culture:

1. **Mission resonance is real.** The VA is a mission agency in the deepest sense. Proposals that connect the work to veteran outcomes read as credible; the evaluators are career public servants who take the mission personally.
2. **It is a huge, sprawling operation.** The VA runs roughly 1,300 healthcare facilities (hospitals, clinics, community-based outpatient clinics) and a benefits system that touches millions of veterans and their families. It buys accordingly: medical supplies and equipment, IT systems, construction, research, and an enormous range of services.

The VHA / VBA split

The VA's two halves buy differently, and you should know which one you are talking to:

- **VHA — the Veterans Health Administration** — is the healthcare side: the hospitals and clinics, the medical supply chain, clinical services, health IT (including the VistA electronic health record and the ongoing modernization to a new commercial EHR), and medical research. This is the healthcare-systems market: it buys clinical care, medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, and the IT that runs a hospital system.
- **VBA — the Veterans Benefits Administration** — is the benefits side: disability compensation, education (GI Bill), home loans, pensions. It buys claims-processing services, contact-center services, IT, and the administrative machinery of the benefits system.
- **NCA — the National Cemetery Administration** — the burial and memorials side, a smaller but steady buyer.

For a pursuer, the VHA/VBA distinction is the first segmentation question: *healthcare systems or benefits services?* They have different customers, different acquisition shops, and different technical languages.

Solicitation shapes and vehicles

The VA uses the standard federal toolbox plus its own heavy reliance on shared vehicles:

- **RFPs and RFQs** for operational buys, run by the VA's acquisition offices.
- **The GSA schedules** — the VA is one of the largest users of the GSA Schedule program, especially the medical-supply and services categories. For many VA needs, being on the right schedule is the entry ticket (see the GSA profile).
- **VA-specific vehicles** — the VA runs its own IDIQs and strategic vehicles for its core markets, including the medical-supply prime-vendor programs that keep hospital supply chains stocked, and large IT and healthcare-services IDIQs.
- **The VA Strategic Acquisition Center** — the VA's specialized contracting center for its largest, most strategic acquisitions.

The pattern: for commodity-like medical and administrative buys, the VA routes through schedules and standing vehicles; for its biggest bets (the EHR modernization, major construction, large services), it runs formal full competitions.

Veterans First: the SDVOSB/VOSB set-aside world

The VA is defined, for small-business pursuers, by the **Veterans First Contracting Program** — a statutory priority that sets aside a substantial portion of VA contracting for **verified Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (SDVOSBs)** and **Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (VOSBs)**. This is the most aggressive veteran set-aside in government, and it changes the competitive math entirely:

- **Set-aside priority.** When the VA has a requirement that two or more verified SDVOSBs (or VOSBs) can perform at a fair price, it *must* set the acquisition aside for them. A verified veteran-owned firm is competing against a small pool of verified peers, not against the industrial primes.
- **Verification, not self-certification.** Here is the critical rule that trips firms up: for the VA's Veterans First program, SDVOSB/VOSB status is **not self-certified** — it must be **verified** by the VA's **Center for Verification and Evaluation (CVE)** and the firm must be listed in the **VIP database** (the Vendor Information Pages). No VIP listing, no Veterans First award. This is different from the SBA-certified SDVOSB status used by other agencies (see the DoD profile) — the VA runs its own verification for its own program, and the two are not interchangeable.
- **Documentation burden.** Verification requires the firm to prove veteran ownership and control with documentation — resumes, tax returns, ownership records — under 38 C.F.R. Part 74. It is an administrative gate with real teeth, and it must be maintained (reverification) to stay on the list.

For a veteran-owned small firm, the strategic implication is enormous and simple:

get verified, stay verified, and the VA is the friendliest large market in the federal government. For a non-veteran firm, the corollary is to know the veteran-owned pool is a real competitor for VA work — and that teaming with a verified SDVOSB is a standard route into it.

Evaluation emphasis

Outside the set-aside lane, the VA evaluates the standard federal way — best value with technical, past-performance, and price factors — with two durable emphases:

1. **Past performance and reliability matter a lot.** The VA is consequence-averse in the healthcare domain: patient safety, supply reliability, and data privacy (protected health information) are non-negotiable. A clean, relevant CPARS record and a demonstrably reliable delivery history are strong evaluation assets.
2. **Compliance is heavy.** Healthcare work brings HIPAA and privacy requirements, clinical-quality standards, and security controls. The compliance reading of a VA solicitation is not optional.

Set-aside landscape beyond Veterans First

The VA also runs the standard federal set-aside pool — small business, 8(a), HUBZone, WOSB — and, under its statutory obligations, a very large share of its work goes to small business overall. But the headline is Veterans First: the VA is the one agency where **veteran-owned status is not just a preference but a prioritized statutory pool**, and verification is the key that opens it.

Learning pointers

> **Learning pointers.** The VA profile is the course's study of a mission agency with a statutory set-aside priority. - **Doctrine** — doctrine/01 (the small-business detour, with the VA as the most aggressive version), doctrine/02 (schedules and standing vehicles), doctrine/04 (verification as an administrative gate). - **Literacy** — industry-standard-canon (CPARS and past performance), acronym-decoder (SDVOSB, VOSB), further-reading (SAM.gov and SBA for certification context). - **Case study** — a veteran-owned variant of Ravonics would live in the VA's set-aside world; the profile shows what verification would require. - **Course** — the small-business and certification content of the contracts course (undergraduate-303-government-contracts-and-subcontracting) is where the Veterans First rules get exercised. - **Verify** — verification rules, reverification cycles, and the VIP listing process change over time; confirm the current CVE/VIP requirements and the live solicitation before committing.