

Moving Beyond Patchwork Systems: The Future of Education Services IT

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Statement of
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Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittees on
Technology Modernization and Economic Opportunity

With Respect To

“Moving Beyond Patchwork Systems: The Future of Education Services IT”

Washington, D.C.

Chairwoman Lee, Chairman Levin, Ranking Members Banks and Bilirakis, and members of the subcommittees, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide views on this important subject.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has had shortcomings for years, specifically surrounding Information Technology (IT). Sometimes there have been minor delays or

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hurdles in processing claims or benefits, and sometimes there have been catastrophic failures such as the GI Bill housing payment issue in the fall of 2018. It does not matter how capable and dedicated the employees at VA are, if VA is not equipped with adequate IT resources to perform its required tasks, there will inevitably be breakdowns.

Over the past several years, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has developed and implemented new IT systems to support several program transformations, including the Veterans Benefits Management System, National Work Queue, Case Flow, and eBenefits. Unfortunately, VBA must compete with other offices and agencies within VA for the limited IT funding available each year, delaying the development and deployment of critical IT systems and programming. As a result, critical IT systems are rarely fully developed before business process changes are implemented. Instead, they are phased in over several years, forcing VBA to rely on an inconsistent mix of old and new IT systems, as well as an endless stream of suboptimal workaround solutions. While it may be understandable from a purely budgetary view to stretch out the development and deployment of new IT systems, it is a failure from a functional perspective. Providing only partial IT solutions inevitably results in a loss of productivity and often leads to lower quality and less accurate decisions on claims and appeals for veterans. For example, similar problems caused by inadequately developed technology can be seen in the Veteran Readiness & Employment \$12 million IT debacle, and the education service's continuing problems in making accurate payments under the new GI Bill program.

There are multiple platforms within VA's Education Services (VAES) that need critical IT upgrades: programs that process original and supplemental claims, VAES' interaction with the State Approving Agencies (SAA), VAONCE, and its Business Decision Network which is a legacy system years overdue for replacement. These are just some of the platforms within VAES that can be upgraded and streamlined into single programs in order to make customer service more efficient and ultimately save dollars.

The VFW proposes the "Digital GI Bill" upgrade as the best cost-efficient upgrade to bring VAES into the 21st century. A one-time infusion of resources for VA's IT programs specifically aimed at Education Services would overhaul many of the long-needed platforms that office is struggling to maintain, and allow VAES to properly function, instead of consistently requiring workarounds and patchwork solutions to maintain functionality.

The Digital GI Bill would also be able to accommodate many of the requests Congress and veterans service organizations have been making for years. At the completion of the IT overhaul, VAES would have a cleaner platform to replace VAONCE for School Certifying Officials, SAAs, and VA officials, so they can all have the ability to view one screen when interacting with each other instead of only having access to individual platforms. The GI Bill Comparison Tool would be able to be upgraded regularly instead of housing years-old information that is difficult to corroborate or edit once in place. It would provide a digital Certificate of Eligibility for GI Bill the same way VA Home Loan is an automated process. It would allow for platforms to be introduced that can accommodate the data-sharing agreements between VA and other agencies. And finally, it would be able to track GI Bill users so easier notifications can be made to all benefits users to deliver timely information regarding updates or changes.

The Digital GI Bill upgrade is a long-overdue upgrade to a critical program office within VA. Far too many times we have all collectively overlooked IT resources when it came to new programs and changes within VAES. Just recently, a change to VA Work-Study was passed into law adjusting the payment schedule for work-study recipients. VA does not have a current platform to calculate and deliver those new programs, and no additional IT funding was provided with the change in the program. Far too often we ask for changes within VA and expect the program office to simply make it happen. Unfunded mandates such as the work-study change will lead to VAES trying to create yet another workaround, and to use already overworked and outdated systems to perform a new task for which they were not intended.

Overlooking IT resources is something we have all done too often, and that practice needs to change. The VFW asks that every new proposal going forward place an emphasis on IT needs to accomplish said proposal. Minor delays can be avoided by ensuring proper IT funding is added to all new proposals, and hopefully, we will never have to see what took place during the final implementation of the Forever GI Bill.

In order to accomplish the Digital GI Bill upgrade, the VFW proposes authorizing VAES to transfer VA IT funds from already existing IT funds within VA. This would help expedite the upgrade by using existing appropriated funds and utilizing the same workforce to finish the last changes from the Forever GI Bill. Waiting to authorize and appropriate additional funding could delay the implementation of the Digital GI Bill and cost more money in the long run.

VAES is long overdue for not simply an IT upgrade, but an IT overhaul. A project like Digital GI Bill would set VAES up for success for years to come, and hopefully, head off any delays by ensuring veterans receive their benefits to utilize some truly life-changing programs offered by VA.

Chairwoman Lee, Chairman Levin, Ranking Members Banks and Bilirakis, this concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to present the VFW's input today. I look forward to engaging in further discussion with you or any members of the subcommittees on these issues.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2020, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.