



AFGE Congressional Testimony

STATEMENT BY

**AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO
AND THE AFGE NATIONAL VA COUNCIL**

BEFORE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ON

1988 to 2016: VETSNET to VBMS

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American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO
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Overview

The American Federation of Government Employees and the AFGE National Veterans' Affairs Council (AFGE), representing over 220,000 employees working for the Department of Veterans Affairs at medical centers, regional offices (ROs), and veterans' cemeteries (NCA), appreciates the opportunity to share our concerns and recommendations regarding the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). AFGE is the exclusive representative of the employees who process claims at the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). More than 40 percent of AFGE's total membership are veterans themselves, including civilians in the Department of Defense, corrections officers in the Bureau of Prisons, Border Patrol and ICE Agents in the Department of Homeland Security, as well as employees of almost every Executive Branch agency. AFGE is thus a strong supporter of the interests of America's military veterans.

VBA employees and AFGE are highly committed to ending the backlog and providing veterans with the benefits they bravely earned. At the end of fiscal year 2013, the disability claims backlog had grown to over 600,000. Through the dedication and hard work of VBA employees, the backlog declined to 75,395 as of January 2, 2016. Fifty-two percent of VBA employees are veterans and far more have close relatives who have served in the military. The backlog is a personal issue as much as it is a professional one for VBA employees.

In order to provide frontline employee feedback on VBMS, AFGE conducted a membership survey.

About AFGE's VBMS Membership Survey

AFGE conducted a survey in October, 2015, of VBA employees on their current views of VBMS. Only daily VBMS users were included in the survey results. The survey asked AFGE members:

- How often do you use VBMS for your work?
- Do you believe that VBMS has increased productivity for you?
- Do you believe that VBMS has increased productivity for your office?
- Has VBMS improved since its initial rollout? Where have you seen improvements?
- What additional fixes to VBMS would you recommend?
- Do you prefer working with a paper-based system or a paperless system?

AFGE received responses from 195 employees representing the following 26 ROs and facilities:

- St. Paul, MN
- Boise, ID
- Chicago, IL
- St. Louis, MO
- Atlanta, GA
- Houston, TX
- Roanoke, VA
- Columbia, SC
- Louisville, KY
- Waco, TX
- Denver, CO
- Togus, ME
- Newark, NJ
- Montgomery, AL
- Lincoln, NE
- Huntington, WV
- New Orleans, LA
- Harford, CT
- Des Moines
- Phoenix
- Cleveland
- Los Angeles
- Nashville
- Cheyenne
- Indianapolis
- White River Junction, VT (medical center VBMS user response)

AFGE sent the informal membership survey to all local presidents twice during the survey period to maximize the response rate.

General Survey Takeaways

AFGE has shared our VBA members' frustrations over the difficulties they face with the Committee on a number of occasions since the initial rollout of VBMS. We maintain that VBMS was rolled out prematurely. The new software system regularly shut down and employees were forced to use legacy software without mitigating performance standards.

Things are getting better. VBA employees currently report fewer work interruptions related to VBMS shutdowns and reduced overall system delays. But an important consequence of these software failures has hurt employees, and we ask that the Committee instruct the agency to rectify this: When the system fails and the software shuts down, employees continue to be held accountable for their speed in handling claims at the same rate that prevails when the software is functioning. Clearly, inoperable software should qualify for excluded time within VBMS. When the VBMS software is shut down, we understand and support the notion that VBA must make every effort to ensure that any production slowdown is avoided. However, it is wrong to punish employees for the system's inadequacies. AFGE urges the Committee to require VBA to develop an action plan for when VBMS is inoperable and AFGE must be at the table when creating this plan.

Based on the survey, most AFGE members responded that VBMS has improved their own productivity as well as the productivity of their office. In addition, the vast majority strongly agree that VBMS has improved since its initial rollout. AFGE members also tend to support a paperless claims processing system over a paper-based system, and state that VBMS has come a long way but still has significant room for improvement.

The survey yielded hundreds of suggestions from AFGE members for improving VBMS. We ask that Congress and VBA create an effective feedback protocol for employees and the union to provide regular recommendations on improving VBMS.

It is important that AFGE remain a strong partner with VBA in order to ensure VBMS continues to improve and changes to VBMS render it more effective for veterans. AFGE requests the establishment of a working group to improve VBMS, which would include AFGE representatives, VBA management, and representatives from veterans' service organizations (VSOs). The union must have an ongoing, meaningful role in providing feedback to VBA and the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs must involve AFGE in the feedback loop for improving VBMS.

VBMS Membership Survey Results

VBMS and productivity: About **62% of responses indicated that VBMS has improved** their own productivity at work, compared with **29% who said their productivity has not improved** and 9% who were unsure. For their office as a whole, **62% felt VBMS improved the office's productivity, compared with 22% who said it did not improve** and 16% who were unsure.

VBA employees say that VBMS' ability to have multiple users accessing a single case improves productivity for their office. Others said that VBMS makes it easier to sort through documents.

Several members, however, emphasized that despite possible improvements, processing claims at VBA will always be a matter of reading through documents and going through materials. Several Decision Review Officers (DROs) claimed that VBMS has helped productivity with initial disability claims but the system still presents glaring issues for more complex appeals cases.

Some reported that simply getting used to the program helped with their own productivity. AFGE urges Congress and VBA to emphasize interactive and productive training in order to help employees adapt to new systems and additional changes to VBMS.

VBMS Improvements: AFGE members overwhelmingly agree that VBMS has improved since its initial rollout. **83% confirm that VBMS has improved, compared with 5% who say VBMS has not improved and 11% who are unsure.**

Some of the improvements our members suggested include:

- Better scanning quality of images
- Improved navigation
- Reduced system delay issues and far fewer outages
- Automatic letter generation features
- Process for generating awards
- Loading and returning exams from VA Medical Centers

Preference for a Paperless System: AFGE members indicated support for a paperless system over a paper system. **69% supported a paperless system, 23% supported paper, and 7% were either unsure or supported both.**

Members preferring a paperless system emphasized that they no longer have to chase down paper files or worry about files or paper being misplaced. Employees appreciated the security of paperless claims for the veteran. They also reported that there was less waste and it was more efficient for moving claims around the office. Less time was spent printing off rating decisions. Multiple employees can work different aspects of the same claim simultaneously which is not possible with paper claims.

Respondents also highlighted the flexibility paperless claims provides in allowing employees to telework. AFGE has regularly urged VBA to expand its teleworking program in order to help expand the workforce while increasing productivity. Historically, flexibility for telework regularly improves productivity for employees in the federal workforce while reducing their level of burn out. VBMS and paperless systems provide a new possibility for telework without risking the removal of veterans' personal medical information and other files from the office. AFGE urges Congress to provide VBA with the proper resources to expand and nurture the telework program.

A regular complaint of the paperless system was the physical strain of looking at a screen all day as well wrist and hand discomfort from sitting at a computer. Some note that documents are simply easier to read in paper form since it is easier to tab files and skim pages.

The survey demonstrated a discrepancy in opinion between new and longer term employees. Newer employees tended to prefer a paperless system while longer term employees preferred paper.

Improvement Suggestions for VBMS

AFGE received hundreds of suggestions for improving VBMS. As the primary users of VBMS, frontline employees have the best information on needed improvements that will help their productivity and ability to process claims faster and more accurately for veterans. In the past, VBA management has not engaged AFGE to an adequate degree in seeking out recommendations for VBMS. It is imperative that the union be permitted to assist VBA in soliciting feedback on VBMS from employees if the agency is interested in hearing the unvarnished truth.

Here are several of hundreds of potential improvements identified by AFGE members in their responses:

- **Legacy Systems:** VBMS users should not have to double check results in legacy systems. VBMS should be a one stop shop and employees should not have to use several additional programs to process claims. Documents must be sent directly to VBMS rather than multiple claims processing systems. If it is necessary to move between systems, the order of the documents and any type of labeling and sorting should move as well. In the meantime, the multiple systems (CAPRI, legacy systems, etc.) should be able to better interact with each other.
- **Labeling features:** Labeling features must be improved. Respondents' suggestions included color coding documents, labeling the documents in the subject, and creating additional document labels.
- **Micro-system delay issues:** Documents can take time to open individually as well as individual pages within a document. A delay of 4-5 seconds per page adds up quickly when processing large and complex claims. Employees have to wait as long as 20 seconds to open a large document, only to discover that it does not contain relevant evidence. VBA could create a hover function with a thumbnail to determine whether a document should be opened.
- **Macro-system delay issues:** During certain times of day, the system is slower, for example when the west coast begins its work day.
- **Equipment:** Users regularly suggested better screens to work with, particularly for those with vision impairment. DROs also may need multiple screens so they can review multiple documents in a case at once.
- **Timing out:** allow users to stay logged in for longer periods. One employee reported entering his password 15-20 times per day.
- **Scanning:** Though scanning has improved, pages do still come through VBMS upside down. One employee suggested that after rotating the page, the document should be able to be saved so this is not needed each time the employee reviews the document. Scanning must continue to improve and vendors must be held to a higher standard.
- **Searching:** Some mentioned that the search function was unreliable and that a "Control + F" type function that worked more effectively would be better. Providing additional search options would be helpful.

- **Consolidation:** Make it easier to remove duplicate documents.
- **Alerts:** Many members requested meaningful alerts in VBMS to notify the user of pending appeals or that another user working the claims.
- **Suspense Date:** This should be easy to change and update.
- **Appeals:** Additional emphasis and assistance for appeals which are often far more complex. System delay and equipment issues particular hurt DROs.
- **User friendly features:** Members suggested that reducing clicks between programs and possibly creating a master list/drop down type menu would help efficiency.
- **Quality Review:** Members suggested a “quality review hold” when documents are being reviewed for quality.
- **Document Viewing:** Increase the ability to view multiple documents at once (particularly for appeals).
- **Outages:** Utilize a backup system separate from legacy systems that would work during outages.
- **Spellcheck:** Fix spellcheck for VBMS (members reported inconsistent functionality).
- **Letters:** Provide more letters and templates to use.

Current Paperless Production Standards Issues

VBA has admitted that current performance standards are based on unfair and arbitrary standards. In 2014, AFGE’s National VA Council President Alma Lee had discussions with VBA upper management about the current performance standards, which management agreed were “unattainable.” AFGE and VBA created a working group to discuss a new performance standard system. AFGE urges the Committee to ensure that VBA officials resume this valuable dialogue with AFGE.

Given VBA’s transformation to a paperless system and its exclusive use of VBMS, the timing is ideal for a scientifically based time motion study to create a formal work credit system.

VBA does not have a formal work credit system based on actual data that reflects the amount of time required to process specific types of claims and their components. VBA should not deprive employees of the proper credit for critical work needed to process claims accurately and timely the first time. The broken work credit system creates performance standards that are arbitrary, inconsistent, and focus too much on quantity over quality.

AFGE urges VBA to focus on the following issues in order to reduce the backlog while fairly evaluating employees’ performance:

- Evaluations should be revised to better reflect the complexity of the claim and the processing time required.
- Expand outreach and education to the veteran community about what medical information is needed for a claim to be “ready to rate” without delay.
- VBA has still not conducted a long overdue and much needed scientifically valid time motion study related to VSR and RVSR work for the total completion of claims rather than a point system for individual actions within claims once the claim is ready to rate.

AFGE's Additional VBA Recommendations for Ending the Backlog

Overall, AFGE urges Congress to provide VBA with funding for hiring thousands of additional claims processors at VBA to prevent future reliance on mandatory overtime. In 2014, VA spent \$135m on mandatory overtime. Based on a 2:1 ratio of Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) and Rating VSRs (RVSRs), VBA could have hired an additional 704 VSRs and 352 RVSRs and increased claims processors by 13 %. Mandatory overtime creates burnout and has led to lower morale at VBA compared with VHA, NCA, and VA Central Office. VBA must build a long term workforce to deal with an influx of claims by properly staffing ROs.

While production numbers have steadily increased over the past several years, so has reliance on mandatory overtime. In order to guarantee long term success of VBA, AFGE urges Congress to provide funding for a significant increase in claims processors for not only disabilities claims, but appeals and additional work products.

Employees must be accommodated and treated with respect and integrity in order to foster the most productive and healthy culture possible. VBA must take steps to end employee burnout, raise morale and create promotion opportunities within the agency.