

**TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
TO THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
"ASSESSING THE VA IT LANDSCAPE: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES"**

FEBRUARY 7, 2017

Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on behalf of National Commander Charles E. Schmidt and The American Legion; the country's largest patriotic wartime service organization for veterans, comprising over 2 million members and serving *every* man and woman who has worn the uniform for this country; we thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding The American Legion's position on Assessing the VA IT Landscape: Progress and Challenges.

"Overhauling the health care system for Americans who answered the call of duty by serving in the military is a national priority. The country's largest integrated health care delivery system is responding to these challenges and aims to reestablish trust by expanding methods of providing care and emphasizing the concept of "whole health" and adopting a veteran-centric approach in everything we do. It will be necessary to reimagine the future of VHA health care delivery. Partnerships with federal and community health care providers may result in better access and broader capabilities and will require a new infrastructure. The future requires the use of best practices in science and engineering to improve the quality, safety and consistency of veteran's experience, regardless of the site or type of care." David Shulkin, M.D.¹

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Information Technology (IT) infrastructure has been an evolving technological necessity over the past 37 years, sometimes leading the industry, and sometimes trailing. The American Legion has been intrinsically involved with VA's IT transformation from the inception of Veterans Health Information and Technology Architecture (VistA) to the recent introduction of VistA-e[volution] for medical records, as well as being a pioneer partner in the concept and integration of the fully electronic disability claims process.

Leading the field in 1978, VA doctors developed an electronic solution to coordinate and catalogue patients healthcare long before their private sector colleagues, who were slow to follow, while some private physicians still refuse to automate today.

As has been well documented, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) suffered from horrific backlogs peaking in March 2013 at over 611,000 claims. Today, that backlog has been reduced to approximately 100,000 claims. VBA was mired in a mid-20th century work model lacking IT integration. Shuttling physical cases from one station to the other and from regional offices to medical centers adding to delays to adjudication decisions. Though not perfect, the

¹ New England Journal of Medicine <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1600307>

implementation of Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) and stakeholder enterprise portal (SEP) has significantly reduced VA's reliance on hard copy cases. Today, cases can be viewed throughout the nation collectively, greatly assisting advocates, VA, and ultimately, millions of our nation's veterans.

IT automation is expensive to implement and expensive to maintain, especially when maintaining legacy equipment. As in all digital space, IT infrastructure advances so quickly that most IT infrastructure is outdated by the time it is fully implemented, and VA's IT infrastructure is no different. Unfortunately, in this case it is simply the cost of doing business in a technologically advancing society. With this in mind, companies are turning to rented cloud based resources and Software as a Service (SAS) to mitigate costs. These services have a lower up-front investment and negate the need for hardware maintenance and software upgrades in many cases.

Information Technology is inextricably intertwined into many of the services we take for granted, such as; telephone systems, appointment scheduling, procurement, building access and safety controls, and much more. Maintaining an up-to-date system is not a luxury, it is necessary, and The American Legion has found that VA's IT infrastructure is aged and failing our veterans.

One of the primary complaints The American Legion receives regarding VA healthcare is scheduling issues. VA's inability to schedule the full complement of veterans' healthcare needs from one central location causes a multitude of delays and billing problems and puts veteran patients at risk when all of the members of the veteran's health team are unable to effectively collaborate online.

In order for VA to safely and effectively serve veterans going forward they need a 21st century data system that incorporates;

- ✓ A single lifetime Electronic Health Record system (EHR),
- ✓ One Operation Management Platform consisting of one resource allocation, financial, supply chain, and human resources system that are integrated seamlessly with the EHR,
- ✓ A single Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system

If proprietary, the system needs to be built using open source code, which will allow the program to remain sustainable and enable future competitive Application Programming Interface (API) Framework that will provide seamless interoperability with internal and external systems.

Once this system is developed, metrics and analytics will be available to all levels of leadership from decentralized locations. Legacy viewer and 130 different versions of VistA simultaneously running across the national and international VA landscape that has been patched together is outdated and ineffective. A veteran should be able to walk into any VA medical Center (VAMC) anywhere in the country or abroad, and the first intake specialist to assist that veteran should be able to pull the patient's record up instantly. This is not possible today.

Initiatives like MyHealthVet, eBenefits, and the recently launched Vets.gov are all steps in the right direction, and all need to be tied into a single user interface system. The American Legion also supports extended use of public/private partnerships similar to the team detailed to VA from the private sector who have spent the past 18 months building the Vets.gov portal. IT industry leaders such as Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Cisco have already partnered with VA in a number of areas and appear willing to help at cost, below market cost, or even donated services, and VA needs to have the flexibility to maximize these relationships.

Finally, as we struggle to keep up with the multitude of programs and expenditures related to VA's IT program, The American Legion is outraged that one of VA's first experiences with integrating cloud services into the VA program was mismanaged and squandered more than \$2 million in taxpayer funds. VA does not have the freedom to learn as they go and needs to partner with or hire experts in cloud computing before they engage in cloud brokerage services. A few days ago the VA Office of Inspector General found²;

“OI&T spent over \$2 million on a cloud brokerage service contract that provided limited brokerage functionality and that VA's actions did not ensure adequate system performance or return on investment. We determined total project costs exceeded \$5 million and the system's limited brokerage service functionality prevented it from being used in a production environment. This capability is essential for delivery of cloud services. The project manager did not ensure that formal testing and acceptance were conducted on project deliverables.”

These deficiencies occurred because of a lack of executive oversight and ineffective project management. Without enforcement of oversight controls, project leadership cannot ensure it will receive the value of contract deliverables or demonstrate an adequate return on investment for the project.”

In closing, The American Legion calls on Congress to ensure that VA is tying all of their IT programs together into a seamless program capable of processing claims, managing veterans' healthcare needs, integrating procurement needs so that VA leaders and congress can analyze annual expenditures versus healthcare consumption, integrating patient communications into their profiles, and ensuring seamless transition between the Department of Defense and VA.

These are the needs of our 21st century fighting force, these are the needs of our returning veterans, these are the needs of our aging veterans, and these are the responsibilities of our federal government who called on these heroes to defend the Constitution of the United States, against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

Conclusion

The American Legion thanks this committee for their diligence and commitment to our nation's veterans as they struggle to receive the benefits they have earned for their service to the country. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Warren J. Goldstein, Assistant Director in The American Legion Legislative Division (202) 861-2700.

² VAOIG <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-15-02189-336.pdf>