

**STATEMENT OF
DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
MR. CURTIS L. COY
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

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Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting us to appear before you today to discuss the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Office of Economic Opportunity information technology (IT) capabilities. I am accompanied today by Mr. Rob Worley, Director of Education Service, Mr. Jack Kammerer, Director of Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service, and Mr. Steven Schliesman, Assistant Deputy Chief Information Officer for VA's Office of Information and Technology (OI&T). VBA's Office of Economic Opportunity has four functional areas: Education (i.e., GI Bill programs), VR&E; Transition, Employment, and Economic Impact (i.e., Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and employment-related issues); and Home Loan Guaranty. It is our understanding that the Committee would like to focus today's discussion on the Education Long-Term Solution (LTS), VR&E IT systems, and the Veterans Employment Center (VEC).

Post-9/11 GI Bill Long-Term Solution (LTS)

In June 2008, Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, which established a new education benefit program under chapter 33 of title 38 United States Code, otherwise known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. VA OI&T contracted with the Department of the Navy's Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command (SPAWAR) to develop a long-term solution for education claims processing -- an end-to-end claims processing solution that utilizes rules-based, industry-standard technologies for the delivery of education benefits. VA has deployed six major releases for LTS, including several releases of functionality to implement changes to the Post-9/11 GI Bill required by Public Law (P.L.) 111-377 (Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010).

On September 24, 2012, end-to-end automation of supplemental claims for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, which are paid to Veterans and schools, was successfully activated in LTS. Since that deployment, over 6,000 claims per day are processed automatically without human intervention. Last fiscal year, 52 percent of all Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims were fully automated. Approximately 85 percent of all Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims are now partially or fully automated. This automation has significantly reduced education claims processing times – from an average of 16.5 days in FY 2012 to 7 days in FY 2015. Processing timeliness for original claims (those establishing initial eligibility) has improved by 12.1 days, from 30.5 days in FY 2012 to 18.4 days in FY 2015. VA has also maintained a payment accuracy rate of 99.4

percent. Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VA has paid benefits to nearly 1.5 million individuals totaling over \$56 billion.

Section 702 of P.L. 113-146 (Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014) instructs VA to generally disapprove courses if a public school charges higher tuition rates under the Post-9/11 GI Bill to Veterans who live in the state than it charges its in-state residents. Functionality in VBA systems needs to be modified to ensure only education claims for Section 702-qualifying programs are automatically processed. To meet this need, VA awarded a development contract in September 2015 to enhance LTS and other supporting systems, such as the VA Online Certification of Enrollment system (VAONCE) and Web-Enabled Approval Management System (WEAMS).

Additional LTS functionality needed to further increase efficiency in education claims processing includes: automated certificates of eligibility for original claims; electronically generated letters; expanded automation of supplemental claims; issuance of advance payments; monthly certification of attendance; and improved business analytics for reporting purposes.

Post-9/11 GI Bill Comparison Tool, Feedback Tool, and CareerScope

P.L. 112-249, enacted on January 10, 2013, enhanced and complemented the provisions of Executive Order 13607 (Principles of Excellence) by requiring VA to develop a comprehensive policy to improve outreach and transparency to Veterans and Servicemembers. This law required VA to deploy online tools to make information on institutions of higher learning (IHLs) publicly available. The law also required VA to develop a centralized mechanism for tracking and publishing feedback from students

and State Approving Agencies (SAAs) regarding the quality of instruction at IHLs, IHL recruiting practices, and post-graduation employment placement. Finally, it required VA to perform market surveys to determine the availability of off-the-self online tools that allow Veterans to assess academic readiness and compare education and training opportunities.

VA internally developed and deployed the GI Bill Comparison Tool. Launched on February 4, 2014, the GI Bill Comparison Tool enables prospective students to compare educational institutions using key measures of affordability and value through access to school performance information and consumer protection information, and it helps Veterans become informed postsecondary-education consumers. The GI Bill Comparison Tool is easily accessible through VA's GI Bill website as well as eBenefits. As of October 12, 2015, over 1.2 million unique visitors have accessed the GI Bill Comparison Tool. The latest version of the GI Bill Comparison Tool includes functionality that allows users to search for schools and employers based on state and residence, compare multiple schools side-by-side, and compare the benefits of multiple GI Bill education programs for those who may be entitled to more than one benefit. Additionally, it displays school-level complaint data from the Feedback System and provides information on Section 702 (in-state tuition provision of the Choice Act) school approval information. VA will continue to develop and refine the GI Bill Comparison Tool.

VA also developed and launched the GI Bill Feedback System, a centralized online reporting system that allows Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists, and eligible dependents and survivors to report their experiences with educational

institutions. Depending upon the nature of the feedback, VA may serve as an intermediary between the student and the school to assist in the resolution of the complaint, or VA may launch a targeted risk-based review of the school. Complaints may also be reviewed by state and Federal law-enforcement agencies, including the Department of Justice. VA began accepting complaints through the GI Bill Feedback System when it was launched on January 30, 2014. VA reviews and triages each complaint received, and valid complaints are sent to schools or employers for a response. In March 2014, VA began transmitting the complaints to the centralized Federal Trade Commission's Consumer Sentinel database, where they are accessible by law-enforcement agencies. Functionality has also been added to the GI Bill Comparison Tool to display the school-level complaint data compiled from the GI Bill Feedback System, so that students may view this information before making a choice on a particular school. As of October 12, 2015, there were over 52,000 landing-page views with 4,500 complaints submitted. A specialized team in Education Service has resolved over 3,500 of these complaints.

Finally, as a result of the market surveys, VA deployed an online assessment tool called CareerScope® that allows a Veteran or Servicemember to assess whether he or she is ready to engage in postsecondary education and determine his or her likely vocational aptitude. As of October 13, 2015, over 16,000 Veterans and Servicemembers initiated assessments in CareerScope.

VR&E IT and Business Process Improvements

VR&E is working to prepare for the initial development of the new VR&E case management system, called VRE-CMS. Together with the Veterans Relationship Management (VRM) Program Management Office and VA OI&T, VR&E has refined the functional requirements for VRE-CMS, which will include a planned collaborative user interface in eBenefits and allow VR&E to move toward a more efficient and Veteran-centric paperless service-delivery process. The paperless service-delivery process includes self-service options through eBenefits, phased elimination of paper files, and automated payment processing. A paperless business process will allow VR&E to better support Veterans on their own terms and reduce the administrative burden on VR&E counselors. The intent is to integrate VR&E with other VA business lines and information systems to enhance relationship management, support vocational rehabilitation success, and modernize the employee experience. The total two-year IT development funding for this project is \$9.7 million, with \$3.8 million in FY 2015 and \$5.9 million in FY 2016.

In August 2015, VR&E fully deployed the CWINRS Subsistence Allowance Module (SAM) to all VBA regional offices. The module utilizes the corporate Financial Accounting System (FAS) to make subsistence payments to Veterans and will eliminate VR&E's reliance on the legacy Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) by December 2015. As of October 7, 2015, over 51,200 Veterans have received subsistence payments through SAM, and delivery of payments by the new system is increasing at a rate of over 1,000 Veterans per week.

In collaboration with the Veteran Health Administration (VHA), VR&E expanded VHA Telehealth and CAPRI (Compensation and Pension Records Interchange) technologies to enhance direct Veteran service through online counseling technology and an online medical referral tracking system. The introduction of CAPRI allowed VR&E to transition from a cumbersome paper-based process for medical referrals to an electronic process with the capability to track medical referrals from scheduled appointments through delivery of service by VHA. Since its release in March 2015, VR&E employees have successfully referred over 1,900 Veterans to VHA for medical services.

Tele-counseling uses secure video teleconferencing to enable VR&E counselors to remotely meet with and counsel Veterans receiving VR&E services. The system was released nationally to program participants and VR&E's team of 1,000 vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) in March 2015. Although this is the initial phase, it has significant potential to increase VR&E's responsiveness to Veterans' needs, reduce travel costs and time for Veterans and employees, and improve accessibility to VR&E services. VR&E is also partnering with VHA to provide support on the Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV). This software viewer combines data from VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) health information systems and displays it chronologically on a single screen. The goal is to field JLV software to VRCs nationwide to enable them to better support Veterans with their vocational rehabilitation needs.

Veterans Employment Center

VA, DoD, the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Education, the Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management collaborated

to design, develop, and incorporate the best features of existing online employment tools into the Veterans Employment Center (VEC). The VEC is the Federal government's single internet source for connecting transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families to meaningful career opportunities. With its inception, the VEC consolidated several government sites, bringing together job opportunities and allowing users to build an online profile that can be shared - in real time - with employers, including those who have made a public commitment to hire Veterans.

The VEC's Military Skills Translator, built on DOL's skill translator, aims to allow Servicemembers and Veterans to match their military occupation code and pay grade with associated civilian skills and occupations. The VEC's Profile Builder, based on principles taught in the DOL Employment Workshop for TAP, allows a job seeker to import the results obtained from the military skills translator into an online profile which acts as a virtual resume. To date, employers can access a vault of verified career profiles, leverage advanced search functionality, such as keyword and/or geographic location, to find the right candidates for their organization, and connect with qualified transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their spouses directly.

The VEC's Veterans Job Bank (VJB), fed by jobs listed on the National Labor Exchange, USA Jobs, and employers using job posting schema, allows users to search over 2.2 million jobs from the private sector and Federal, state, and local governments. The VJB's search functionality allows Veterans to narrow their job search with options such as industry, occupation, location, and Federal/non-Federal filters. Job postings that are returned within the VJB link directly to the employer's job listing, allowing any updates to an employer's website to be automatic and routing applicants directly to their

applicant tracking system without developing new hiring processes. Additionally, employers can make public hiring commitments on the VEC. In turn, job seekers can view a searchable list of employers and organizations that have made a commitment to hire or train individuals and then link directly to their websites to get more information, start the conversation, and apply for jobs.

The VEC integrates and promotes VA's public and private partnerships by linking to a broad set of resources, programs, and services offered by VA-partner organizations. Additionally, through VA's partnership with LinkedIn, Veterans and Servicemembers now have the ability to import their LinkedIn profile directly to the VEC with just a few clicks. LinkedIn is also making it easier for Veterans and Servicemembers to connect to employers with a free year of LinkedIn's premium Job Seeker Subscription. VA will continue to explore opportunities to expand such partnerships with the private sector to ensure Veterans and Servicemembers have access to meaningful economic opportunities.

VA took action in June 2015 to revise the TAP curriculum, enhancing coverage of the VEC in VA's Benefits I & II briefings. All VA benefits advisors have received extended training on how to assist transitioning Servicemembers with creating a profile in the VEC. The importance of the VEC in TAP is taught during the DOL Employment Workshop. The workshop's curriculum was revised in January 2015 to include an introduction to the VEC and directions on how to create a profile in the VEC. Any potential future DOL revision would continue to incorporate instruction on the VEC. As of September 15, 2015, the site averages nearly 1.5 million page views by approximately 135,000 users each month. The VEC has become the Federal

government's online tool for Veteran employment, thanks in large part to the support of DoD, DOL, and our public and private partners.

The VEC and the GI Bill Comparison Tool were built using VA in-house digital service resources, which leveraged the latest in open-source web frameworks optimized for sustainable productivity and automated testing to eliminate and prevent bugs and re-work, and used world-class development talent hired from the private industry such as Google and Amazon. Technologically, the VEC employs Agile methodology in managing the software's development life-cycle. However, the VEC and the GI Bill Comparison Tool gain speed and effectiveness through their focused use, simplicity of design, and isolation from sensitive Veteran benefit information.

Conclusion

VBA and OI&T continue to assess IT capabilities in all of VA's business areas. Our goal, as always, is to improve our systems in order to ensure that Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families have every opportunity to attain personal and economic success.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. We would be pleased to answer questions from you or other members of the Subcommittee.