FURTHER EXAMINING FOREVER GI BILL IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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C O N T E N T S

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2019

Page

OPENING STATEMENTS

WITNESSES

APPENDIX

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD

FURTHER EXAMINING FOREVER GI BILL IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2019

U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:01 a.m., in room 210, House Visitors Center, Hon. Mike Levin (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Levin, Brindisi, Pappas, Luria, Lee, Cunningham, Bergman, Banks, and Meuser.

Also present: Representative Roe.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. LEVIN. Good morning. I call this hearing to order.

I want to thank everyone for joining us today in the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee. Today we are convening to receive another update on VA's implementation of the Forever GI Bill and, specifically, whether the Department is ready to fully implement Sections 107 and 501 on December 1st.

It has been more than 2 years since Congress passed the Forever GI Bill into law in August 2017. The VA was given 1 year to implement the Forever GI Bill, which was by no means an easy task. VA had to make major modifications to its legacy information technology systems that processed education claims and payments in order to process the monthly housing allowance changes required by Sections 107 and 501. The fact that we are still modifying outdated systems for veterans' education benefits is an issue that we must address sooner rather than later.

Nonetheless, VA repeatedly reported to Congress that the work was on track, that was until July 2018, 1 month before implementation, when VA raised concerns about implementing the bill on time. The botched implementation in August 2018 led to thousands of veterans either not receiving their housing stipend for months or receiving an erroneous amount.

Many veterans, as we all know, rely on their monthly housing stipend to pay for their living expenses while they attend classes that will prepare them for opportunities in the job market. There were stories of veterans being evicted and facing other economic hardships.

The Inspector General conducted its own assessment, as well as requesting that MITRE conduct an independent technical assessment to identify why this occurred. The findings were stark. In the

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past, the VA lacked an accountable leader who could oversee project delivery and, I quote, "resulting in unclear communication of implementation progress and inadequately defined expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the various VA business lines and contractors involved," end quote.

That is something that we cannot afford to repeat, which is why Congress and specifically this subcommittee has been closely tracking VA's progress for the last year.

In our previous hearings regarding the President's budget request, we examined the shortfalls in Forever GI Bill implementation. In May 2019, we held a joint hearing with the Technology Modernization Subcommittee on VA's progress in updating IT systems and processes to meet the implementation date.

VA's officials since have provided our subcommittee staff with monthly updates on the status of IT system modifications and assured they will not repeat the mistakes of the past, and I appreciate that very much.

Last month, I traveled to VA's Muskogee, Oklahoma regional office and saw firsthand the systems that VA uses to process education claims. I am grateful to the Under Secretary and others for joining me on that visit. I learned a lot. It is obviously very important that we continue to modernize the systems that are in place.

We have repeatedly asked if VA officials are getting today and in the future what they need to provide our Nation's veterans the benefits that they deserve. This committee urges the Department to be forthright about their needs, which I trust that you will be, and, as you know, Congress has to juggle several funding requests across the Federal Government and, as is often the case, the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

Nonetheless, the focus of today's hearing is on the implementation of Sections 107 and 501, and it is just 12 days away. In 12 days, those changes are scheduled to go into effect. Progress seems to be on track, but we have got to perform our oversight duty to ensure smooth implementation without unintended adverse effects to veterans.

Our opportunity here today is to see where things stand and learn from the failures of the past, and hopefully build on that for the future. I look forward to hearing the testimony from our witnesses to do just that.

Now I would like to recognize Congressman Bergman, who is sitting in for Ranking Member Bilirakis, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF JACK BERGMAN, ACTING RANKING MEMBER

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for joining us at today's subcommittee hearing on the continued implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017, also known as the Forever GI Bill. This bill was signed into law by President Trump on August 16th, 2017, and is one of the best illustrations of the work that Congress can get done when we work together in a bipartisan manner. This was the first major improvement to the GI Bill since 2011 and encompassed over 30 provisions brought forth by many members of this House, who all

share our commitment to the men and women who serve either in uniform or alongside their active duty spouse or parent.

As we all know, despite the best efforts and good intentions of many in the Department, VA was unable to meet the August 1 deadline of 2018, effective date for Sections 107 and 501 of this law. This failure led to some of the most significant GI Bill processing delays since the program's rocky rollout in 2009. Students suffered several financial hardships because of these delays and even today thousands of veterans are still not being paid the correct amount of monthly housing allowance under the law; some are being overpaid and some are being underpaid. It is because of this subcommittee's hearings and bipartisan oversight that many of these issues came to light.

On November 28th, 2018, Secretary Wilkie issued a full stop on the development of the failed IT modifications, and decided to reset development and implementation completely. I thank and praise the Secretary for making this difficult decision.

This reset aimed at full implementation by December 1, 2019, which, as we know, is rapidly approaching. Since this reset, VA has done a great job of keeping the committee informed of their efforts to get the system online, as well as keeping schools and students informed about upcoming changes, many of which could have significant financial impact on students' monthly housing allowance.

It is my understanding from staff and member meetings that VA is poised to meet the December 1 deadline and deliver the changes as required by law. We have come a long way from last November's issues of blue screens of death and lack of bandwidth that hampered processors' ability to do their jobs.

I want to give significant credit to Dr. Lawrence, Assistant Secretary Gfrerer, and their dedicated teams of career VA employees and contractors, for their efforts to get this right. While it is important to acknowledge that it has been done, we still have questions that need to be answered about where VA goes from here.

Today, I am looking forward to hearing from our witnesses how they are going to, first, ensure every veteran that has been owed money as a result of IT failures, some since August 1st, 2018, will be made whole, as well as a time line on when students can expect such payments; second, provide proper accounting for the amount of money in the overpayments that are going to be forgiven as a result of these payments' delays; and, last, provide resources and attention to upgrading current VA legacy systems to ensure that the types of delays that occurred never happen again.

These legacy systems have been hanging on a thread for far too long and calls from this subcommittee about the need for significant upgrades have been ignored by senior VA political leaders, especially those from the previous administration, for far too long.

The Forever GI Bill will not be the last time that Congress changes this education program, which means that it is time for VA to build a truly agile system that is prepared for the inevitable evolution of this great benefit.

Before I yield back, I want to take a moment to say thank you to the student veterans and schools for their patience and understanding throughout this whole process. The IT system's failures and associated delays with the implementation of this law have

been a burden for all involved. I am hopeful that today we can highlight the good work that has been done to finally get this right.

I thank our panel for being here and, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Congress Member Bergman, I appreciate your remarks.

I would now like to recognize the ranking member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Dr. Roe, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DAVID P. ROE, RANKING MEMBER, FULL COMMITTEE

Mr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for recognizing me.

It is important that we are here today to review the implementation of the Forever GI Bill. As one of the coauthors of this legislation, I was disappointed last year to witness a rocky implementation of Sections 107 and 501. Last August 2018, a year ago, I was in Springfield, Illinois with Congressman Rodney Davis at a roundtable, education roundtable, where we realized that there was a significant problem when we were talking to the community colleges and other colleges that were represented.

As these delays were beginning to unfold, I applaud then Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member O'Rourke's efforts to understand where things went wrong and how the VA could work to put implementation of this important law back on track.

I personally want to thank and acknowledge the work of Dr. Lawrence, Assistant Secretary Gfrerer, Ms. Bogue, and Mr. Orifici, and their talented staff, for their hard work to straighten things out and get this right. I thank you for that work.

Like many of the members today, I am very interested to hear about VA's communication plans for alerting students to changes to monthly housing allowance payments that will go into effect when the student's January 1st payments begin. While no plan is foolproof, we must do all we can to ensure that every student is contacted and educated about the potential change to their housing allowance payments. These changes have the potential to impact thousands and I am concerned that, despite VA's best efforts, some students will be very surprised when they see an unexpected decrease in payment on January 1.

I am also interested in hearing about VA's plans to hold Secretary Wilkie's commitment that ever student veteran who was shortchanged due to the IT failures are made whole. It is important to make sure these payments are made in a responsible way, so that they do not negatively impact the processing of spring enrollments; however, it is imperative that students have some idea of when they should expect their payments that they are owed under the law.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for recognizing me and for holding this important hearing. I thank the panel for being here today, and I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Dr. Roe.

I would now like to get to our witnesses. We are fortunate to have true experts from the VA, also MITRE Corporation, I am grateful to all of you for being here.

Dr. Paul Lawrence, Under Secretary at the Veterans Benefits Administration. Good to see you. Ms. Charmain Bogue, Executive Director of Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Education Services. Good to see you again. Mr. James Gfrerer, Assistant Secretary with VA's Office of Information and Technology. Mr. Robert Orifici, Information Technology Specialist in the Office of Information of Technology. Dr. Jay Schnitzer, Vice President and Chief Technology Officer of the MITRE Corporation.

Thank you all again for joining us. As you know, you will have 5 minutes for your oral statement, but your full written statement will be added to the record.

Under Secretary Lawrence, I would like to start with you, and you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF PAUL R. LAWRENCE

Mr. LAWRENCE. Thank you. Good morning, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bergman, and members of the subcommittee. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the status of VA's implementation of the Colmery Act.

On November 28th, 2018, VA announced changes in the implementation of the Colmery Act, Sections 107 and 501, which deal primarily with the calculation of the monthly housing allowance. Secretary Wilkie announced a reset of VA's implementation to give the Department time, contracting support, and the resources necessary to develop the capability to process enrollments in accordance with the law by December 1st, 2018.

VA established a Program Integration Office, or PIO, as a formal entity within the Department made up of government leaders, staff, federally funded research and development center support, and contract support. The PIO captured business requirements for Sections 107 and 501, maintained an integrated master schedule, managed a program risk register, and reformulated the configured control process.

Previously, VA engaged MITRE to perform an independent technical assessment of the capabilities necessary to meet the requirements of the Act. MITRE provided 20 recommendations intended to help VA successfully test and deploy the Colmery Act.

Since the formation of the PIO in December 2018, Office of Information Technology (OIT) has worked diligently in partnership with VBA. OIT assigned proven leaders to partner with us in governance and leadership of the Colmery Act delivery, and co-located staff with VBA's Education Service. OIT has worked closely with us and MITRE to improve our requirements and testing process. Through these improvements, the team successfully deployed two software bills and updated five legacy systems in order to support the December 1st launch. These bills were completed on schedule and have been fully tested.

Since the last hearing before this committee in May, we have successfully implemented each recommendation made by MITRE. MITRE's recommendations in support have been instrumental in

the development and deployment of the new solution. We are on track to meet the December 1st, 2019 launch date.

I am also proud to report that we have accomplished the requirements of public law to establish a tiger team. VA Chief Information Officer (CIO) and I participate in the weekly tiger team meetings and engage with the Colmery delivery team several times each week.

Importantly, we are fulfilling the Secretary's promise to make every Post–9/11 GI Bill beneficiary 100 percent whole. The process to correct housing records will continue through 2020, as VA will begin accepting updated records from schools in circumstances where the student was studying at a different campus than originally provided to VA. Also, as promised, if a student was overpaid due to VA's challenges in implementing the law, VA will notify the impacted student individually with the amount VA intends to waive. Concurrently, VA will review the debt to ensure it was incurred solely based on implementation of Sections 107 and 501. Upon confirmation, VA will notify the student of the completed waiver. In the process, VA does not require anything additional from the impacted student veterans.

VA has numerous initiatives in place to better serve and inform schools, veterans service organizations, State approving agencies, and the stakeholders of how implementation affects the student population and process. We provided 9 monthly updates to Congress; we executed 40 direct email campaigns reaching over a million GI Bill students and other stakeholders; we participated in two conferences in July 2019, in which we had the opportunity to connect with nearly 1400 representatives from schools across the country.

VA also hosted 45 focus groups and webinars, reaching over 30,000 school certifying officials and other stakeholders. During the webinar sessions, we outlined the extension campus updates, shared a time line for future changes, and provided opportunities to ask questions. VA held nine in-person and 16 virtual sessions with School Certifying Offices (SCOs), allowing them to review and interact with our updates to the education processing IT system. The feedback from these was overwhelmingly positive.

In addition, VA conducted a Forever GI Bill school tour this past September, visiting campuses across the country to reach students who are directly affected by the Forever GI Bill. We visited six states—North Carolina, New York, Maryland, Oklahoma, Virginia, and Texas—connecting with 15 schools and hundreds of GI Bill students. I personally visited the Community College of Allegheny County and the University of South Carolina Columbia, where I hosted roundtables with students and school officials. I heard firsthand that the communication we have in place is reaching all levels successfully.

VA has made tremendous strides toward developing and deploying the IT solution to support Sections 107 and 501. My first priority as Under Secretary is to provide veterans the benefits they have earned in a manner that honors their service. On December 1st, we will start providing this same level of high customer service to our student veterans.

Mr. Chairman, thank you. This concludes my testimony. We are prepared to respond to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF PAUL R. LAWRENCE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Under Secretary Lawrence.

Mr. Schnitzer, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF JAY SCHNITZER

Mr. SCHNITZER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bergman, Ranking Member Dr. Roe, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for inviting us to testify before you again today on matters relating to the implementation of Sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act, also known as the Forever GI Bill.

The law amended the location basis for the monthly housing allowance and aligned those payments with the Department of Defense's basic housing allowance rates.

My name is Jay Schnitzer, I am Vice President and Chief Technology Officer with the MITRE Corporation. I would like to make a brief statement and submit my full remarks for the record.

MITRE is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation operating federally funded research and development centers on behalf of Federal agency sponsors, including the Department of Veterans Affairs.

As I stated in my previous testimony in May, the challenges which impacted the Forever GI Bill program 1 year ago have been seen repeatedly across the government as agencies struggle to execute highly complex, integrated mission requirements, and modernize their systems and processes to address new mission needs. At that time, I summarized the key findings from the independent technical assessment we delivered in November 2018 on the VA's implementation of Sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill.

The focus of that independent assessment, requested by VA's Office of Information Technology, was to identify issues related to the delayed delivery of a long-term solution, or LTS, and to recommend a resolution to the issues associated with completing and deploying the required system updates. The assessment explored the following six areas: one, leadership and governance; two, technical environment; three, process; four, requirements management; five, personnel authorities and responsibilities; and, six, software code evaluation.

As noted by the assessment, several key findings were related not to technical considerations, but rather to the assignment of responsibilities and questions about governance, authorities, priorities, and goals. Among other things, we identified the need to establish a single cross-organizational business leader and champion for the overall effort; new governance structures, new program governance structures, including a new Light Governance Council; a Program Integration Office; and an end-to-end systems integrator to coordinate planning, development, and integrated testing efforts.

To VA's credit, these recommendations and others were fully accepted by the leadership soon after our independent technical assessment was completed. Further, progress on implementation of

these recommendations have been transparently tracked and reported on by VA.

Our current assessment is that these changes have had a significant impact on the delivery of this program and that VA will meet the target deployment on December 1 for the planned functionality.

As the deployment date approaches, three key milestones have been successfully completed, which indicate that the deployment will occur as planned, specifically; one, the Colmery team has completed all development milestones on or ahead of schedule, including bill deadlines and end-to-end user acceptance testing; two, a series of tabletop exercises have been conducted to further verify end-to-end operational and functional readiness; and, three, two dry runs, equivalent to a full dress rehearsal, are being conducted for the Section 501 batch runs to identify any challenges or issues that can be addressed prior to deployment.

Information technology programs, especially those requiring a great deal of integration among new technology, legacy systems, and new business rules and processes are inherently high risk. VA now has in place an integrated program team that is deliberately managing that risk by identifying the critical path activities and decisions needed to succeed and contingencies to mitigate the risk.

Going forward, we encourage VA to leverage this model to reduce risk and improve results across the VA's other critical programs by; one, adopting this management model enterprise-wide by establishing for each critical program a senior accountable business leader and a Light Governance Council; two, working to strategically simplify the legacy system environment by determining opportunities to modify, modernize, or replace legacy systems as they implement new programs; and, three, continuing use of modern information technology methods, processes, and tools that underlie the independent technical assessment recommendations.

MITRE remains committed to the success of this initiative in partnership with VA leadership and the selected systems integrator. On behalf of the entire MITRE team, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to come before you again today to provide this update, and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAY SCHNITZER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Dr. Schnitzer.

With that, without objection, the chair is authorized to call a recess at any time, and I now recognize myself for 5 minutes to begin the question portion of the hearing.

Under Secretary Lawrence, thanks again for having me to Muskogee recently. I will start with the major question that I think we all have today, which is very simple: is VBA ready to meet the December 1st implementation date for Sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes.

Mr. LEVIN. I am glad to hear you say that, you say that with confidence.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Ten out of ten.

Mr. LEVIN. Ten out of ten. Oh, and your microphone, sir.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Sorry. Ten out of ten.

Mr. LEVIN. Ten out of ten, all right. Ready for the spring 2020 semester, particularly since, you know, we know in the past what happened with August 2018.

I know that you dedicated a lot of resources within VBA to meet to the December 1st implementation date and one of the issues, as you know, in August 2018 was delayed education claim processing time, which was caused by IT systems and the decision to delay school certifications.

My question for you, Mr. Under Secretary, what have VBA and Education Services changed to ensure that the processing time will not be longer than normal after December 1st?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I would like to ask Charmain to jump in here in a second, but I would point out the following last year. Last year, what happened, if—you were not here, I know—there was delay in getting the software ready. We were always 1 week away from having the software ready, which delayed the processing.

As was pointed out, we received the software in October, so it is ready. We are ready to roll per normal, so we are not going to have a bunch of held applications waiting for us to be ready. We are ready, but we have taken extensive steps to prepare, hire, and train, and I would like Charmain to jump in here and explain that.

Ms. BOGUE. Yes, good morning. Basically, we have done a few things. One, we are at the lowest point for our pending inventory right now to prepare for what is coming for the December 1st rollout. We are traditionally about 60K in terms of our pending inventory, right now we are at 40K. Those are the lowest numbers we have seen since implementation of Post–9/11.

Number 2, we are in the process of hiring nearly 500 employees, between temporary and permanent staff members. We are already at 54 percent when it comes to hiring those members and they were on board by the end of November, ready for the December 1st rollout.

Then, last, we are ready to ramp up for mandatory overtime. Right before the spring peak period comes into place in January, we will kick in for mandatory overtime and folks will be working mandatory overtime, so we are prepared for the spring semester.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

In November 2018, MITRE released a report stating that the— you know, basically, that the findings, the systems, the processes of the Education Services at VBA, providing a status update, and then we had of course a hearing in May where VA had completed, I believe, 10 of the 20 recommendations from MITRE. As you shared in your testimony, Under Secretary Lawrence, VA has now implemented all 20 of those recommendations, I think is what you said.

As a point of clarity, when you say implemented, do you mean completed or initiated?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Completed.

Mr. LEVIN. Great.

Under Secretary Lawrence and Dr. Schnitzer, I would like to hear from both of you on my next question, if I could. What is VA doing to internalize the lessons learned from 2018 and the assistance provided by MITRE, so not just in Education Services, but across the enterprise?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Perhaps I can start and I will speak to VBA in particular, and maybe we can get Mr. Gfrerer to jump in, because I know some of those affect what he does.

I think, if you recall, three things came about last time which were really important and we decided to implement it in VBA on all our significant projects that involve IT. One is a clear, accountable official responsible for that. While it is me in this one, in other opportunities we do where we have IT there is a clear, accountable business unit leader there.

Another is we hire the right contractors. We talked about a systems integrator and a software developer in this. We make sure we are hiring the right contractors.

We have, while the role was played by MITRE now and MITRE in some of those in VBA, but else-wise other firms providing program integration and oversight, giving us the expertise to watch over the whole initiative.

Those are three things we are doing in VBA based on the learning based on the learning, as Dr. Schnitzer pointed out, from this project.

Mr. LEVIN. Anything you would like to add, sir?

Mr. SCHNITZER. Thank you. The only thing I would like to add—and I agree with everything Dr. Lawrence just said—was that some of these lessons are being shared across VA, so from Dr. Lawrence's leadership to leadership in other parts of VA as examples of things to consider, and I know that is ongoing at VA as well.

Mr. LEVIN. Could you maybe give me a specific example of, you know, how VA maybe has changed their process in some area outside of Forever GI Bill implementation from, you know, the work that you have done and the lessons that have been learned?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Can I deflect that to Mr. Gfrerer? He has a broader view of the IT.

Mr. LEVIN. Sure.

Mr. GFRERER. Again, while the focus was on some of the past mistakes of the previous year, I would point to the current year and what we are doing. Dr. Lawrence referred to a few of them, but the first thing I would cite is that the Department has surely from a culture standpoint shifted to a Development Operations (DevOps) mentality. Again, at the risk of being too technical, previously they had followed a waterfall methodology, which is all requirements are listed up-front, and then it is likely for the program to be successful, as opposed to what we refer to as a minimum viable product within Agile.

The Department has done that and then, as Dr. Lawrence has said, additionally the testing, the modernization efforts, the table-top exercise. All of those things that we have done in MISSION Act and some of the others have led up to the preparation of the environment and setting the condition for the launch on December 1st, but also for those days afterwards, to make sure that we stabilize the environment, that the software is acting in an appropriate fashion, that all the other interconnected systems are contributing to the delivery of the outcomes.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you very much. I will come back with some more questions, but I want to give my colleagues an opportunity. I would like to recognize Congressman Bergman for 5 minutes.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Lawrence, assuming that the IT modifications are successfully deployed on the 1st of December, what is the plan for providing retroactive payments to student veterans who have been underpaid, some all the way back to August 2018?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. We intend to true everybody up, as promised by the Secretary.

There are two parts to this answer I would like to draw on, there is an IT component and there is a processing component, so let me start with Mr. Orifici explaining some of the IT things we need to do.

Mr. ORIFICI. All right. As we move forward with the IT components of this, we are currently working, we started the first sprint toward the development of the retroactive payment piece for Section 107, and that is currently underway. We plan to complete the IT capability for 107 retroactive payments in the winter of this year and then we will go on to testing activities then for deployment in the spring.

The other component of that is with the December 1st launch, we have a batch process that will run, which will start the true-up process for Section 501 of the Colmery Act, and that will launch at the stroke of midnight on December 1st.

Mr. BERGMAN. Good. Whoever you want to answer this next one, it is kind of a follow-on. Once these needed upgrades are ready—so I am hearing about March 2020—will there be a phased-in approach to pay students? Is it reasonable to expect that, if all the systems work out the way that you hope, that the students should expect to be made whole by next summer?

Ms. BOGUE. That is a good question. We have been working closely with the schools over the last year in terms of the retroactive piece and going back to correct records, and, yes, it will be a phased approach. Our first priority is to pay those that were underpaid for that timeframe and then our second priority is those that were overpaid, and then there is the third category of those where there is no change whatsoever.

Also the phased approach will include, we will have a set timeframe in which we will allow schools to come back in to certify, to give them ample time, at least a 6-month window, in order to come back and recertify enrollments for that time period. We believe, doing that, it will help with the workload as it relates for the schools, as well as making sure there is no impact to students for the summer and the upcoming fall semesters.

Mr. BERGMAN. Realistically, by a year from now, given your projections, we should be—the students should be made whole?

Ms. BOGUE. Realistically, yes, they should be made whole. It is contingent upon the schools, but the schools are already tracking that information. We have been working very closely with the schools to make sure that they are tracking the information of those students that are owed funds. Like I said, the first priority is those that are underpaid, that we make that the first priority to get those in the door to make sure that we cut them a check for the difference.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. The earliest would be?

Ms. BOGUE. The earliest in terms of those going out the door, I would say by early summer we will start seeing checks go out the door.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Dr. Lawrence, Section 501 of the Colmery Act requires housing allowance amounts for many students to decrease with their January 1st payments. What is the VA's plan on how to communicate these changes to the students and what will the process be for an equitable relief for those students who will see their payments drop by a considerable amount?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I am going to enlist Charmain in just a second, but I do want to comment on this, because I know one of the lessons learned from our interactions last year was a real egging on for more communication from us. We have tried real hard to up our communication game in terms of explaining to students, explaining to schools what is going to take place.

As you point out, one of the consequences of this law is the way they change where they get their credits they will receive less in their monthly housing allowance and this is of real concern to us, to include us notifying your offices of schools in your State that will be affected by this.

I really want Charmain to jump in here, because this has been a real area of concern.

Ms. BOGUE. Over the last couple of months we have had some targeted outreach at those with a lower rate zone, we called it the 24 Percent Campaign. Out of the 8,300 extension campus locations that we collected across the Nation, 24 percent of those locations fall in a lower rate zone. We targeted those particular areas and worked with schools and students to basically push out messaging to inform them of what is transpiring and what is coming down the pike.

What we realized is that the majority of schools have already started working with their students to basically inform them that if they are spending most of their time at one of those extension campus locations in a lower rate zone, to expect a lower rate, and to provide them the information in terms of what that rate will be.

Also, like as Dr. Lawrence said, just this Monday we put out information to the congressional districts in the area as well, to make sure they are aware of what is going on. Also we have connected with the Veteran Services Organizations (VSOs), so that way they are educated about what is happening.

It is not just the students and the school administrators that we are educating, but it is the community that we are educating about what is happening with the monthly housing allowance changes.

Mr. BERGMAN. Well, thank you.

Mr. LAWRENCE. I notice the time is up, could we just answer the second part of your question, sir, about equitable relief?

Mr. BERGMAN. Sure. I see my time has expired and I know we are going to have a second round here, but, you know, there is an old saying, bad news does not get better with time and the point is if—it just is what it is and the point is, the sooner our student veterans have an indication that there is going to be a change to the lesser, the better they can plan on the front end. Do not wait until you have all the numbers, get the word out that there are going to be some changes and the details will come later.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, and I echo those remarks.

I would now like to recognize Ranking Member Roe for his questions for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROE. Thank you. Just to follow on with that line of questioning, I think that is probably the most important part of what you are right now. This 24 percent, is that 175,000, 200,000 students? About how many students is that?

Ms. BOGUE. The 24 percent represents just the extension campus locations for the schools, not the student count.

Mr. ROE. Okay.

Ms. BOGUE. For the student count, we have done some preliminary work with schools and what they have indicated is that about 16 percent of the student population would be impacted by the 107 piece, and let me equate that to some numbers.

Within a term, basically 500,000 students receive a monthly housing allowance. Of those 500,000, 420,000 there is no impact to them, because they are staying at their main campus, but about 80,000, 16 percent, they could be potentially impacted by the 107 changes. What we are looking at right now, of the 80,000, about 21,000 would receive a lower rate.

Mr. ROE. Well, if we act like we are self-serving, we are, because our phones are going to ring off the wall, and then your phones are going to be ringing off the wall, because we are going to be calling you. I think that is the thing. If you are in an area—and, as the General said, students, you know, they do not have too much money and when you reduce the amount that they have, it is going to be a real impact on some students and the quicker they get that information the better.

Again, I want to commend you all for getting this rolled out. I am really excited about how it is going to work.

Dr. Schnitzer, just a couple things I wanted to ask you. What do you believe are the biggest lessons learned by VA officials in this process, and how can they apply these experiences to improve future IT modifications, whether it be the GI Bill process or other businesses? I think—John and I were talking about that, about there should be some lessons learned here.

Mr. SCHNITZER. Thank you, Dr. Roe. I think the three things are what I mentioned, but I will call them out specifically as being the most important. I think having a single business leader have ultimate authority within the organization, Number one; Number two, having the Light Governance structure is really critical; and, Number 3, incorporating the concept of a Program Integration Office. Those three components and those scaled for other issues as well, so those can be used generally.

Mr. ROE. When we roll out the next—and there will be a next sometime—I think we could certainly utilize what we have learned here to not have this year hiccup, and then give you enough time to get the old IT or either invest in new IT where we can roll it out better, would that be a fair statement?

Mr. SCHNITZER. That is correct, sir.

Mr. ROE. Dr. Lawrence, about the—you did not get a chance to finish, because you ran out of time, on the equitable relief plan.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes, certainly. We are very sensitive to that and we understand what you were describing about our student veterans, you know, live on modest incomes, the housing allowance will go down in certain situations, so we want to explain that. We share your concern that they call you and you direct them to us. We would also like your help to communicate this is not a VA failure, this is just how the law and the rules work. We want to make sure that is well understood, but we are prepared for that.

I want Charmain to talk about equitable relief.

Ms. BOGUE. Equitable relief will provide a one-time relief for students for that particular term. So if they realize that there is a drop in their rate for that term, so let us say—I will use San Fran as a great example, San Fran the rate is $4300, but in Sacramento the rate is about 2500 bucks. If they realize that they are spending most of their time in the Sacramento area, the difference there, they can come in and say, VA, hey, I planned my life around the situation of receiving $4500. We will say, hey, we will do a one-time of the difference for that particular term, and we will hand that over to the student.

We understand that process usually takes about 3 months, so we are working with tiger teams in our regional processing offices to expedite that to have 2-week turnaround times all the way up to the Secretary, because the Secretary has to approve all equitable relief requests.

Mr. ROE. I think that is the right thing to do and to give people who are caught off-guard, and there will be some no matter how much you try to do this.

Dr. Lawrence, I know that the VA has made a significant investment in time and resources to improve communication to the schools and students about the changes coming as a result of the Colmery Act, can you just very briefly again go through exactly what you have done and how can we help you get that information out?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Sure. I am happy to have Charmain jump in here, because she has done a lot of this.

We have really upped our game in terms of just, you know, emails and the like—nobody receives letter anymore—emails, those sort of—as much social media as we could imagine. Facebook, Charmain has been on Facebook at all the conferences, we have folks who are doing Twitter and the things like that. We have been to the conferences, we have spoke to the officials and, as I said, I personally have been to roundtable at universities to understand if this has happened. We have taken that counsel really seriously.

Charmain, if you want to jump in here.

Ms. BOGUE. Yes, social media is a powerful tool, I will tell you, and even though we are posting on our media channels, we have asked for your staff, as well as for our VSO partners, to amplify that messaging to also post on their social media channels. We usually post a couple times per week.

As Dr. Lawrence, we went out on a national school tour. You know, New York is a great example. We went to John Jay College, we went to Columbia University, but we invite all the local schools to come out. The entire CUNY and SUNY system came out and supported us to talk about the changes that are going on and what

is happening, and how it is applicable to their State. We continue that dialog.

We also put out a simple, five-page pamphlet for students about the monthly housing allowance changes.

We will continue doing that, you know, in the future as it relates to communications. You know, like Dr. Lawrence said, veterans are not sitting there waiting for a snail mail letter to come in the mail.

Mr. ROE. Okay. I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

I would now like to recognize Representative Banks for 5 minutes.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Lawrence, it is clear that the VA needs to modernize its legacy systems after years of neglect and I think it is fair to say from what we have heard today that you are committed to doing just that. Could you please share with the committee, though, your plan for a full replacement and what it will cost to avoid the need for a reset in the future, and what will it take in additional financial resources to get there?

Mr. LAWRENCE. You are right. Part of my experience in this journey is that our legacy systems are old—and Congressman Bergman talked about updating our legacy systems, I just do not think that is practical anymore, we need to replace them at some point. For us to have a world-class system for our veterans, you just can imagine what it would take, right? Call center technology that is unbelievably responsive, you know, processing power and the like to be able to deal with the issues we deal with, as well as the expected increases in what the—or changes in the GI Bill will bring. Our systems right now are inflexible and limit us tremendously and require more resources to be fixed.

I am in the process of reviewing with the CIO and others our initiatives to understand modernization before Colmery, as well as beginning to benchmark against some of the like projects. We would appreciate that you can appreciate we will come forward with an ask through our internal process. We want to make sure that this is done correctly, so we do not have to be in this situation again; that it has to be honest and, quite frankly, done quickly.

Mr. GFRERER. Congressman, if I could just add quickly on that? I do not want anyone to leave here with the impression today that there is a binary decision here. We are not living with just our legacy system, there is a pathway. There is an OIT and a Department of Modernization strategy, we have migrated to the applications to a cloud environment, refactored them and stabilized them. We have put in an application performance interfaces, we are doing things around managed services.

There is a host of things between legacy and fully modernized systems that are occurring, it is just of course never fast enough or responsive enough for the business.

Mr. BANKS. Do both of you feel comfortable that we have identified everything that needs to be modernized in order to execute the program?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I think we are completing that analysis, so not quite everything yet.

Mr. BANKS. How close to everything?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Pretty close.

Mr. BANKS. Okay.

Mr. GFRERER. I would be a little more specific and say it is part of our joint business plan. Every year, we have specific goals within what we intend to accomplish given the restraints of funding and other, you know, constraints. You know, again, with the Continuing Resolution (CR) environment too, that adds an additional level of kind of to the Rubik's cube for this year, which makes it a little more challenging.

Mr. BANKS. I am not sure if that makes me more or less comfortable, but with that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Representative Banks.

I would now like to recognize Representative Meuser for 5 minutes.

Mr. MEUSER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all very much.

Dr. Lawrence, what has been stated here is some very encouraging news and information. December 1st, you have 100 percent likelihood to go online. By early summer, I think I heard right—Ms. Bogue, is that it, Charmain?

Ms. BOGUE. That is correct.

Mr. MEUSER. Okay, thank you. That you will have a true-up on all past inequities that have existed, all milestones have been achieved up until now. You mentioned the tabletop executions are taking place well, you have had two stress tests or dry runs that seem to have gone well. Also, you have an integrated program team to implement and mitigate risk. All this is quite encouraging.

I do want to mention just in what I am reading here, Accenture refers to the legacy systems as ancient, so that is something I want to ask you about. As I—well, first of all, has Accenture proved to be a good partner?

Mr. LAWRENCE. They have successfully completed all the tasks we have asked them to do, so the answer is yes.

Mr. MEUSER. Great. The past failures that have existed—and, let us face, there have been some past failures, so why—what have we done to—and, obviously, following these principles and a new team, which, again, I applaud, but what do you base why these legacy systems have remained ancient and why have we been put into a position where we did have such large past failures, Dr. Lawrence?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I will start and I will ask Mr. Gfrerer, the CIO, to jump in here. I do not really have a good answer to that. I do not know whether it was failure to listen to perhaps the coaching from the committee to really step back and deal with the bigger problem ahead, versus the short-term solution to a problem and not see what is coming.

I have had the unique experience this year to really appreciate—this is the 75th anniversary of the GI Bill, right? It gets modernized regularly, it will be modernized against as more benefits are expanded. I do not know that the leaders had the chance to really appreciate what that meant and argue for a little more pay and a little more money, understanding the benefits would be longer.

I do not know, Mr. Gfrerer, would——

Mr. GFRERER. Yes. I guess the thing I would emphasize is, I certainly talk to my counterparts in commercial financial services to

compare notes and the challenges are not entirely dissimilar. They face the same obstacles in terms of percent of spent and, you know, upgrading and modernizing their legacy systems. I think that is one thing. I would not want the committee to feel like the government is so far out in left field as compared to like private sector counterparts. There are a lot of the same headwinds and struggles, I can assure you of that.

Secondarily, again, I think when you look at some of the time lines, I think the chairman and others mentioned the kind of challenging time lines. You know, I would point to MISSION Act, for example. When you get very complex pieces of legislation that have to go through the entire rulemaking period, which eventually go into user requirements, and then you look at like about 5 or 6 months being left to develop the software and the code to meet these very exotic systems, that can be incredibly challenging. MISSION Act, for example, I have been on record that we essentially did 4 months of development that if in a corporate entity you would have probably taken 18 to 24 months.

Again, I think there is some expectation of management, you know, working with the committee around what we can achieve in a certain timeframe.

Mr. MEUSER. I can appreciate that. I was Secretary of the Department of Revenue in Pennsylvania and, when a new tax code would come in, there would be a mad rush to certainly integrate and implement, and we did work with Accenture relatively successfully as well.

Mr. Schnitzer, my question to you is, would these principles and lessons learned that you described, can they be applied elsewhere throughout the VA system?

Mr. SCHNITZER. Yes, sir, and not only across the VA system, but elsewhere in the Federal Government.

I would just point out that some of the challenges that have been shared by my colleagues within VA and its various agencies apply elsewhere in the Federal Government as well.

Mr. MEUSER. Are they saving money?

Mr. SCHNITZER. Using these approaches? Saving money, perhaps, but, more importantly, providing better services.

Mr. MEUSER. Higher quality, better delivery systems. Okay, great.

What was mentioned by Ms. Bogue that there were 500,000 students that are within this GI Bill and receiving the housing nationwide?

Ms. BOGUE. Every term we have about 500,000 students who are receiving a monthly housing allowance because their course load is more than half time.

Mr. MEUSER. Okay.

Ms. BOGUE. That is that number that——

Mr. MEUSER. I am out of time, but can we get a listing, a spreadsheet of where those 500,000 are, where they go to school?

Ms. BOGUE. Sure. Yes——

Mr. MEUSER. Great.

Ms. BOGUE.—we can provide that information.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you very much.

Ms. BOGUE. You are welcome.

Mr. MEUSER. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Meuser.

Some additional questions for Under Secretary Lawrence. Again, it was really a pleasure getting to spend the day in Muskogee, Oklahoma, understanding from your team there how GI Bill benefits are processed. I particularly appreciate the opportunity to sit down with one of the call center workers and just listen in on several of the calls, and just try to understand in real time the complexity of being able to process those benefits. One of the things I noticed is that they used a number of different applications, a number of different software systems running simultaneously.

How many different applications does one of those call center workers have to use as they are processing one of those claims?

Ms. BOGUE. For the Education call center agent, it depends on the question that is coming in the door, but nine times out of ten the question coming in the door is about the status of their particular benefits, so they would probably have to use about three or four systems in order to look at that information.

One of those systems is our long-term solution, which will tell you where the information is processed, and then we have our benefits delivery network, which is another system which will tell you when the money has been released and to verify banking information across the board. Then we have our normal CRM tool, the Client Relations Management tool, which is the call center management tool.

Those are three examples of a system they could use from day to day for each call.

Mr. LEVIN. For the main data base with a lot of the personal information of the veteran, what programming language is that dependent on?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I think you saw us using Cobalt that day.

Mr. LEVIN. Cobalt?

Ms. BOGUE. Yes.

Mr. LEVIN. I think that was created in 1959 and was popularized in 1968. I was born in 1978, so, you know, it is obviously a dated technology.

Given that—and, you know, this is being kind to say that Windows OS machines usually last about a decade, it usually does not last that long, how are you able to integrate a new software that is now 50-plus years old?

Mr. GFRERER. Well, first I would say that the Federal standards around tech refresh for microcomputers is about 4 years, sir. Ten years would be—that would be below sub-optimal, so just to set the record——

Mr. LEVIN. I am just happy if my phone lasts through the year.

Mr. GFRERER. Exactly. Your question was around the legacy systems and just, you know, what we are doing. Again, I would tell you that it is not a static, it is not the same Cobalt, for example, that was started in 1959, there has been modification language. Then we start to put technology in between that, the application performance interfaces again, so we can Web-enable them and tie them to the systems, and then we are always looking for ways to combine functionality.

Again, it could be a little misleading if we led you to believe that literally the same architecture that was on the Veterans Benefit Management System that was coded in the 1960's or the 1970's exist today. There have been a lot of updates along that, much like you would if in Department of Defense (DOD) with an aircraft, right, where it may be the existing shell, but the guts, the internal avionics and all those things are much more upgraded.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, I certainly respect and appreciate all the hard work over decades of getting the system to, you know, function with interoperability of Oracle data bases, Microsoft data bases, and the like, but clearly, you know, it is very out of date.

Are there other data bases that are used throughout VBA that also rely on things like Cobalt or is that something that is specific to Education Services? I guess is that something that we need to address only in Education Services or is it part of a far larger discussion?

Mr. GFRERER. Well, I will start off with that. It is certainly enterprise-wide, right? I mean, we are here with Veterans Benefits Administration today, but, again, we have an integrated network throughout and a lot of our development efforts are similar across the administrations and the corporate portfolio.

Rob, I do not know if you want to focus beyond that.

Mr. ORIFICI. Thank you. When it comes specifically to Cobalt and to Benefits Delivery Network (BDN), Education Services, the majority of the functionality remaining on that BDN legacy system.

Ms. BOGUE. If I could just add, in the space of education, just to give you context, we actually utilize 23 systems to process education benefits across our six programs.

Mr. LEVIN. That is all helpful. You know, count me among those that absolutely believe we need to modernize this system, I was completely convinced of that. I think everybody is working really hard and doing the very best they can with the software that they have got, the resources that they have, which leads me to the next question. What resources do you need from Congress, from us, to ensure that as you overhaul this system from Cobalt to something that is modern and sustainable going forward, what is it that you will need?

Mr. GFRERER. Congressman, we are certainly in discussions with Office of Management and Budget(OMB) around what we think are the future investments necessary to modernize the system; we have found a very receptive audience with our colleagues there. We are quantifying that. Also, in our past meeting with you, I complimented and thanked again the Congress on in the Fiscal Year 2020 budget there is actually a line around infrastructure readiness. Again, addressing that technical debt that creeps into any organization, government or otherwise.

I think, directionally, we are heading in the right direction. It is always a question of managing around the resources that are available, but I think largely we are headed in the right direction.

Mr. LEVIN. Do you have any other unfunded mandates that would take precedence over overhauling your infrastructure?

Mr. GFRERER. I think that is a great question. I know with Dr. Lawrence and VBA, again, as a partnership, I think one of the challenges that occasionally gets left out is that with the central-

ized appropriation in VA when a piece of legislation is passed, I think we need to do a better job of communicating with the committee and the appropriators around making sure that sufficient resources are added. Otherwise, we do as you said, are impacted by unfunded requirements, sometimes in the current year of execution.

Mr. LEVIN. My last question. I know Congress authorized $30 million in the Forever GI Bill to fund the IT modifications that the bill mandated, but that the funds were never appropriated. Do you anticipate that this $30 million or perhaps additional funding for the IT infrastructure overhaul will be requested in the President's Fiscal Year 2021 budget?

Mr. GFRERER. Congressman, what I would say is that we certainly have an unfunded requirements process that we have worked with our Office of Enterprise Integration and our Chief Financial Officer this year, so we are addressing that with respect to any reprogramming or supplementals or future year budget requests that might come out of that. I am not prepared to address that at this time.

Mr. LEVIN. Anybody else care to comment on that? No?

All right, with that, I will turn it over to Congress Member Bergman for additional questions.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. We are 11 days from crossing the line of departure. Those of you who have served in uniform know exactly what that means, because no plan survives first contact. Okay.

I would like to just start right here, Ms. Bogue, and go down the line, what in your mind is going to be the single biggest pop-up that stuff is hitting the fan in the wrong direction on the 1st of December or shortly thereafter? Do you want to go out and make a prediction here?

Ms. BOGUE. I am not going to say hit the fan, what I am going to say is my concern is making sure that we are over-communicating, right? I want to make sure that we are communicating at all levels to make sure that students and schools and everyone is aware the changes are rolling out and to understand the impact to students.

That is what keeps me up at night to make sure that we have a robust——

Mr. BERGMAN. Let me ask you—hold on——

Ms. BOGUE.—communications plan.

Mr. BERGMAN.—hold on. Okay, and that is a nice—that is a good answer, but the point is what is your preparation—if you are not going to verbalize necessarily what could hit the fan, what is your preparation for when it does, whatever the "it" is?

Ms. BOGUE. I believe that we are very prepared and I do not foresee anything hitting the fan, but I will tell you that between our office, as well as OIT, we have a pretty aggressive strategy to have all boots on the ground and all hands on deck to make sure that we mitigate for any issues that come up on December 1st.

Mr. BERGMAN. All liberty is canceled?

Ms. BOGUE. All what?

Mr. BERGMAN. All liberty is canceled——

Ms. BOGUE. All liberty.

Mr. BERGMAN.—during the fight. Okay.

Ms. BOGUE. Correct.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Dr. Lawrence.

Mr. LAWRENCE. We have spent an awful lot of time over the last year thinking about this, and I am not so certain what the military analogy is of sort of getting to fight the war over again, you get to start again, because I think we had a lot of time last year to figure out what we did not enjoy about our previous war, so that gave us a real baseline.

What Dr. Schnitzer talked about and the CIO alluded to is we have had numerous tabletops where we plan through what is going to happen on December 1st. We have anticipated as much as we think we can and we are prepared for that, but your point is there might still be something else. That is what we are worrying about, but, as Charmain pointed out, December 1st is on a Sunday, so we are working on Thanksgiving. We have people ready to jump in to help deal with all the situations, but we know what is at stake, because the period of time last year, and it was described in the statements about veterans waiting for their checks, something we do not want to have happen.

Most of us are veterans in the VA, you know that, so we feel this very personally. I would like to think we have anticipated everything, but we are prepared for things we have not thought about.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Mr. Gfrerer.

Mr. GFRERER. Well, General, I do not get a chance often to use the military parlance, so I will talk in terms that you will probably accept in terms of shaping, sustaining, and decisive. Shaping, we have taken the network and all of the architecture, we have done a freeze moratorium on systems that could introduce additional risk, we have done the testing in terms of the systems to make sure that they will interact properly.

In terms of sustaining, as was mentioned earlier, we have a robust incident management plan. It has been rehearsed through these tabletops, as Dr. Lawrence said. We have an enterprise command operations center that is 24/7, people will be on a call within minutes if a related system if experiencing latency or some challenges.

Then I would say, decisive, the resources will be brought to bear. Even on Sunday, December 1st, if a particular system, if there is a bandwidth issue, whatever, we will bring to bear all of our power with the enterprise command operations team, with the service desk, and with our commercial providers to make sure that those challenges are addressed, like I said, literally within minutes.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Orifici?

Mr. ORIFICI. Thank you for the question.

Looking at this, I think we have looked at everything that has gone wrong in the past year and anything that has caused an incident with our systems, and we have prepared scenarios around those and how to remediate and effectively remove those issues, and we have practiced those. We have run mock calls where we have pulled people in and worked through these exercises.

With the level of planning, I am hoping for a smooth run, but we are prepared for the obstacle course, if we encounter it.

Mr. BERGMAN. Doctor.

Mr. SCHNITZER. Sir, somebody a lot smarter than me once said, predictions are hard, especially about the future. I do not think I can predict how things will go off the rails exactly, but your point is well taken. Something always happens that is unexpected and unpredicted; I think the mitigation in this case is the quality of the team. The difference now is that we have got people who have been through it before, there is plenty on the bench, and who are really well prepared at this point with really good systems in place and good support.

I think there is readiness and people willing to step up and deal with it when it comes and who know how to do so.

Mr. BERGMAN. Well, you know, thank you all for your honesty, because, Number one, things are going to happen and there are going to be mistakes that are made. Please try to make them be new mistakes, that is the key, because it will show, if we make the same mistake again, we did not learn. I am very appreciative of all your efforts to ensure that we will embrace the change on behalf of the veterans. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, General Bergman.

I would like to recognize Ms. Luria for 5 minutes.

Ms. LURIA. Well, thank you, Dr. Lawrence, Ms. Bogue, for appearing again.

After the last time you appeared before the subcommittee in May, I sent a letter specifically addressing the correction of the underpayments in Section 107 and 501. Unfortunately, I am still awaiting a response to that letter, so I thought today's hearing would be a good opportunity to follow up on some of those questions.

At that time I asked if you could estimate approximately how many students have been underpaid; do you have that data now?

Ms. BOGUE. We did talk about that a little bit earlier and what we said is, over the last year, we have basically been working with the schools to obtain information through our focus groups and our webinars and, based off of data from the schools, what we realized is about 16 percent of their student population would be impacted by the 107 changes. What that equates to in terms of numbers, for each term about 500,000 students receive a monthly housing allowance; of the 500,000, 420,000 will not be impacted, because they are still going to remain at the main campus location. The remaining 80,000, 16 percent will basically have some impact as it relates to the 107 changes. Of the 80,000, 22,000 potentially will receive a lower rate; and then 40,000, no change whatsoever; and then 19,000, they will receive actually a higher rate.

Again, I just want to add that those are preliminary numbers sort of coming in the door. Once we flip the switch on December 1st and we continue to monitor new enrollments coming in the door, those numbers will shift, and we will make sure to provide updates in the January timeframe in terms of the latest numbers after we flip the switch.

Ms. LURIA. Well, thank you. Based off the understanding that you are still collecting data to come up with the finite numbers, students who are impacted, my next question was, what is the price tag. I understand that you might not have an exact number

now, but do you have an estimate of the range of the amount as far as people who are owed more funds based off the change?

Then, if I am correct, those who were overpaid will not be financially impacted, there is a process by which they can have those fees waived if they have been previously overpaid throughout this process?

Ms. BOGUE. You are talking about two aspects. The piece I just mentioned is the point-forward piece for any new term that starts on or after December 1st. The second part of that is the retroactive piece when we will have to go back and correct records, but that piece will not happen until the spring timeframe when we go back to correct records, and we will have a better sense of the funding piece as it relates to overpayments and underpayments for that retroactive piece.

Ms. LURIA. Anyone who was overpaid will not have a financial——

Ms. BOGUE. That is correct.

Ms. LURIA.—burden for that?

Ms. BOGUE. Anyone who was overpaid, we will review their information, make sure it was solely based on the 107 issue, and we will waive that debt; that is a correct statement.

Ms. LURIA. The next thing I wanted to focus on was the IT systems for implementing this. I know that, you know, this is a change that requires different programming, different systems for communication. While talking to some of our subcommittee staff who had the opportunity to visit the regional office in Muskogee it was brought to their attention that there was not the possibility to communicate electronically with students who were impacted.

Can you comment on that? Then what types of systems you might be able to put in place to smooth that communication between affected students, for this and other issues, and then just smoothing out the process to make it more efficient?

Ms. BOGUE. I am unclear of this particular issue as it relates to Muskogee, but we are able to connect with students electronically. Actually at the local level VCE's claims examiners are able to email students, if they need to; however, if there is certain Personal Identifiable Information (PII) information, then we are not able to share that through via email channels because of the security natures of it.

Also at a national level, right here in headquarters we also communicate with students on major changes that are happening to the program. We have an email distribution of over 700,000 students in our data base and any time there is any changes to the GI Bill program we are emailing students at the national level.

Ms. LURIA. The PII specifically for an individual's claim, does that hinder the process? Because I would assume that there is information that has to go back and forth, bank account information, those types of things.

Ms. BOGUE. Correct.

Ms. LURIA. Is there no secure process by which that information can be exchanged for payment?

Ms. BOGUE. Not via email, but we have another tool called Right Now Web, which is available on our website, and an individual can use that tool to communicate via electronically.

Mr. GFRERER. Well, and I would add too, the information in eBenefits is a secure system and it can be updated and reviewed in there. We are in the process of all of those are consolidating down on VA.gov.

Again, as a recipient within veterans' benefits, I sat down with our Chief Technology Officer (CTO), Mr. Charles Worthington, and actually looked at where I can verify my eBenefits direct deposit information. All of that functionality is collapsing down on VA.gov, part of our modernization efforts.

Ms. LURIA. Well, thank you. And I appreciate the efforts toward modernization and I will go take a look at that myself, so that I can become familiar with what is available there for veterans. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

I would now like to recognize Mr. Meuser for additional questions.

Mr. MEUSER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I actually do not have any more questions. I really just want to thank you all for your great work. Thank you for your service, thank you for taking care of the over 50,000 veterans that I have in Pennsylvania's 9th congressional, and God speed.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Meuser.

If there are no further questions, we can begin to bring this hearing to a close. I want to thank our witnesses again for joining us today, and I thank you for your hard work as we approach December 1st.

It is clear to me from my visit to Muskogee, my conversations with many of you, that you are working incredibly hard toward a successful December 1st deadline, I thank you sincerely for that. It is also clear to me that we have got to make some real investments in the modernization of our technology for the GI Bill and for education benefits. You have my unwavering commitment that as long as I am in Congress I will work with you and try to convince my colleagues however we need to that the very least we can do for our veterans who have served, who have given so much to our country, is to make sure that we can process their benefits quickly using sustainable and modern technology.

All members are going to have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks, and include additional materials.

Without objection, the subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:09 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

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Prepared Statement of Paul R. Lawrence

Good Morning Chairman Levin, Madam Chair Lee, Ranking Members Bilirakis and Banks, and Members of the Subcommittees. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the status of VA's implementation of the provisions in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (Colmery Act) or, as it is more commonly referred to, the Forever GI Bill. Accompanying me today are James Gfrerer, Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology and Chief Information Officer (CIO); Charmain Bogue, Executive Director of Education Service, Veterans Benefits Administration; and Rob Orifici, Information Technology (IT) Specialist, Office of Information and Technology (OIT).

Forever GI Bill "Reset"

As you are aware, on November 28, 2018, VA announced key changes and a reset in the implementation of sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act. These sections dealt primarily with the calculation and processing of monthly housing allowance (MHA) payments under the Post–9/11 GI Bill. Section 107 requires VA to pay the monthly housing allowance (MHA) based on the campus where the student physically participates in most of his or her classes. Section 501 requires VA to align its MHA payments with the Department of Defense's Basic Allowance for Housing. These sections proved difficult to implement because of the dual challenge of updating and integrating multiple legacy systems with new and more complicated business rules that came about because of the statutory requirements, while also maintaining a high level of payment accuracy. Secretary Wilkie's reset of VA's implementation efforts was to give the Department the time, contracting support, and resources necessary to develop the capability to process enrollments, in accordance with the law, by December 2019.

The Secretary took three actions to ensure the successful implementation of these two provisions of the Forever GI Bill. First, on November 26, 2018, he appointed me as the single person responsible and accountable for overseeing implementation of the Colmery Act. With the support of our CIO, we developed an organizational structure to plan and execute the tasks associated with the implementation of Colmery Act provisions.

Next, he directed VA's Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction to provide acquisition support in the areas of contracting, program integration, systems implementation, and software development. On February 15, 2019, VA awarded a contract to Accenture Federal Services, a world-class integrator, to provide systems integration support to coordinate planning, development, and integrated testing of all systems associated with Colmery Act implementation.

Last, he directed OIT, and any other offices required to support this effort, to ensure that adequate staffing, funding, and any other necessary resources are provided. On November 28, 2018, VBA established a Program Integration Office (PIO) as a formal entity which reports directly to me as the single accountable official for the Colmery Act's implementation. Assigned and/or aligned Government leaders, staff, Federally Funded Research and Development Center support, and contract support make up this newly established office. The PIO also completed the refinement and finalization of a comprehensive set of business requirements for sections 107 and 501; maintained an integrated master schedule; managed a program risk register; and reformulated the configuration control process. As the accountable official since January 2019, I have met with PIO personnel and the CIO weekly to ensure our progress continued, except one time when I was meeting Chairman Levin of the HVAC Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity in Muskogee for a regional office site visit.

VA has made significant progress in the development and deployment of the new solution, and we are on track to meet the December 1, 2019, target date. Upon implementation of the fully developed IT solution, VA will begin paying MHA payments in accordance with the law and start retroactively correcting records affected

by the implementation delay. The process to correct housing records will continue through 2020 as VA will begin accepting updated records from schools in circumstances where the student was enrolled at a campus different from what was originally provided to VA. This will cover the time period of August 1, 2018 through November 30, 2019. While VA now has these locations within its systems for processing, we require the school to tell us where the student was attending classes. The timing of this retroactive work balances feedback received from schools regarding the workload this would create with VA timeliness standards for processing housing records. This will fulfill Secretary Wilkie's pledge that "VA is dedicated to ensuring that those who are underpaid are made 100 percent whole, retroactively, if necessary."

As promised, if a student was overpaid due to VA's challenges in implementing the law, VA will notify the impacted student individually with the amount VA intends to waive. Concurrently, VA will review the debt to ensure it was incurred solely based on implementation of section 107 or 501. Upon confirmation, VA will notify the student of the completed waiver. In this process, VA does not require anything additional from the impacted student.

To address the incoming workload resulting from implementation of the law, VA has begun hiring temporary full-time employees. In Fiscal Year 2020, 331 temporary full-time employees will be onboard to ensure VA maintains our processing timeliness goals of 28 days for original applications and 14 days for supplemental enrollment documents. As of November 13, 2019, VA is processing original applications in 20.7 days and supplemental enrollment documents in 12.1 days.

Individual Technical Assessment

In November 2018, VA chartered MITRE to perform an Independent Technical Assessment (ITA) of the capabilities necessary to meet the requirements of the Colmery Act. The ITA focused on identifying issues related to the delayed delivery of updates to the Chapter 33 application residing on the Long-Term Solution (LTS) environment and recommending resolution to the issues associated with completing and deploying the required system updates. MITRE provided 20 recommendations intended to help OIT ensure adjustments to LTS are successfully tested and deployed in the near future.

Since the last hearing before this Committee on May 9, 2019, PIO has successfully implemented each MITRE recommendation as of September 30, 2019. PIO defined and executed an operating plan and improved the development of business requirements. These improvements provide better visibility into the overall effort required across VA and OIT to meet the requirements of the Colmery Act and to provide for a higher probability of successful deployment of capabilities for future implementation of Colmery Act sections. PIO also established common development and test environments and processes which allow for faster cross-organizational time to release.

Communication with Stakeholders

VA has numerous initiatives in place to better serve and inform schools, Veterans Service Organizations (VSO), State Approving Agencies, and other stakeholders of how the implementation affects their student population and process. We executed over 40 direct email campaigns reaching over a million GI Bill students and other stakeholders. We designed communications toolkits which were provided to students, schools, regional offices, VSOs, and Congress. VA also hosted over 45 focus groups and webinars reaching over 30,000 School Certifying Officials (SCOs) and other stakeholders. During the webinar sessions, VA outlined the extension campus updates; shared a timeline for future changes; and provided opportunities to ask questions.

VA held 9 in-person and 16 virtual sessions with SCOs allowing them to view and interact with updates to our education claims processing IT system, VA-ONCE. The feedback from the SCOs was overwhelmingly positive.

VA participated in two conferences in July 2019 in which VA had an opportunity to connect with nearly 1,400 representatives from schools across the country. During the conferences, VA provided information on sections 107 and 501 and the impact to GI Bill beneficiaries. Question and answer sessions were held with the Executive Director of VA's Education Service. Additionally, we provided copies of VA's Forever GI Bill communication toolkits. The toolkits provide language to use when corresponding with students, including high-level messaging, email and social media verbiage, and web and print-ready materials regarding sections 107 and 501.

In addition, VA commenced a Forever GI Bill School Tour this past September, visiting campuses across the country to reach those who are directly affected by the Forever GI Bill. We visited six states (North Carolina, New York, Maryland, Oklahoma, Virginia, and Texas) connecting with 15 schools, and hundreds of GI Bill stu-

dents and school officials. Veterans Resource Fairs were held during our visits, which provided students the opportunity to meet with Veterans Claims Examiners to receive answers on situation-specific questions and check on active claims in the VA education system. Campus leaders welcomed VA and provided tours of their Veterans Resource Centers. I personally visited the Community College of Allegheny County and University of South Carolina-Columbia where I hosted roundtables with students and school officials. I heard firsthand that the communications we have in place are reaching all levels successfully. But most importantly, we had meaningful conversations with students utilizing the GI Bill on how they interact and engage with VA and their benefits. VA has future school tours scheduled across the country through 2020.

Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

On April 1, 2019, VA launched the VET TEC Pilot Program. Since its inception, VA has found over 4,000 Veterans eligible for the program. These Veterans may, at any time, choose a program they wish to enroll in. Currently, there are over 100 students enrolled in a VET TEC program. VA began accepting applications for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship program on August 1, 2019, and since that time has received over 8,000 applications with over 750 scholarships awarded.

Promises Fulfilled

VA has made tremendous strides toward developing and deploying the IT solution to support sections 107 and 501. I am proud to report we have accomplished the President's requirement in the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act of 2018 (Public Law 115–422) to establish a Tiger Team to implement sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act and are fulfilling the Secretary's promise to make every Post–9/11 GI Bill beneficiary 100 percent whole. Our goal, as always, is to provide a seamless experience for GI Bill students by leveraging innovation for timely and accurate claims processing and protecting the integrity of the GI Bill program.

Mr. Chairman and Madam Chair, this concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittees may have.

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Prepared Statement of Jay Schnitzer

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you again today on matters relating to the implementation of Sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act, also known as the Forever GI Bill (FGIB). These provisions impact all Post–9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries in receipt of a Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA), as they changed the way the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must pay MHA. The law amended the location basis for the MHA and aligned MHA payments with the Department of Defense's basic housing allowance (BAH) rates. As you know, implementation of this legislation is a critically important issue for untold numbers of Veterans. MITRE very much appreciates the opportunity to share our insight from our work on this critical program.

MITRE is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation. We are chartered to operate in the public interest, which includes operating federally funded research and development centers, or FFRDCs, on behalf of Federal agency sponsors. We currently operate seven FFRDCs sponsored by a variety of Federal sponsors including the Department of Veterans Affairs, which is a co-sponsor of MITRE's Center for Enterprise Modernization (CEM). Our Center for Enterprise Modernization was established in 1998 by the Department of Treasury's Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and we have been proud to support many modernization efforts under that FFRDC, including aspects of the VA's modernization efforts. The other primary sponsors for which MITRE operates FFRDCs include the Department of Defense; the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services at the Department of Health and Human Services; the National Institute of Standards and Technology; the Federal Aviation Administration; the Department of Homeland Security; and the U.S. Courts — the latter being the only non-Executive Branch entity that has created an FFRDC to date.

Background

As stated in our previous testimony provided in May 2019, the challenges which impacted the FGIB program 1 year ago are seen repeatedly across the government as agencies struggle to execute highly complex, integrated mission requirements and modernize their systems and processes to address new mission needs. At that time,

I summarized the key findings from the Independent Technical Assessment (ITA) we delivered in November 2018 on the VA's implementation of Sections 107 and 501 of the FGIB.

The focus of that independent assessment, requested by VA's Office of Information Technology (OIT), was to identify issues related to the delayed delivery of the Long-Term Solution, or LTS, and to recommend a resolution to the issues associated with completing and deploying the required system updates. The assessment explored the following six assessment areas:

1. Leadership and Governance;
2. Technical Environment;
3. Process;
4. Requirements Management;
5. Personnel Authorities and Responsibilities; and
6. Software Code Evaluation.

The ITA team's review of the observations, findings, and recommendations — informed by industry benchmarks and best practices, insight from subject matter experts, and experience with large-scale software intensive systems — enabled it to identify four systemic findings that were preventing rapid integrated capability delivery under the strategy then in place:

1. Technical and business leaders were not fully empowered to address issues related to the Colmery Act due to a lack of clear authority, priorities, and goals;

2. Work priorities, resources, and authorities for execution were not aligned for the delivery of Colmery Act functionality;

3. Operations and processes within and across VBA and OIT were not focused on the Colmery Act functionality, impeding the information flow to leaders; and

4. Data and tools were not integrated across LTS and the legacy systems, impeding delivery of the Colmery Act functionality.

As noted by the assessment, several key findings related not to technical considerations, but rather to the assignment of responsibilities and questions of alignment centered around governance, authorities, priorities, and goals. Among other things, we identified the need to establish:

- A single cross-organizational business leader and champion for the overall effort;
- New program governance structures, including a new Light Governance Council — one streamlined and built for speed — to serve as the decision authority for definition and enforcement of norms for executing program activities, as well as the approval or disapproval of lifecycle processes, control gates, activities, funding, acquisitions, resources and systems required to achieve successful implementation;
- A Program Integration Office, accountable for definition, coordination, and management of functional, technical, and programmatic activities across the VA; and
- An end-to-end systems integrator, to coordinate planning, development, and integrated testing of all systems associated with implementation of FGIB, including new software development, interfaces with legacy systems, systems architecture, and testing.

In response, the Under Secretary for Benefits was appointed to oversee overall implementation of the effort, aided by the Chief Information Officer and supported by a Light Governance Council, referred to as Program Governance, led by two Co-Chairs, representing the interests of the business and the technical communities respectively and supported by a Program Integration Office (PIO), led by key leaders from the Education Service, Office of Business Process Integration and OIT, who are responsible for definition, coordination, and management of functional, technical, and programmatic activities.

To VA's credit, these recommendations and others were fully accepted by the leadership soon after our ITA was completed, briefed to senior leaders in December and presented to this committee. Further, progress on implementation of those recommendations has been transparently tracked and reported on by VA. This degree of leadership commitment and focus has been instrumental in the progress we've seen to date.

Current Assessment

Our current assessment is that these changes have had a significant impact on the delivery of this program. As a result, we anticipate that VA will meet the target deployment of December 1 for the planned functionality. This leadership team has been both highly integrated and extremely proactive. Over the course of this past year, they have quickly made informed, data-driven decisions and worked across all organizations involved in or affected by this program and the changes being made to implement it. As the December 1 deployment date approaches, three key milestones have been successfully completed which indicate that the deployment will occur as planned. Specifically:

1. The Colmery team has met or come in ahead of schedule on all development milestones. Since my previous testimony, the team completed Build 1 (7/5/19) and Build 2 (10/18/19), which included end-to-end user acceptance testing with all interdependent systems. These builds were completed on schedule, and the team reviewed testing material through 10/23/19, at which time the Minimally Viable Product was formally accepted by VA.

2. In preparation for the deployment, a series of tabletops have been conducted to further verify end-to-end operational and functional readiness. Representatives from about twenty (20) dependent systems and/or offices have worked together to flesh out standard operating procedures (SOPs) and develop contingency plans for hypothetical scenarios.

3. In addition, two dry runs are being conducted for the Section 501 retro batch runs to identify any challenges or issues that can be addressed prior to deployment. This is equivalent to a "full dress rehearsal" before the December 1 deployment.

Future Actions

As stated in previous testimony, Information technology programs, especially those requiring a great deal of integration between new technology, legacy systems, and new business rules and processes, are inherently high risk. Our experience, along with many industry case studies, shows that clear leadership and accountability, along with simplified governance that facilitates decisions making while avoiding bureaucracy, mitigates that risk and leads to more successful results. The VA now has in place an integrated program team that is deliberately managing that risk by identifying the critical path activities and decisions needed to succeed, and contingencies to mitigate the risk.

Going forward, we encourage VA to take this experience and leverage this model to reduce risk and improve results across the VA's other critical programs by:

1. Adopting this management model as an enterprise-wide model by establishing for each critical program a senior accountable business leader, assisted by the CIO, and a light governance council supported by a PIO;

2. Working to strategically simplify the legacy system environment by determining opportunities to modify, modernize or replace legacy systems as they implement new programs; and

3. Continuing use of modern IT methods, processes and tools that underlie the ITA recommendations and have contributed overall to the success of this effort, such as DevOps and automated testing.

MITRE remains committed to the success of this initiative in partnership with VA leadership and the selected systems integrator. MITRE is currently working with VA to instantiate the PIO activity as an organic capability moving forward. We appreciate the opportunity to provide independent, conflict-free strategic advice to the Program Integration Office through this phase. As the operator of the VA's FFRDC, we stand ready to assist the VA to fully establish the capability to perform this integration and modernization function as a core competency and a standard, integral part of their management approach.

In closing, let me just note that of MITRE's roughly 8,500 personnel, some 30 percent are Veterans. There are few duties that our employees consider more noble and consequential than honoring, through our support for the VA, the service and sacrifice of our Nation's men and women in uniform. On behalf of the entire MITRE team, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to come before you again today to provide this update, and I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of The American Legion

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander, James W. "Bill" Oxford, and the nearly 2 million members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to share the views of The American Legion on the Department of Veterans Affairs continued implementation of the *Harry W. Colmery GI Bill* (hereafter referred to as the "*Forever GI Bill*").

In the summer of 2017, the Administration and Congress enacted the *Harry W. Colmery Educational Improvement Act*, named after The American Legion's Past National Commander and the author of the original GI Bill (The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944). The *Forever GI Bill* eliminated the arbitrary 15-year limit, increased benefits for Purple Heart recipients, expanded Yellow Ribbon eligibility, restored benefits to victims of school closures, and calculated housing allowances based on the beneficiaries' zip code of class attendance. Section 107 of the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act* addresses the perceived inequities in the Post 9/11 GI Bill by mandating that the housing allowance be calculated based upon the location of the campus where the majority of a student's classes were taken.

Background

When the *Forever GI Bill* was signed into law on August 15th, 2017, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had under 12 months to develop and launch 16 provisions of the bill, which included restoration of lost benefits due to closed schools including calculation of the monthly housing stipend based on location of campuses, and aligning housing stipends to Department of Defense levels. By May 2018, serious doubts were beginning to emerge that VA was at risk of missing these deadlines.[1] By October 2018, pending GI Bill claims rose to 228,640, a 68 percent increase from the previous year. Furthermore, over 1,400 claims were reported as delayed past 60 days. Timeliness of delivery rose to 35.4 days for original claims and 23.8 for supplemental claims. By November 2018, confidence in the VA's ability to implement the GI Bill was at an all-time low.

In the following year, The American Legion convened a "*Veterans Benefits Administration GI Bill Symposium*" on February 28th, 2019 during our 59th Washington Conference. The purpose of this symposium was to establish a dialog between the VA and the school certifying officials (SCOs) who were the first point of contact student veterans turned to when their housing checks did not arrive on time. The SCOs made it clear to VA staff that payment delays have direct consequences on student veterans' faith in the VA system; *timely payments must be prioritized above any Forever GI Bill implementation requirements*.

Implementation challenges spilled into second-order effects on GI Bill processing times, resulting in extended housing payment delays for student veterans in the Fall Semester of 2019. As The American Legion focused on helping veterans who were falling into hardship due to missed GI Bill payments, news of the payment backlog sparked bipartisan outrage, and the VA reassigned its Director Education Service.[2]

The American Legion shares this view, and commends VA for its improvements to benefits delivery:

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[1] https://www.stripes.com/house-lawmakers-question-va-s-ability-to-meet-deadline-for-gi-bill-changes–1.580317

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2018/11/15/veterans-arent-getting-their-gi-bill-payments-because-vas-year-old-computer-system-broke/

GI Bill Delivery	October 8 2018	October 16 2019
Pending Claims	228,640	74,343
Oldest Pending Claims	1,391	233
Timeliness of Delivery	35.4 Original / 23.8 Supplemental	23.3 Original / 13.1 Supplemental
Source: VA		

The American Legion is pleased to share that VA appears to have executed a remarkable turnaround to bring *Forever GI Bill* implementation back on track and restore confidence in VA's ability to effectively administer education benefits.

By October 16th, 2019, pending GI Bill claims fell to 74,343, the lowest it has been since passage of the *Post–9/11 GI Bill* in 2008. Claims over 60 days dropped to 233, and timeliness of delivery accelerated to 23.3 days for original claims and 13.1 days for supplemental claims. The American Legion also commends VA for achieving its fastest GI Bill processing numbers to date, and encourages VA's education service to continue to prioritize timely benefits processing.

Technical Challenges

The calculation and processing of *Post–9/11 GI Bill* benefits is a complex process requiring inputs and oversight from veterans, SCOs, and VA Education Liaison Representatives. The intricacy of this process requires routine stakeholder engagement and feedback loops that were not part of the *Forever GI Bill's* initial 2018 implementation plan. The lack of organizational integration throughout the software development lifecycle resulted in both communication and technical gaps across the implementation phases. The Post–9/11 GI Bill provides a monthly housing allowance for a student veteran based upon the facility code assigned to the main campus of the approved educational facility.

Initially, in attempt to implement Section 107 as broadly as possible, VA defined a training site as a "campus" included: 1) the individual campus of a school where the student is taking classes (i.e., the school's science center, humanities building, or athletic center), 2) the physical location where a student is learning in a study abroad program, or 3) an internship, externship, practicum or student teaching site. Recognizing earlier this year that this definition was too broad, VA then changed the definition of a "campus" for housing payment purposes to be only those locations where the physical site of the training is either owned or leased by the school and the school has ownership or control over the student's classroom instruction. Additionally, VA has assigned sub-facility codes to the campuses in the zip codes that meet this definition as some students found themselves attending branch campuses with a higher cost of living than the main campus. In response to this challenge VA reset its implementation efforts last year for Section 107 of the law to allow the Department time to reestablish contracting support and resources to develop the capability to process and deploy for spring enrollments for 2020.

The American Legion eagerly looks forward to the successful implementation of Sections 107 of the *Forever GI Bill* and applauds VA efforts to make necessary adjustments to its information technology platform to expedite facilitatation. However, we strongly suggest that VA remain cognizant of challenges produced for veterans and schools by future changes and request they take said challenges into consideration going forward.

Stakeholder Communication

Presently, VA Education Service has achieved transparent stakeholder engagement that incorporates schools, veterans organizations, student beneficiaries, and third-party contractors to a degree seldom seen in its history. The American Legion believes this is the result of solid leadership and hard-learned organizational lessons from the VA's "*Colmery Act (PL 115–48) Section 107 — Focus Group*" on March 7th, 2018. The purpose of this focus group was to brief schools and veterans organizations on VA's newly established definition of "campus" to meet Forever GI Bill guidelines to calculate housing allowances based on campus zip codes (the aforementioned Section 107). VA did not seek sufficient input on higher education's definition of "campus," and as a result included internship and externship sites in its campus definition.

Following the results of the initial *Forever GI Bill* implementation, VA commissioned both a public Office of Inspector General report and an internal MITRE Corporation Independent Technical Assessment to determine the causes of the botched

rollout; both determined unclear communication to VA stakeholders as a contributing factor to implementation failures along with an absence of leadership:

Throughout planning and early implementation efforts, VA lacked a single accountable official to oversee the project, which resulted in unclear communications to VA stakeholders of implementation progress and inadequately defined expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the various VA business lines and contractors involved.[3]

In November 2018, the VA Secretary named the Under Secretary for Benefits as the senior official responsible for implementing the *Forever GI Bill*. In subsequent months, new leadership was established at VA Education Service along with a new contractor, Accenture, to oversee *Forever GI Bill* implementation. The product of these changes was a strikingly more engaged outreach strategy in 2019. This effort allowed for better communication with veteran support organizations and congressional stakeholders, and VA Education Service began hosting monthly stakeholder meetings to brief staffers on implementation progress.

This also enhanced communication with schools. Accenture launched a roundtable and webcast to collect comments and insights on how to best implement, communicate, and provide training on GI Bill implementation, which is a markedly different approach from 2018 that incorporates stakeholder feedback instead of dictating stakeholder requirements. Finally, VA increased and improved its outreach directly to student veterans. The Under Secretary for Benefits hosted multiple Facebook Live feedback sessions, and VA Education services launched a VA School Tour that has visited nine sites across the country to collect feedback from beneficiaries' and faculty experiences.

Conclusion

Seventy-five years ago, The American Legion pioneered the proposition that America must invest in the transition back home for those who defend her. As daring as the passage of this "GI Bill of Rights" was, its ultimate success could not have been realized without effective implementation led by the Veterans Administration's post-war chief: General (Ret.) Omar Bradley.

The implementation challenges of the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Benefits Act of 2017* demand VA to rise to this earlier caliber of leadership, and The American Legion stands ready to support its successful execution.

For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Mr. Ernest Robinson at The American Legion's Legislative Division at (202)–263–2990 or erobinson@legion.org.

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Prepared Statement of The Student Veterans of America

Chairman Levin, Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Member Bilirakis, Ranking Member Banks, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on the ongoing Forever GI Bill implementation efforts.

With more than 1,500 chapters representing nearly one million student veterans, service members, families, and survivors using Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits in schools across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those directly impacted by the in the implementation of sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. Student Veterans of America places the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid by conducting rigorous research on student veterans, providing a myriad of programs supporting their success, and advocating for improvements to veterans benefits and higher education policy. As the future leaders of this country, and some of the most successful students in higher education, it is imperative that we foster the success of veterans in school to prepare them for productive and impactful lives.[1]

Edward Everett, our Nation's 20th Secretary of State, and the former President of Harvard University was famously quoted as stating, "Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army." While we have the finest military the world has ever known, the sentiment remains; the importance of education to our coun-

[3] https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG–19–06452–97.pdf
[1] Shane, Leo. Military Times. Report: Young vets are more successful than their civilian peers. July 29, 2017. https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2017/07/29/report-young-vets-are-more-successful-than-their-civilian-peers/

try's national security continues to be critical. Ensuring the success of student veterans on campus must first start with ensuring they have reliable and timely access to their earned education benefits.

Background

The *Harry W. Colmery Educational Assistance Act*, more commonly known as the Forever GI Bill, was signed into law in August 2017 and created the largest expansion of education benefits for veterans in nearly a decade.[2] The bill includes dozens of provisions that increase access to higher education, reduce inequities within the benefit, and turn the GI Bill into a benefit of service far beyond the current generation. Nearly all the law's provisions are already in effect and benefiting student veterans across the country.

While SVA was proud to work alongside many members of this subcommittee and their staffs to pass the Forever GI Bill, we remain watchful of the law's ongoing implementation of the provisions aimed at addressing inequities in the Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) students receive. The Spring 2020 semester will be a crucial indicator of this process, as the new MHA provisions should have taken effect by this date.

In several oversight hearings this Committee held over the past year, senior VA officials assured the Nation's student veterans and this Congress that late payments and failures associated with a lack of accountability at VA have been sufficiently addressed.[3] At the time, student veterans expressed the dire straits of the situation, noting, "I'm about to lose everything that I own and become homeless. I don't want to be that veteran on the street begging for change because I haven't received what I was promised."[4]

In response to a March 2018 focus group outlining VA's plan to use zip codes to calculate campus-based MHA rates as required by section 107 of the law, SVA raised concerns in an April letter with the planned strategy and the potential roadblocks we saw with VA's plans. Our concerns centered around the use of zip codes to define campus location instead of existing Department of Education coding mechanisms and the unintended consequences that could create.[5]

As late as a July 2018 hearing before this Committee, there was a reassurance by VA that the IT updates needed to implement the MHA changes would be ready soon. However, by early August it became clear VA would not only miss the Forever GI Bill implementation deadlines because of continued IT challenges, but routine updates to MHA calculations — such as cost-of-living adjustments — would also not be calculated for the Fall semester leading to inaccurate or significantly delayed payments. Only after SVA, alongside other veteran serving organizations (VSO), made clear the urgency of proceeding with certification and communicating the direction to proceed did VA make those communications, as detailed below.

Beginning in September last year, SVA began to hear from student veterans that MHA payments were missing or inaccurate. On September 14, 2018, SVA along with 14 other VSOs wrote VA to express our disappointment and concern over the continued IT failures and the lack of transparent communication on the issue to students and stakeholders.[6] By mid-October, VA sent letters and emails to all GI Bill users, issued several statements online, and took internal steps to address the backlog.[7]

Then, in November 2018, VA announced a "reset" of the implementation process, establishing a new deadline of December 1, 2019, and returning students to the uncapped Department of Defense (DoD) housing rates until the Spring 2020 semester. These rates were based on the school's administrative campus location, not the location where each student takes their classes as VA was planning to do. Essentially, housing allowances were processed as they were before the Forever GI Bill became law while VA worked to get their systems and processes working properly.

[2] Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017 § 108. Pub. L 115–48. (2017). https://www.Congress.gov/bill/115thcongress/house-bill/3218.

[3] Wentling, Nikki, "Federal watchdog: VA leadership failures are to blame for GI Bill payment issues," March 21, 2019, https://www.stripes.com/Federal-watchdog-va-leadership-failures-are-to-blame-for-gi-bill-payment-issues–1.573672

[4] McCausland, Phil, NBC News, Veterans haven't received GI Bill benefits for months due to ongoing IT issues at VA, Nov. 11, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/veterans-haven-t-receive-gi-bill-benefits-months-due-ongoing-n934696

[5] Student Veterans of America. SVA Response to VA's Campus Definition. https://studentveterans.org/images/pdf/will/SVA-Response-to-VAsCampus-Definition.pdf

[6] Student Veterans of America. VSO Response to Forever GI Bill IT Delays. https://studentveterans.org/images/pdf/will/Forever-GI-BillDelays__VSO-Letter-.pdf

[7] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration. Education and Training. https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/

Now, with the "reset" deadline two weeks away, VA will complete the final testing phases for the implementation of the remaining sections of the Forever GI Bill. These changes redefine their interpretation of "campus" location to reduce administrative burdens on students, schools, and VA, and retroactively correct any underpayments students saw during from the Fall 2018 semester onward based on the uncapped DoD rates. VA will also not collect debts from any students overpaid due to the change in rate calculations.

VA Outreach and Communication

SVA commends VA and its staff for improving public outreach efforts to spread awareness, and we commend the obvious dedication to successfully implementing the Forever GI Bill. In our November 2018 testimony before this Committee, our primary recommendation was to provide more consistent and transparent communication to students, school staff, and stakeholders working alongside students during dynamic situations such as these delays. All stakeholders in this process have a vested interest in transparent and timely communication. It is important that VA acknowledge potential issues and proactively communicate those issues and ways to address them in a timely manner so that students, schools, and other stakeholders can make informed decisions about their education and finances.

Anecdotally, SVA is hearing generally positive feedback from student veterans and School Certifying Officials (SCOs) regarding VA's communications for upcoming changes to the MHA. While it may be too early to tell, we are hopeful that these comments are representative of the experience stakeholders will have once the Spring 2020 semester starts. It is critical that the lines of communication between VA and stakeholders remain open following the December 1 deadline to communicate concerns and, if new problems arise, ensure they are addressed immediately.

One such concern that was recently reported to SVA concerns the SCO hotline at VA. SCOs call into this dedicated hotline for assistance only to be met with frequent claims by VA support staff of missing or unavailable information, lack of access to relevant data, or lack of knowledge or adequate training to answer the SCOs' questions. These hotline employees apparently do not receive training on the VA ONCE system — one of the primary methods for SCOs submit student GI Bill certification documents to VA. VA's employee training in this area should be reviewed and enhanced to better serve SCOs and, in turn, our student veterans.

Last, in addition to the generally positive feedback from SCOs, SVA has received limited reports from SCOs about workload and communication concerns, particularly related to new extension campus requirements. The ability of SCOs to perform their job duties is critical to SVAs mission of helping student veterans and military-connected students succeed in higher education. We encourage the Committee to work with organizations like the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA) to better understand these concerns and to address them in an efficient and effective manner.

SVA remains committed to working closely with our partners, Congress, and VA to monitor and improve the implementation process. To that end, SVA believes VA should answer several outstanding questions to clarify any remaining ambiguity that exists for stakeholders.

Outstanding Questions

1. What does VA need to commit to a comprehensive modernization of its education benefit IT infrastructure?

The issues with the VA's antiquated IT systems and their conflicts with modern coding remain. These problems will continue to negatively impact VA's administration of educational benefits. SVA encourages VA to pledge to modernize its outdated education benefit IT systems.

2. Will the payments be retroactive to August 1, 2018 and be calculated through the date of the new IT system implementation, which is currently set for December 1, 2019?

While the Secretary's announcement last November made clear the VA would calculate underpayments owed to students based on Forever GI Bill requirements, it was less clear on the specific dates those underpayments would honor. The statement said: "To clear up any confusion, I want to make clear that each and every post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiary will be made 100 percent whole — retroactively if need be — for their housing benefits for this academic year based on Forever GI Bill rates, not on post-9/11 GI Bill rates."

VA should articulate to all stakeholders how payments were or will be calculated back to August 1, 2018 for all terms that were underpaid, as the law requires. Fur-

ther, VA should clarify the status of any ongoing correction payments that stem from the pause on routine adjustments, like cost-of-living, which has been in place while VA makes improvements to its systems and processes in advance of the December 1, 2018 deadline. If VA resumes routine adjustments for Spring 2020, SVA expects VA will have to make retroactive payments that account for the lack of such adjustments for all academic terms beginning Spring 2019 through Fall 2019.

3. How will the VA prevent another backlog when they process both new claims and prior underpayments?

We also acknowledge VA has made progress with recently implemented policies to adjudicate its oldest claims and increased the total number of claims processing staff to address the backlog, but we remain concerned about the potential number of claims that will need to be processed for underpayments. This number could be staggering once you add up the several semesters that have come and gone before the new IT system is live.

Processing those underpayments will be in addition to the normal claims processing required for current and new GI Bill students. A realistic plan to process both the underpayments and the current claims with sufficient resources, both in manpower and infrastructure, to prevent any sort of backlog or delay in payments is critical. This must also include any burden on SCOs for processing prior underpayments if there is a requirement for their intervention.

There are many, both in Congress and among the veteran community, ready and willing to advocate for what VA needs to best serve student veterans, but we must first know what those needs are — both from an authorization and appropriations standpoint — for VA to meet this mission. VA will have to move quickly on these asks if they hope to have resources committed in time to meet its upcoming needs.

4. How will VA communicate updates and progress?

One of the biggest frustrations during the GI Bill payment delays experienced this past year was the lack of clear and timely communication from VA on what was happening, what they were doing, and what students and schools should do if they needed help or more information. SVA has heard reports of significant improvement in this area, but the need to always strive to improve communication cannot be stressed enough as the last provisions roll out to student veterans everywhere.

These delays had significant financial impact on student veterans, varying in severity, with no ability of student veterans to predict when their claims would be processed, and payment received. This impacted some students' plans for continuing in higher education, their housing, their ability to pay bills, incurring late payment fees with their colleges for tuition, books, or fees, and even negatively impacting their credit reports. Regardless of the extent of this problem, or its severity, there is no question there was impact that was not addressed well, and it must not reoccur.

Consistent, clear, and timely communication from VA will be the best way to ensure it has what it needs following the December 1, 2019 deadline and to keep students, schools, and stakeholders supportive. Additionally, continuing to examine how to insure more accurate contact information is a longstanding goal VA should continue to work toward that will ultimately aid in all VA's communication efforts.

The success of veterans in higher education is no mistake or coincidence. Research consistently demonstrates this unique population of non-traditional students is far outpacing their peers in many measures of academic performance.[8]

Further, this success in higher education begets success in careers, in communities, and promotes family financial stability, holistic well-being, and provides the all-volunteer force with powerful tools for recruitment and retention. At our 10th annual national conference in 2018, the President and CEO of SVA, Jared Lyon, shared the story behind the quote on our anniversary challenge coin, "Some attribute the following text to Thucydides and others note that it's a paraphrase of a book written by Sir William Francis Butler from the late 1800's. The reality, either way, rings as true today as it ever has, and the phrase goes like this, 'The nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by coward and its fighting done by fools.'"[9]

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[8] Cate, C.A., Lyon, J.S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B.Y. (2017). National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A Report on the Academic Success of Student Veterans Using the Post–9/11 GI Bill. Student Veterans of America, Washington, DC, http://nvest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NVEST-Report__FINAL.pdf.

[9] Jared Lyon, Defining Our Future: Today's Scholars, Tomorrow's Leaders, Jan. 5, 2018, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/defining-our-futuretodays-scholars-tomorrows-leaders-jared-lyon

Supporting that success is paramount, and it starts with providing necessary resources and abilities at VA to successfully manage education benefits. We commend VA's commitment to ensuring these remaining provisions of the Forever GI Bill are finally implemented successfully and hope to see continued efforts to ensure seamless transition into higher education continue while also advocating for improvements to help meet that same goal.

We thank the Chairman, Chairwoman, Ranking Members, and the Committee members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this Committee and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

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Prepared Statement of The Veterans Education Success

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
EXAMINING ONGOING FOREVER GI BILL IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

November 19, 2019

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Veterans Education Success (VES) is a non-profit organization with a mission to advance higher education success for veterans, service members, and military families, and to protect the integrity and promise of the GI Bill and other federal education programs.

In addition to nonpartisan research and policy advocacy, we provide free case work to students having trouble with their GI Bill or who are impacted by predatory schools, and help elevating their voices to share with policy makers both their positive and negative experiences in higher education. We are focused on addressing ways to increase the continued academic success of military-connected students in their pursuit of their academic goals.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective on the continued efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to implement the *Harry W. Colmery Educational Assistance Act of 2017* (Public Law 115-48) also known as the Forever GI Bill (FGIB).

Since the Fall 2018 semester, when VA faced significant challenges as it attempted to implement sections 107 and 501 of the FGIB, we have seen continued efforts and commitment by VA to institute a smoother implementation moving forward. While we remain hopeful, we believe continued oversight by Congress is of the utmost importance.

Recommendations Moving Forward
As such, Veterans Education Success makes the following recommendations:

1. **The Lagging IT Infrastructure Must be Promptly and Thoroughly Addressed. This includes ensuring the $30 million allotted to VA is appropriated to VA. -** There is clearly a significant issue with the existing education IT systems. They are failing. Addressing this issue is critical.
   a. While VA was allocated $30 million for IT upgrades, this money has yet to be appropriated. Asking VA to implement such a significant program without the necessary money to do so is setting them up for long-term failure. Without the necessary resources to implement this law, VA is having to continue to work with a broken system. Given the history and number of times the VA IT education system has failed when trying to upgrade an old and decrepit system, it is inevitable that, without the appropriate resources, delays may happen again. We ask that members of Congress to make it a priority to address these issues in a timely and efficient manner.
   b. We also ask the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to ensure this money is used specifically for what it is intended: to build a new enhanced IT system for Education. The current outdated system is failing and has had too many patches added to it to try to fix it. Like a boat, there can be only so many patches before it risks sinking. This IT system has now negatively impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of veterans and their families and must be addressed.

2. **Continued Communication** – VA has gone to great lengths to increase communication with key-stakeholders, including monthly meetings and updates, campus tours around the country, and publishing information on many social media forums. We appreciate their hard work and their dedication to clear, transparent, and timely communication. As they continue to move forward, we suggest the following:
   a. **Articulate a Clear and Defined Timeline on When Students Will be Made Whole and What That Process Will Look Like. This includes answering the following questions we have heard from students and schools:**
      i. When does VA plan to start making students whole for their Monthly Housing Allowance (MAH) underpayments?
      ii. How does VA plan to implement this rollout?
      iii. Has VA communicated to the students about any role they will or will not need to play in order to be made whole? Will they need to self-certify?
      iv. What communication has taken place with schools that need to recertify? Will they have ample time to stay on top of current certifications while also recertifying students for past semesters?

        v. Does VA foresee any similar issues experienced last year with the rollout of the new IT system? Will the current system be able to handle the large influx of certifications?

       vi. For students who are being recertified for a lower MAH, what safeguards have been put in place to ensure they will not get a debt collection letter?

3. **General Recommendations**
    a. **Continued Engagement of Key Stakeholders** – Among other things, VBA has been hosting monthly meetings with military and veteran groups to provide updates on the implementation process. We hope they will continue.
    b. **Enforce Mandatory Overtime When Needed**–VA needs all hands-on deck to ensure students receive their MHA in a timely manner and endure no more hardships.
    c. **Conduct a Study on Feasibility of Batch Payments** – Unlike VA, the Department of Education (ED) processes batch payments to schools prior to the semester starting based on the enrollment of past years. This process has been effective for both schools and ED, and we believe there might be lessons learned for VA on ways to more effectively process education benefit payments. In theory, this process could alleviate the work of VA on the front end, so VA can focus on processing the MHA for students. While we understand there are many variables between how VA processes payments and how ED processes payments, we believe there might be potential for better streamlining the current system at VA. Additionally, it would protect students from being dropped from classes, charged late fees, and/or being prohibited from registering for class for the following semester.
    d. **Provide Students Accurate Benefits Information** – Create a document, similar to a check stub, that students can use to show landlords and other loan guarantors. This stub will confirm the amount of money they will be receiving each month in their MHA and will help them in securing housing, utilities, etc.

We appreciate the work VA has done to address these concerns and hope these recommendations can provide helpful guidance moving forward. Those who served our country and are using their hard-earned benefits to attend school and ensure their civilian economic success deserve to pursue their education with the peace of mind they will receive their education benefits in a timely fashion.

We also appreciate the amount of time, effort, and attention the committee has dedicated to providing oversight of the implementation of the Forever GI Bill.

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