

**STATEMENT OF
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UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS (HVAC)
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION
SUBCOMMITTEES**

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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.

Lastly, 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 students 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.