

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

**Testimony of Jay Schnitzer, M.D., Ph.D.  
Before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
of the  
House Veterans Affairs Committee  
November 19, 2019**

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 one 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

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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

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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.

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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.