REVIEWING THE DIGITAL G.I. BILL PROGRAM

JOINT HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

AND THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

———

THURSDAY, JULY 13, 2023

———

Serial No. 118–25

———

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Available via http://govinfo.gov

———

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MIKE BOST, Illinois, *Chairman*

AUMUA AMATA COLEMAN RADEWAGEN,
  American Samoa, *Vice-Chairwoman*
JACK BERGMAN, Michigan
NANCY MACE, South Carolina
MATTHEW M. ROSENDALE, SR., Montana
MARIANNETTE MILLER-MEEKS, Iowa
GREGORY F. MURPHY, North Carolina
C. SCOTT FRANKLIN, Florida
DERRICK VAN ORDEN, Wisconsin
MORGAN LUTTRELL, Texas
JUAN CISCOMANI, Arizona
ELIJAH CRANE, Arizona
KEITH SELF, Texas
JENNIFER A. KIGGANS, Virginia

MARK TAKANO, California, *Ranking
  Member*
JULIA BROWNLEY, California
MIKE LEVIN, California
CHRIS PAPPAS, New Hampshire
FRANK J. MRVAN, Indiana
SHEILA CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK, Florida
CHRISTOPHER R. DELUZIO, Pennsylvania
MORGAN MCGARVEY, Kentucky
DELIA C. RAMIREZ, Illinois
GREG LANDSMAN, Ohio
NIKKI BUDZINSKI, Illinois

JON CLARK, *Staff Director*
MATT REEL, *Democratic Staff Director*

————

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

DERRICK VAN ORDEN, Wisconsin, *Chairman*

NANCY MACE, South Carolina
C. SCOTT FRANKLIN, Florida
JUAN CISCOMANI, Arizona
ELIJAH CRANE, Arizona

MIKE LEVIN, California *Ranking Member*
FRANK J. MRVAN, Indiana
MORGAN MCGARVEY, Kentucky
DELIA C. RAMIREZ, Illinois

————

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

MATTHEW M. ROSENDALE, SR., Montana, *Chairman*

NANCY MACE, South Carolina
KEITH SELF, Texas

SHEILA CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK, Florida,
  Ranking Member
GREG LANDSMAN, Ohio

C O N T E N T S

THURSDAY, JULY 13, 2023

Page

OPENING STATEMENTS

WITNESSES

Accompanied by:

Mr. Robert Orifici, Benefits and Memorial Services Portfolio Director, Office of Information and Technology, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Accompanied by:

Mr. David Powner, Executive Director, Center for Data-Driven Policy, MITRE

APPENDIX

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

REVIEWING THE DIGITAL G.I. BILL PROGRAM

————

THURSDAY, JULY 13, 2023

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

The subcommittees met, pursuant to notice, at 1 p.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Derrick Van Orden [chairman of the subcommittee on Economic Opportunity] presiding.

Present from the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity: Representatives Van Orden, Mace, Levin, Mrvan, McGarvey, and Ramirez.

Present from the Subcommittee on Technology Modernization: Representatives Rosendale, Mace, Self, Cherfilus-McCormick, and Landsman.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DERRICK VAN ORDEN, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Good afternoon. The joint oversight hearing of the Subcommittee of Economic Opportunity and the Subcommittee on Technology and Modernization will now come to order.

As you have heard me say many times, these subcommittees are not bipartisan, they are nonpartisan. I am very proud of my Democrat colleagues and also my Republican colleagues to adhering to that. There is no room for that in this committee and it will not be tolerated.

Today, we have come together once again to look out for the interest of our veterans. Our veterans fought hard for this country, and we owe it to them to fight hard for their interests here in Congress. Today, our subcommittees come together to once again examine how we can work with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to improve the lives of veterans through the Digital G.I. Bill—good afternoon, sir. The Digital G.I. Bill is intended to streamline G.I. Bill claims processing by consolidating antiquated legacy IT systems and automating adjudication of most claims. Some of these systems are over thirty years old and must be modernized.

Since our last hearing in July 2022, VA has accomplished quite a bit. There have been five releases of the software. More than half of the supplemental claims are now automated and the Enrollment Manager system is now up and running. This is good news and shows a tremendous amount of progress. However, the Digital G.I. Bill system that is being developed by VA and Accenture is partly

the result of past IT failures. Other companies have attempted to modernize. The systems have failed and the VA has wasted millions of dollars. We are here to ensure that this does not happen again.

In March I received a call from the secretary about the Digital G.I. Bill failing to process veterans' monthly housing allowance. The Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) initially failed to pay approximately 282,000 student veterans. While these issues were resolved nearly immediately, there are still 4,000 veterans that received late checks due to this mistake. This problem is reminiscent of 2018 when a similar failure resulted in thousands of students waiting weeks and months in some cases for the claim to be processed, which led to significant delays in students receiving their monthly housing allowance. Time and time again, student veterans are being left in limbo because of the VA's failures, and that is completely unacceptable.

Also in March the new Enrollment Manager system went live. VA had insisted the launch in January at the beginning of the spring semester despite an outpouring of concern from the schools about the problems that this would cause. That means you people are not listening. The subcommittee was eventually able to persuade the VA to listen to the boots on the ground and push the go live back, set off the demo, effect delays in the development of the system that no one has ever adequately explained. I am going to say this again, you are not listening. You are trying to run things from Washington, DC. and you are just not listening. That is no way to run a railroad and we are stopping that today.

It is my understanding that the next Digital G.I. Bill release has been stalled for several months as VA takes a step back to reevaluate the schedule and revise the cost estimates because of the Enrollment Manager release jobs program. That is what you are running. We must get a handle on these delays, motivate you—it is not the VA, it is you—to keep this project on track. Up to this point, it has been like pulling teeth to figure out how much money has been spent. I think we got this what, last night? You guys knew this hearing was coming a long time ago and we got this sheet last night. Okay, no. Junk. We need to figure out how much this is costing in a timely manner so we can make the appropriate decisions. No one can tell us when the project is going to be final. That, again, is unacceptable. Cannot even get an answer when you are going to do the next release.

We are here today to get these questions answered and I want them answered. I do not want the I am going to get back to you later, and then we are going to send you a note and my people will call you. I want the answers today. If you are not willing or able to answer them, then you are incompetent. I do not want to come to having to subpoena you, but we are in the majority and I will do so because you are not serving our veterans appropriately for some reason, and I want to know what that reason is today.

As I said, we have a fantastic relationship together on this committee in a nonpartisan manner. Today, we are going to vote it at 13:30. That is 1:30 for you civilians. We may have to briefly recess. If you think we are not pushing this today, you are wrong.

With that, I will yield to my friend and distinguished Member of Congress, Mr. Levin, the ranking member of this subcommittee.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Mr. LEVIN. I thank my friend, Chairman Van Orden, thank Chairman Rosendale as well. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with you guys on important legislation to help our veterans. Thank Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick as well for making this happen today.

In November 2019, I went to Muskogee, Oklahoma, and I wanted to go see why it was taking so long for progress to be made on how G.I. Bill benefits and other information was being processed and went and had some really good barbecue as well in Muskogee. What I saw with regard to G.I. Bill technology was frankly pretty shocking. I saw systems that were being held together with you know, 40, 50 year old technology, Common Business-Oriented Language (COBOL) was being used in one of the systems. Frankly, it was miraculous that the good people there who were working really hard, were able to make any of it work. Even really simple things, like changing an address, proved extraordinarily difficult when you had multiple systems running. Seeing systems that are decades old barely being held together, really was deeply frustrating. I remember the conversations I had back then about the money that would be needed in order to repair things and to get things up to some semblance of modern technology. We largely have delivered on what was asked of us in the Congress. We have come through on those requests. Bipartisan as well. You know, this was from the Trump administration now on through to the Biden administration.

It is so important that we get this right. These processors there in Muskogee in a converted grocery store are responsible for distributing nearly $12 billion annually in veteran education benefits. This dysfunction has been really hard on VA staff, but also on student veterans, on educators, on school certifying officials.

I was very pleased that in March 2021, VA awarded the contract to Accenture to support the Digital G.I. Bill project to create a more user-friendly platform for students and institutions enrolled in VA educational assistance programs, as well as those administering those programs. We have to unite all these legacy systems, scores of legacy systems, bringing together activities like payments, enrollments, oversight, at higher functioning levels—at any functional level, to be honest with you. It is a multi-year effort, and it is planned to take place over many increments, and I understand that that can be frustrating too, but there needs to be a progress. That is the key.

One year ago, our two subcommittees came together for an update on Accenture's work, and the takeaways were pretty positive. Improvements were being made, program incurrence were for the most part on schedule. In preparation for today's hearing, we asked largely the same questions. The news is still relatively positive. This summer VA through Accenture released something called Enrollment Manager, which replaced a legacy system called VA Once. This is designed to improve the user experience for school certifying officials, make it easier for them to access student records,

make it easier and faster for institutions to exchange data and documents with VA. There are six more releases is my understanding, planned through 2024, all designed to make the experience better for the employees and for the veterans alike. However, there is absolutely a need to review the Digital G.I. Bill contract and the upcoming release timelines to ensure both VA and Accenture are on the same page for the releases.

Here is the deal, Congress can pass all the laws that we want to pass. If we want to truly strengthen these benefits, if we want to truly make this system work the way it is supposed to work, we have got to make sure VA has the capacity to efficiently deliver those benefits. If we do not do that, we are just missing the point, and we are failing the veterans that we are serving and the families that we are serving.

I think we are all committed here to doing everything that we can collectively to make sure that is the case, to make sure that you guys are on track, and we are going to do all we can to hold you accountable to that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, sir.

I would now like to yield to the Technology Modernization (TM) subcommittee chair, Mr. Rosendale. There you are. How are you doing, pal? You all right.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MATTHEW M. ROSENDALE, SR., CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The G.I. Bill is one of the most successful government programs in history. The educational benefits in the G.I. Bill are often credited with helping create the American middle class of the 20th century. Not only that, it is the rare government program that has consistently generated hundreds of billions of economic growth for tens of billions of dollars spent, decade after decade. Congress took big steps to enhance the program with the post-9/11 G.I. Bill and the Forever G.I. Bill. Now it is critical that we modernize how it operates with the Digital G.I. Bill.

It is hard to believe just how antiquated and complicated the information technology systems are that the VA staff use to process G.I. Bill applications. As we have seen many times, these IT systems are impeding service delivery to our veterans rather than improving it. The Digital G.I. Bill (DGIB) project began in 2021 and a year ago, the effort was making rapid progress. It was releasing new functionality every few months, boosting automation, and starting to phaseout legacy systems. DGIB is one of the most successful examples of implementing a system as a managed service. It was also the lowest cost of all the VA's major IT modernization programs. This was an encouraging contrast to the expensive failures we have been seeing elsewhere.

Unfortunately, that progress has stalled. Since the fifth DGIB release earlier this year, the VA has been stuck in an opaque process to revise its schedule and reshuffle the subsequent releases. There is still no date for the sixth release as the months slip by. Unfortunately, explanations from the VA and the contractors have been

convoluted and contradictory. We are seeing everybody at this table pointing fingers at each other. That is the expectation that I have today and that is what we are going to try to sort through—sort that spaghetti out.

We have to get the Digital G.I. Bill back on track. The most difficult and important milestones for the project are yet to come. We need to know what percentage of original claims the system will be able to automate. We also need to know whether Accenture will be able to retire the benefits delivery network. VA and contractors still need to demonstrate whether the managed service is less expensive to operate than the hodge podge of legacy systems. Finally, we need to know how much DGIB will ultimately cost. MITRE's initial 10-year estimate was between $1.3 and $1.9 billion dollars. We have heard of a window, ok, of range of costs. That is an enormous window. Getting any information about costs since then has been extremely difficult. All we know is that the cost estimate seems to be moving in the wrong direction.

I am pleased to see the Digital G.I. Bill has accomplished more in 2 years than any other VA IT project that I have seen. Today, it is stumbling. I believe the concept remains sound, but the bureaucracy managing the project is floundering. We expect better.

I want to thank our witnesses for appearing today to give veterans and taxpayers an update on this important program. I look forward to finding out some of these answers so the Digital G.I. Bill can move forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I will now yield to the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Technology and Modernization, a wonderful friend of mine, Ms. Cherfilus-McCormick.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SHEILA CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden, and thank you, Chairman Rosendale for holding this hearing. Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today.

We have a lot of ground to cover and a lot of opening comments to hear. I will keep my remarks short.

G.I. bill education benefits are a key recruiting tool for our military, especially at a time when the Department of Defense (DoD) is struggling to meet its recruiting goals. It is in our Nation's interest that we ensure that this benefit continues to be an incentive to military service by ensuring the program's future stability.

G.I. Bill benefits are also crucial to easing service members' transition out of the military and into private sector jobs that support the veterans and their families upon completion of their service. While the G.I. Bill has been a prime example of a successful benefit program for decades, it has historically been frustratingly slow to apply for and receive. The old paper process left veterans waiting weeks and months for approval to start classes, frequently making them miss registration deadlines and postponing their start of their education. I am heartened to hear that this is improving, but it seems we still have a lot of work to do.

VA's recent efforts to modernize the system used by managed education benefits have been a shining example of how IT modernization should happen. Much so it has left us wondering why education services is able to do this and other parts of the VA cannot. Is there a way that we can share the lessons learned from this program with the rest of VA to improve the implementation of IT systems across the organization? It is not often that the TM Subcommittee gets the opportunity to hear from an IT modernization program that seems to be going well, but we are starting to hear about delays with the implementation.

I hope to hear today how VA plans to overcome these roadblocks and push the program forward. We cannot allow this program to go the way of other IT modernization efforts.

I look forward to today's conversation, and I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, ma'am.

Allow me to introduce our witness panel.

Our first witness is Mr. Joseph Garcia, the executive director of education services of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Garcia is accompanied by Mr. Robert—I am going to slaughter your name, sir. Please.

Mr. ORIFICI. Orifici.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Orifici?

Mr. ORIFICI. Orifici.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Orifici. Ok.

Mr. ORIFICI. Yes.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Orifici. Gotcha. I want to pay the appropriate amount of respect by pronouncing your name properly, Mr. Orifici—the benefits and memorial service portfolio director. Our second witness is Mr. Troy Mueller, senior advisor, and department head at M-I-T-R-E, MITRE, and is accompanied by Mr. Dave Powner, Center for Data Driven Policy at the same company. Our third witness is Mr. Kyle Michl.

Mr. MICHL. Michl, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. This is not working out today. I apologize, man. I was much better at this, Mr. Michl, because we met the other day. Digital G.I. Bill senior delivery and chief innovation officer at Accenture Federal Services (AFS).

[Witnesses sworn]

Thank you and let the record reflect that witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Garcia, you are now recognized for 5 minutes. Just to be super clear, I mean, some of you have been here before, that clock is 5 minutes. That is exactly as long as you will be talking. Same thing up here.

You are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH GARCIA

Mr. GARCIA. Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden, Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Members Levin and Cherfilus-McCormick, and other members of the subcommittees.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Digital G.I. Bill program and the continued system improvements and upgrades. Join-

ing me today is Robert Orifici from VA's Office of Information and Technology.

To ensure VA effectively serves veterans and their families, seeking to use their G.I. Bill benefits, VA is modernizing the G.I. Bill's IT platform to deliver benefits faster and enhance customer experience. On March 11, 2021, VA awarded a managed service contract to Accenture Federal Services to develop the DGIB. This enterprise service platform gives G.I. Bill students the ability to engage with VA and their earned benefits through electronic outreach, intake, and enhanced communication tools. Since inception, VA has deployed numerous major releases. In just 6 months, VA marked its first major milestone by deploying the processing of post-9/11 G.I. Bill claims into the managed service. The managed service allows for agile decision making in a single managed platform that grows with VA's needs and responds to changes in technology through continuous end-to-end updates. For the first time since the inception of the G.I. Bill program, applicants can receive a same day education benefits eligibility decision. DGIB now provides veterans the ability to download and view digital copies of their certificate of eligibility, no longer waiting up for 5 days for a paper copy.

We contacted the first veteran who used the automated system. This veteran expressed that she appreciates the efforts VA has made to ease the process for veterans. She told friends who are getting out how easy the process was to apply for the post-9/11 G.I. Bill and encouraged them to apply for classes. She hopes that more veterans will utilize this benefit in the future. Her thoughts validate the goal of the Digital G.I. Bill program, better support for veterans pursuing their educational goals, modernize the tools for them, and those that support the veterans.

In the most recent major release in March 2023, VA deployed Enrollment Manager to help School Certifying Officials, SCOs, submit enrollments faster. In only 4 months, VA surpassed 1.4 million enrollment certifications. Over 15,000 SCOs from over 11,000 institutions are now using Enrollment Manager. One school certifying official shared with me personally that Enrollment Manager does not have the same constraints as the legacy system. Before, an SCO had to wait a day to make changes to a certification to make sure certifications did not get processed out of order, but now SCOs can finish a task in a couple of minutes that previously would have taken multiple days. Enrollment Manager speeds up the certification process, which in turn allows SCOs to have more time with their veteran students.

Implementing a managed service and improving automation involves integrating numerous complex IT systems and decommissioning decades old legacy systems. VA acknowledges several challenges during this transition, such as the March 2023 issue with monthly housing allowance payments. Although electronic funds transfer payments were received on the same day, there were lessons learned and lessons applied, including enhanced monitoring and reporting.

VA also started a manage services assessment to develop a comprehensive risk matrix to ensure mitigation needs and promote best practices across the business lines.

VA is committed to ensuring the continuous improvement of the DGIB program, as well as effective stewardship of taxpayer resources. VA is working with AFS on a bilateral modification to the current contract to meet emergent requirements, clarify testing capabilities, and to add additional integrations to other VA systems.

Chairmen and ranking members, VA has made tremendous strides in the administration of education benefits and appreciates support of Congress as we work through the challenges and continue our efforts to modernize educational assistance programs.

This concludes my testimony. My colleague and I look forward to answering any questions the committee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOSEPH GARCIA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Garcia.

The written statement of Mr. Garcia will be entered in the hearing record.

Mr. Mueller, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to Deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF TROY MUELLER

Mr. MUELLER. Chairmen Van Orden, Rosendale, ranking member, Cherfilus-McCormick, Levin and other members of the subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the Department of Veterans Affairs Digital G.I. Bill program.

Successful modernization of IT is critical to improving the veteran experience. MITRE very much appreciates the opportunity to share our insights on this work. MITRE is a not for profit corporation chartered to operate in the public interest, which includes operating six federally funded research and development centers, or FFRDCs. The Center for Enterprise Modernization, where I am a department head, was established in 1998 by the Department of Treasury and is now jointly sponsored the Department of Veterans Affairs, Commerce, and the Social Security Administration. My department is responsible for supporting the modernization of benefits and service delivery across all Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) lines of business.

As an Air Force veteran, I know firsthand that serving in the military opens the door to many benefits, including the life changing opportunity to access higher education. Education benefits span those entering the service through officer training programs, tuition assistance, and fully funded degree programs while on active duty, and the G.I. Bill and other education programs for veterans and their families. I myself have benefited from each of these programs. I received an Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship for college, I completed my masters under tuition assistance, and was able to earn a doctorate utilizing the post-9/11 G.I. bill. If not for these benefits, I would not be here before you today. Supporting the VA, it is not merely an assignment or a job. It is personal. It is my way of giving back for the things I have received.

MITRE has been a partner with Education Service since 2008, supporting the implementation of the post-9/11 G.I. Bill, and again in 2019 to chart the path forward for modernizing claims proc-

essing and customer service. MITRE is currently working with the program management office in the areas of systems engineering, program integration, life cycle cost estimating, and organizational change. Over the past 3 plus years, the program has had many accomplishments delivering major releases of capability. Additionally, the VA has demonstrated gains and maturity regarding program governance, execution, and decision making as demonstrated by their taking action on recommendations of the 2108 independent technical assessment of the Colmery Act implementation.

Programs of this size and complexity intended to modernize an environment of multiple legacy systems with numerous dependencies and an enterprise that includes parallel modernization efforts are never without risk. VBA, to its credit, is currently conducting a strategic review of this program as part of an effort to identify and evaluate opportunities to improve delivery of benefits and services. The outcome of the review will position the VA to maintain a rhythm of capability delivery while ensuring good stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

Recognizing that there will always be challenges, complexity, and risk, I have two recommendations to share with you today. The first is to encourage the VA to continue to mature its contracting and program management capabilities and ensure proper allocation and alignment of resources with demonstrated knowledge, skills, and experience to appropriate programs and projects. A contracting officer with extensive experience procuring commodities is not the same as one who has worked on and led development and execution of exquisite acquisition strategies for large, complex, transformational programs. The same can be said of program managers. Both are scarce resources that require agencies to be deliberate about career development and assignments.

The second recommendation is for the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs to continue the direct monthly engagement of their staff with education service. The meeting which started during the Colmery Act implementation has become a critical part of the battle rhythm of program, just as important as program increment planning sessions or a governance meetings. From our vantage point, these monthly engagements promote transparency, provide the opportunity for dialog, and contribute to the momentum of risk and issue identification, mitigation, and decision making on the program.

In closing, let me just note that of MITRE's roughly 10,000 personnel, over 1,600 are veterans. There are few duties that our employees consider more noble and consequential than honoring through our support to 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 today and look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF TROY MUELLER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Mueller's written testimony now be entered into the record. Mr. Michl, I now recognize you for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF KYLE MICHL

Mr. MICHL. Thank you, sir.

Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden, Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Levin, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, and members of the Subcommittees on Economic Opportunity and Technology Modernization. Thank you for inviting me to testify about our efforts in service of VA's Digital G.I. Bill delivery program.

I am Kyle Michl, the senior delivery lead for the program and the chief innovation officer at Accenture Federal Services.

Accenture Federal has a longstanding partnership with the VA on programs that deliver meaningful outcomes for beneficiaries, including veterans, service members and their families. Since March 2021, Accenture Federal has been working with the VA to streamline educational claims processing by creating simple, efficient digital experiences to help veterans and their families complete their educational journeys. I would like to share with you a few examples of how the program is serving veterans through continuous delivery of meaningful outcomes.

VA and Accenture Federal have delivered major releases, as well as a number of smaller agile releases to our platform. These releases are aimed at driving automation and improving time to receipt of benefits. Together, VA and Accenture Federal have made significant strides in areas including user experience, service enhancements, program insights, and processing efficiencies. A number of the release highlights include providing intuitive user experiences and rapid decisions for eligible first-time beneficiaries. We deliver new intuitive designs and updated functions for beneficiaries applying for Post–9/11 G.I. Bill benefits. Improvements such as pre-filled service history function make applications for Post–9/11 G.I. Bill benefits easier. We have reduced eligibility processing from 30 days down to a matter of minutes and provided the ability to receive digital copies of decision letters.

The G.I. Bill has been assisting veterans for nearly 79 years. Now through automation, we are helping applicants start their educational journeys faster than ever.

We are also providing schools modernized claims capabilities. School certifying officials, or SCOs, are the front door for veterans to continue and complete their educational goals. To better serve the SCOs, we introduced Enrollment Manager which streamlines the process to submit enrollments for students. More than 15,000 SCOs have accessed Enrollment Manager since launch and the new system has reduced the number of steps to enter in a new enrollment to as few as five clicks. Already more than 1.4 million enrollments have been submitted. Most importantly, SCOs now have more time to focus on what matters most, helping veterans, service members, and their families meet and exceed their educational goals.

Last, modernizing legacy systems. With streamlined VA processes and our new technology platform, we have achieved a 99.99 percent system availability rate for claims processing. We are also helping VA decommission antiquated legacy IT systems to improve the speed and accuracy of its educational claims processes. We

have retired two of the three legacy systems and have exceeded DGIB's 3-year IT infrastructure reduction targets.

Now, large complex programs have enormous dependencies both within and external to the program. Recognizing this, VA and Accenture Federal have established governance processes to quickly identify risks and assess impacts. Together, VA and Accenture Federal have continued to make progress on DGIB milestones, while jointly working through options to address gaps in dependencies. We are actively engaged with VA to re-plan future releases to outline potential options for a path forward, while continuing to fulfill program commitments. Our partnership with VA can continue to provide world class modernized services to veteran beneficiaries. We can do this by deploying future capabilities like approval manager, workload manager, and benefits manager, which will replace aging legacy systems with modern technologies and digital experiences.

In conclusion, we remain steadfast in our commitment to make a dramatic difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of veterans, service members, and their families. Through the use of innovative technologies, we are strengthening the foundation that provides agile rapid deployments, improved automation, and enhanced data insight. We are proud to help the VA bring to life its truly bold DGIB vision and to focus on delivering the best outcomes for veterans and for the American taxpayer.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KYLE MICHL APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Michl, thank you very much for your testimony.

Your written statement will be now entered into the record. The subcommittee will now recess so that the members can go vote and we expect to return 10 minutes following the last vote. Mr. Garcia, I recommend that you bring a lunch. Okay?

[Recess]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The subcommittee will come to order.

We are going to proceed to questions and I am going to ask members and witnesses to respect the 5 minute rule. I talked about that earlier, so I am not asking anymore, I am telling you. I will hold myself accountable to the same timeline.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Garcia, can you give us a date when the Digital G.I. Bill project will resume and when the release six is scheduled?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. Thank you for that question.

We are going through a contact modification with AFS.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Garcia, I am going to be short with you.

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I expect you to be short with me. I asked you for a date and not a process. They have got this thing that is called the calendar, and I want you to be able to put your finger on it and tell me a date. Can you do that?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, yes. The release six is Enterprise Management Payment Workload and Reporting (eMPWR). That is the next major release. That is the financial system update within BDN.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Garcia, that as a process, not a date? I am asking you a very clear question, what date? Put your finger on a calendar and let us stop this buffoonery.

Mr. GARCIA. Summer of 24 for release six.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. That is a season, not a date, Mr. Garcia. What is the date that this will be released?

Mr. GARCIA. I cannot give you a date beyond that.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. That is unacceptable. Mr. Garcia, do you read the newspaper? Do you read the newspaper?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. Everyday.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Do you remember that article that came out that said Visa went out of business? No, because you did not read it because it did not happen. It did not happen because Visa is a company and it is predicated on merit. If Visa all of a sudden could not process over 200,000 of their bills, and then eventually, what, 4,000 at some point, what would happen to the person that was responsible at Visa in about, I do not know, 6 minutes? What would happen to that person, Mr. Garcia? Could you posit it? They would be fired. They would be kicked to the curb because they were not serving their customers. You use that word when you are speaking about my fellow veterans, you call them customers. The person at Visa, if they failed objectively, like you have—because it is not the VA, man, you are the VA. It says it right there—if they failed like that, they would be fired. Why are you still getting a paycheck? Can you answer that question, Mr. Garcia? Should you be held to the same standard as a civilian company that is processing things that you buy at Walmart when you are talking about the lives of veterans? I have gone through every single education program that you have, Mr. Mueller, all of them. You, Mr. Garcia, need to justify to us why you are getting a paycheck. Can you do that, sir?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. I would like to do that.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Hit it. I am going to give you 50 seconds. I want 1 minute to close. Hit it. You are on.

Mr. GARCIA. I started on 1 August 2022.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. GARCIA. Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP), right, was at 54 percent obligation in August 22. Through my efforts—Mr. Levin can recognize this—by December when the program ended with a 99 percent. I do not call that failure, sir, I call that supporting the veteran. As I was a student veteran, I would not be here with the G.I. Bill. Eight years enlisted time, got out, finished my program, getting the G.I. Bill. Customers are important to me. Higher ed, I was in higher ed 10 years before I came to this position. I know SCOs, sir. I listened to them.

The successful roll-out of Enrollment Manager, because I put a priority on it. I know the SCOs. They used to work for me. I listen to them. As I listen to veterans as well.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well.

Thank you, Mr. Garcia.

Here is the problem. Are you confident, Mr. Garcia—can you please tell me again what percentage of original claims you have automated last month?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, varies by date—by day——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Percentage of claims you have automated last month. Can you answer that question, sir?

Mr. GARCIA. In the 15 to 20 percent range because it varies by day.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. That is a 20 percent variance, and that is unacceptable, Mr. Garcia.

You have to understand that the reason that these things are not working is because we have the VA, which is a group and agency, and we have processes. We do not have people. That does not fly. Mr. Garcia, I am holding you personally accountable for this, personally accountable for this.

I want to say one more thing my—and time as expired. I will get you in the second round. I yield back. I now recognize the ranking member, Mr. Levin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the chairman. I would like to associate myself with the chairman's request for specific timeline. In fact, in my open, I had mentioned, I think, six additional releases. I see in the majority's timeline here, release six, seven, eight, nine. I think there are a ten, eleven, and a twelve. It would be very helpful to us. I appreciate all the work, obviously, that you are doing, but it would be very helpful to us that to be able to put specific dates against those releases and then be able to measure over time and make sure that those dates are being hit.

I Wanted to follow up also on the chairman's question about automation. In your testimony, I saw current percentage of 57.38. How do you explain that it is not higher than that after the time that you have had? How are we going to get from 57.38 to 70, 80, 90? What do you need to make that happen?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, when the program started, we were at around the 35, 37 percent range. We are pushing 60 percent, so that is an increase of 25 percent.

One of the things that we are working on, for example, is with DoD on the system called VA DOD Identity Repository (VADIR). It is what comes over from the Pentagon into our system. We have been having good progress meetings lately over the last several months to make sure that information that came here was accurate. We do not want to put in an automated system inaccurate information that creates inaccurate payments, right. The off ramping that occurs from automation is when the data is not accurate coming in. We are making progress with DoD.

Mr. LEVIN. I appreciate that. Unfortunately, we have limited time.

Can I get your commitment that you will give us a date certain or at least an estimated date certain of when we can get to hit 70, 80, 90, 100 percent? Can you give us that table?

Mr. GARCIA. We progress——

Mr. LEVIN. That is pretty simple, yes or no.

Mr. GARCIA. We are committed to higher automation and originals and supplementals, yes, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. You cannot give us a specific timetable on when you are going to be able to hit those higher numbers?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, it depends on the off ramping.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. Can you give us a specific timeline that fills in some of the blanks of this chart when you are going to hit release six, seven, eight, nine, and so forth?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, it does depend on the contract modification. We have got to get through that and that in turn would set the new schedule. We can say, release six is in the summer timeframe.

Mr. LEVIN. Sir, I am trying to work with you here. I think it would be very helpful to everybody on this committee if you would at least commit to giving us some specifics with regard to dates and times as it pertains to releases and as it pertains to the automation frame work. Can you commit to that?

Mr. GARCIA. In the best that I can, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. Well, our staff will be following up with yours, but I think it really would be helpful for us to understand how these investments are being implemented and how these metrics are being achieved.

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. In March, hundreds of thousands of veterans were at risk of not receiving their housing payments due to a processing failure tied to Digital G.I. Bill release five.

Mr. Garcia, I will start with you, and I want to give time for Mr. Michl as well. What steps are you now taking in light of that failure to ensure the future releases do not cause similar unforeseen errors?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. There was a dependency that was created for the BDN system to be online and the system did not catch the dependency of when that occurred. The system just froze, the payment queue did not go forward. We immediately responded to that. Payments did go out for 278,000 Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) recipients, 4,000 paper checks went out the next day. We fixed that problem with AFS. We now have robust monitoring that occurs every month. I get daily inputs that last week, that tracks across the cycle, payment queue, payment run, and we have full confidence that will not happen again.

Mr. LEVIN. That is good to hear.

Mr. Michl, anything you would like to add?

Mr. MICHL. I would say we certainly recognize that there was an issue there and worked together quickly to make sure that we got payments out that very same day, and payments out overall in the timeframe which typically go out.

With regards to making sure that this does not occur in the future, we have certainly put a number of processes in place to look at functional counts and share that with the broader stakeholder community to make sure that we have full and complete visibility to any issues that may occur, and make sure that we have the opportunity to address issues as they arise.

Mr. LEVIN. I appreciate that. That is certainly all on the record now. We are going to hold you to it.

Again, as I said at the outset, I think there were so many problems with G.I. Bill technology, and it is encouraging to hear of your progress, but help us say nice things about your work by providing us with specifics, specific dates, specific progress that you are making, and I think that would go a long way.

I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ranking Member Levin.

I now recognize Mr. Mrvan from Indiana for 5 minutes, sir.

Mr. MRVAN. Mr. Garcia, considering the VA's history of budget overruns in IT projects, what concrete actions are being taken to prevent excessive spending and ensure that the Digital G.I. Bill modernization efforts stay within budget?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, I would say two quick points. The governance structure that we have has become more robust over time. We have the right leadership in place for the executive steering committee, for example. On a day to day basis, we have program governance that I help lead with my partners at this table. Governance have been improved. We are also standing up—or increasing the Project Management Office (PMO) that works directly for me. It has been in place, but we are adding more Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) and more capability to it, partnering with MITRE at the table as well. I think improved governance and the PMO office that helps with that program oversight, including the budget part of it, is how we are doing that.

Mr. MRVAN. One of the pieces of legislation that I have proposed is an acquisition review board that would allow for the ability to look at projects as they are being enacted, as they are being instituted. What is your opinion of that?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir what was the term called again?

Mr. MRVAN. It is an Acquisition Review Board.

Mr. GARCIA. Oh, the ARB.

Mr. MRVAN. Yes.

Mr. MRVAN. Sir, I think that is a good idea. As to governance, I defer to some of my partners to maybe add to that as well.

Mr. MRVAN. We can stop there. I just wanted to know what your opinion was.

Mr. GARCIA. Okay.

Mr. MRVAN. With that, I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, sir. I appreciate it greatly.

I recognize Ms. Cherfilus-McCormick. Oh my gosh, I was thinking you are—I am sorry—McCormick for 5 minutes.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

This question is for Mr. Orifici—I hope I got that right.

For the most part, modernization of the Digital G.I. Bill system has been seamless and has avoided the pitfalls that VA's other IT modernization efforts have faced. What are some of the lessons learned from these efforts?

Mr. ORIFICI. Thank you for that question, ranking member.

I have actually come up in the education programs on the IT side through some of the failures and the successes that we are having here. I have gotten to experience many of the aspects of the failed IT and the successful programs. We have had a very collaborative environment between education service and Office of Information and Technology (OIT) and our vendors, that lets us communicate very regularly in terms of what work needs to be done, what the risks and issues are, and really be able to collaborate closely in terms of what progress needs to be made and what actions need to be taken. I think a large part of the success in the education space has been that close collaboration between the business, IT, and the vendors to make things successful.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. How can the VA transfer best practices and lessons learned from the modernization effort and duplicate it success in other VA programs?

Mr. ORIFICI. Also a very good question.

I am now in a larger role than I have been previously going through this and we are looking at the lessons learned and how we have done and been able to achieve the successes within this program and looking to see what we can then apply to the other areas than the benefits portfolio. We also worked very closely with our Chief Information Officer (CIO) on a regular basis with this program and he has very close to oversight of what we are doing here to apply those lessons more broadly across OIT.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. The committee has heard from numerous witnesses on the issues and incompatibilities between VA and DoD systems. What are the largest challenges in integrating DoD and VA systems?

Mr. ORIFICI. I will start that question then I will turn that over to Joe.

One of the challenges that we have is that there is very specific qualities around especially training data and around some the collection of data from all the branches of service as we look to automate the claims process. As we get into the collection of this data and making sure that we are having the quality data there, we have had to work with the data groups on the DoD side, and they have been very collaborative with us in correcting and working with us to bring this data across. It is really been making sure that we collect all the data that is needed to be able disqualify training periods and other type of information like that to make sure that those claims move forward.

Mr. Garcia.

Mr. GARCIA. Ma'am, that again is a very good question because the data comes over from DoD and it enters our system. We have had great progress working with our partners. We had a meeting with them where we specifically identified the quick wins that we could get. A lot of it is Guard reserve time, service academies, how they have their obligations set up. We were very clear on what we needed, and our counterpart is working with the Services to make sure that we get that information that we need. I am very pleased with the progress that we are making and will continue to make with our DoD partners.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you.

Well, that takes me to my question for you, Mr. Garcia.

As with any technology modernization program, our main concern regarding potential vendor lock. The prime contractor, Accenture, indicated that it has used several proprietary technologies in a system which may hamper VA's ability to modify, upkeep, and enhance systems. Is this a concern of VA?

Mr. GARCIA. Proprietary.

Mr. ORIFICI. Proprietary. The——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Please suspend the gentlelady's time until you guys get your act together.

Mr. ORIFICI. I am sorry, sir. He has the hearing—it is not working for him, so he has a hard time hearing the questions.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. That is a very reasonable excuse.

Mr. GARCIA. Is this Intellectual Property (IP)?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Are you prepared to answer the question?

Mr. ORIFICI. They are concerned about the vendor lock and the IP. Yes, IP.

Mr. GARCIA. Social properties?

Mr. ORIFICI. Yes.

Mr. GARCIA. Sorry, ma'am. We are working on the intellectual property. Is that the question, ma'am?

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Mm-hmm. On the vendor lock.

Mr. GARCIA. Yes. We are working to include that in the modification of the contract.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. What steps are you taking?

Mr. ORIFICI. Yes, so Mr. DelBene is very concerned about the intellectual property and how this moves forward. Part of the negotiations that we are entering with the vendor is how we handle the transition of IP into the VA to ensure that we minimize any impact of vendor lock around the intellectual property and the proprietary software.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, madam.

I recognize Ms. Ramirez from Illinois for 5 minutes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden, Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Levin, and Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, for holding today's hearing and reviewing this digital bill program, G.I. Bill program.

As you may know, you have probably heard me talk before about a bill that I introduced here in Congress, H.R. 1767. It is the Student Veteran Benefit Restoration Act. This bill in essence would restore G.I. Bill benefits to student veterans who have been defrauded by education institutions. As you can imagine, ensuring that the technological upgrades to the system used to administer the G.I. Bill benefits is really important to me. I want to make sure it works.

This question is for Mr. Garcia. What steps is the VA and relevant departments taking to ensure that one H.R. 1767—because I am being positive about it being signed into law—what steps are you taking in the Enrollment Manager platform to make sure we have the capacity to handle a possible influx in claims?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, ma'am.

Part of the efforts that we do is legislative changes that we need to do. We have office within education service that actually works on that to make sure that we take that new legislation, work with our partners to make sure that is integrated into, for example, the digital GIB platform moving forward. That is important that we do.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Got it. I just want to reiterate, I think you heard it from Chairman Van Orden, you heard it from Ranking Member Levin, I mean, I think we all want to see a timeline that we are going to be able to count on in this fifth iteration of the modernization of the program. It is critical to all of us. I want to just make sure I say that on record.

I have just a few more questions for you, and then I am going to yield back.

18

Does the VA plan to request increased funding to the Office of Information and Technology for educational services? Yes or no?

Mr. GARCIA. That is OIT funding so, Robert, can you answer that?

Mr. ORIFICI. At this time, we do not plan to ask for additional funding for OIT for this program, and that will be based—that may change based off any negotiations with vendor.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Got it. Can the VA say that there will be no processing delays in the future as we wrap up what will be maybe the fifth iteration?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, ma'am. We do not want any more delays.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yes. I just, again, I want to reiterate what you heard here today. We know that you are working really hard and we want to make sure that we have the systems in place to ensure that above all we are centering everything we do on our veterans and making sure that they have the resources they need, they are able to process their benefits as soon as possible, and that we do not look back and repeat the same thing we have seen in the past.

I am going to take your word that you are doing everything in your hands to ensure that summer 2024 date comes to a concrete date and that we could all be celebrating, we are moving forward, and we have progress.

Thank you.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Ramirez.

I recognize Mr. Self from the great State of Texas for 5 minutes.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Mueller, I heard you say earlier about the noble work—VA does noble work. We are not here today to question the nobleness of your work, we are here to see if we can make it more efficient.

Mr. Garcia, you have a very impressive resume, 28 years in the Air Force. You assumed leadership just over a year ago, and you have written on leadership, you have taught leadership, and you assumed the leadership of this program almost a year ago. Is that right?

Mr. GARCIA. August 1st. Yes, sir.

Mr. SELF. August 1st.

Mr. GARCIA. Going on a year.

Mr. SELF. Going on a year. Very close to it. Since you took the leadership of this program, we have come up with this delay. First question is, to what do you attribute the delay? I may have missed it while I was out on the floor, but the bottom line, if you will.

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. That is a very good question, sir.

Part of the delay is getting it right, right. We want to make sure, we want to build on the success that I have heard people recognize, do right for our veterans, and be good stewards, right. The delay, sir, I think, comes down to new information that we got about the runway that we now have. BDN shut down, the benefit delivery network system, was originally going to shut down, be unavailable September of this year. That compressed the time schedule, right. Now we know it is next of 2 years of runway. We were able to use that runway to move Enrollment Manager, for example, for the school's certifying officials. It has been a great program, 1.4 million enrollment certifications. It has been a much better program be-

cause we moved it to the right. That is an example of how we are trying to make sure we take advantage of the agile capacity with additional runway.

Mr. SELF. You talked about how it compressed the timeline and yet then you have a longer runway. I am not sure I understand that. We do not need to go into it.

Once you identified the delay, how often do you personally—because we are talking about at least a billion dollar program here over the decade, at least a billion dollar program—how often do you personally chair meetings to make sure this moves as fast as it can? You personally.

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, Digital G.I. Bill is the highest priority for me. It takes up every part of my day. In the governance structure we have meetings with our partners twice a week. I have their cell phone number. I talked to them nighttime, weekends to make sure the program is moving forward. We set up a project modernization office, PMO, in my office working directly for me now. That is a change that I made. It was not working for me before. The PMO works for me. I talked to that person daily. It is a daily effort working with this modernization forward.

Mr. SELF. Okay. Have you had this large of a project management project before?

Mr. GARCIA. I have been involved with projects like this, sir, after I retired I worked for a consulting firm. The Pentagon has some modernization projects. I did not lead them, but I was part of them.

Mr. SELF. Mm-hmm. Okay. What are you going to do—Congress is concerned about the length of time. I do not accept these delays at face value. What are you doing to compress the time, to use your expression.

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir.

Mr. SELF. Do you just accept your contractor's statement that it is going to take that long? Because leadership, in and of its essence, is to get the most out of the people under you.

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. I agree. I do that for our staff, and I work collaboratively with our vendors to move the program forward. I commit to continue doing that.

Mr. SELF. Do you see any possibility to compress the timeline, to use your phrase?

Mr. GARCIA. We want to make sure we do it right, sir. It is a lot of testing that needs to occur. We do not want to be too fast. We want to make sure that the veterans get their benefits, again, as I got when I was the veteran, that the payments are accurate, for example. We do not want to speed so much that we get it wrong. I think we should be deliberate to make sure these major releases that come forward are done right.

Mr. SELF. Are your contractors working 24/7 on this?

Mr. GARCIA. I call them at all hours of the day and night.

Mr. SELF. The testing—and this may be for one of you other gentlemen—is the testing occurring—because this is an IT system, is the testing occurring 24/7?

Mr. MICHL. I will take that, sir. As we go through test cycles, we have different phases——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman's time has expired.

We are going to move to a second round of questioning. Before we do so, Mr. Garcia, is your hearing—is your device working?

Mr. GARCIA. The device is not working well, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. I would like to take a brief recess now if you want to work on that because I really want you to be able to hear what we are saying. Is that all right? All right, we will take a brief recess.

Mr. Garcia, just give a heads up.

[Recess]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I apologize for this, Mr. Garcia. That technology was issued to you by this committee and that is not your fault, that is ours. That will not happen again. I am going to knock you when you are not doing good stuff and I am going to knock us we do not do good stuff either. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

We will proceed now to a second round of questioning and I recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Garcia, previous to this committee hearing, when you guys were informed—I said this earlier, you were informed over a month ago that you were going to come here and sit here, and we did not get data, this stuff, from you until last night. 20 years in the Air Force, did a bunch of other stuff. Were an officer or an enlisted guy? Were you an officer or enlisted?

Mr. GARCIA. Both. Eight years enlisted, 20 years commissioned.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. What pay grade were you using enlisted guy? What did you get up to?

Mr. GARCIA. E–5 after 8 years, and then I got out and became a lieutenant colonel after 20.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Then you went bad. Just kidding. I am an enlisted guy. Okay. When you were a lieutenant colonel, if you told your lieutenant or whatever, hey, man, we are going to get together a month from now and I want you to have pretty much every pertinent document you could think to make sure that your lieutenant will be able to inform me what is going on. The lieutenant that worked for you, Lieutenant Colonel Garcia, waited until the night before to give you preparatory material, what type of conversation would you have with that lieutenant, Mr. Garcia?

Mr. GARCIA. In fairness, I normally try and ask what was the situation that led to that first?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay, Mr. Garcia. What is the situation that led to the fact that you guys could not give us the pertinent documents that are super duper important for us to find out until 12 hours before hearing when you were informed 5 weeks ago.

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, I am not sure what document you are referring to.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Well, this thing with all the budget and how much money he spent and everything. The $377,508,587.47, which is approximately 20 percent of the $1.3 to $1.96 billion you will be expending of taxpayers' dollars for something that may or may not work.

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, if that got to you late then, that is my responsibility. I do accept that.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much.

These guys came into my office and we talked about this stuff ahead of time. To the knowledge of this committee, your group of folks that work for you have never reached out to this committee staff. I know you have certainly not reached out to my office to discuss any of these things previously, so we could have taken care of some of this and moved the ball forward. To me, it seems that if the vendor, which these guys proactively reached out to my office because they know I am the chairman of the subcommittee and they want to talk through some things in detail because I only give myself 5 minutes to talk and you have not done it, that is telling me that they are trying and you are not. That is a factual statement. I would like to see you more engaged in this program.

My colleague, who had to step back to the floor, Mr. Self, is a retired special forces colonel, and these things do not fly with us. They do not. If you are responsible, Mr. Garcia, you are responsible.

Mr. Michl, what is included in the next phase of this project? Is the code actually written for the project already, and how long has it been ready, if it is, and what do you think the holdup is to implement this? Is the code written? If it is, right, how long has it been written, and then what is the hold up for getting it going?

Mr. MICHL. Thank you for the question, sir.

The majority of the capabilities for release six are written. The next phases will be to test that and then ultimately to deploy that. There are some additional requirements that will likely require development. There will be some additional code. That is why I said the majority, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. When did the majority of this get written? When is it finished so that you could start your testing phase?

Mr. MICHL. It was finished in the in the early spring, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Of this year.

Mr. MICHL. Yes, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. What is the holdup?

Mr. MICHL. There are a number of dependencies to enable testing. Some of that includes the environments that are necessary for that. In order to test an application of this type with the complex data——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Has anybody said go? Is anybody like go, Mr. Michl, run free. Have they done that?

Mr. MICHL. No, sir. We continue to make progress.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Hold on, hold on. I got 35 seconds.

Mr. Michl, who is the person that says go, launch, execute, proceed, sir? Who should be saying—a person—who should be saying that to you? Not an environment or process, blah, blah, blah. Who has to say, hit it, Kyle?

Mr. MICHL. We get approval from Mr. Garcia to move forward with testing.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. We are waiting for Mr. Garcia to tell you to launch something that is already written and paid for and Mr. Garcia has not told you that yet, is that correct?

Mr. MICHL. We have certainly had discussions about what is in front of us.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. That is a yes or no answer.

Mr. MICHL. There is a lot of complexity——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. My time has expired and the answer is no.

I now yield back and I recognize the ranking member, Mr. Levin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the chairman again.

Wanted to relay some questions from students. These are actual questions from students. Hopefully that will yield your attention.

One of these questions was do all school certifying officials have access to Enrollment Manager or have there been any issues preventing access? Mr. Garcia, you seem to be on the hot spot today, so I will go with you.

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir.

Over 15,000 have access to Enrollment Manager and those that could not, we try to get—we got in the system. There might have been some ID.me credential issues, but we believe that they are in that need to get in.

Mr. LEVIN. To your knowledge, there are not any issues preventing access at this time?

Mr. GARCIA. Not that I am aware of, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. We will follow up.

We also heard that the Enrollment Manager might not have the best accessibility for those who are visually impaired. Can you commit to look into that and fix any issues with regard to accessibility?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. We can look into that.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. Specifically, we are hearing about the inability to increase the font size and things like that. I am sure there would be plenty of follow-up for that.

Then third, what is the downtime when Enrollment Manager shut down during the typical duty day?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, I defer to my OIT person on that, please.

Mr. ORIFICI. I am not aware of downtime for Enrollment Manager during the daytime, and I would defer to a Accenture if there is any additional metrics around downtime for Enrollment Manager.

Mr. MICHL. I am not aware of specific downtime associated with enrolment manager. There are certain processes that depend on systems downstream that might be delayed, but that should be not apparent to the user.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. If we get you in touch with that specific person who had the question, can you commit to addressing their concern about this?

Mr. MICHL. Yes. I would be happy to look into it, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Terrific. I appreciate that.

No further questions, and I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Levin. I appreciate it greatly.

I now recognize Mr. Rosendale from the great state of—where are you from anyway—I am just kidding—Montana.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Montana.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I know you are from Montana. It is good to have you here.

Mr. ROSENDALE. The treasure state.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. It is the treasure state. Mr. Rosendale.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you all for your patience. Obviously, we all have a lot of things going on. There is business on the floor

today I had to participate in. I am glad to be back. Thank you very much. This is important work.

If the next release happens next summer, next rollout, that represents a 1-year delay in what we have been doing here. Mr. Garcia, we are 2 years into the DGIB program. It has produced significant accomplishments, as I have referenced in my opening remarks, but the current struggles are frustrating and baffling. Let us get right down to the root cause of this. What caused the next release to change and to be delayed?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, the next release, release six, is eMPWR. That is the financial system that is on the schedule. We do need, as Mr. Michl said, the test environment properly to get that properly tested, make sure it is done right. We have that coming, and so that influenced when that could roll out. I would commit to the early summer timeframe for that next major release of eMPWR, which is the financial system upgrade.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Mr. Michl, let me ask you, what are you waiting for? We just heard that Mr. Garcia has to give you the authority to move forward. What do you need in order to do next rollout?

Mr. MICHL. In order to complete the next rollout we need to have the availability of the test environment that Mr. Garcia just mentioned, we need to have clarity on what requirements are in that release. There is a few additional items to be clarified, and we need to have a contractual path to enable that.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Mr. Garcia, who do you need to get that information from and why is it taking so long to get it?

Mr. GARCIA. We put a team together, acquisitions, OIT, in house, and VBA to figure the best course of action. We have that final decision made. Now we are moving out. Next 30 days, we are going to develop the terms, 30 days to negotiate, and hopefully by early, mid September, we will have a contract modified with AFS to continue progressing with the next major release.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Are you saying that there is another contractor involved or are you going to be negotiating back with Accenture?

Mr. GARCIA. Accenture.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. If you are providing the information, why are you not able to get the information that they need? Where is that coming from in order to authorize them to continue their work?

Mr. GARCIA. Well, we need to modify the contract, right, because then we need to set the priorities, do the deliverables, there is things we want to do with that modified contract that is necessary to trigger the next steps.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Do you have the information that is necessary to deliver that to Mr. Michl right now, Accenture right now so that you could proceed with this work?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, I believe most of the requirements are done. There is——

Mr. ROSENDALE. If you have the information available to you, are you telling me it is going to take you a year to negotiate a contract and be able to authorize Mr. Michl to do this work?

Mr. GARCIA. No, sir, I did not say it would take a year. I am saying by September, we will have the modified contract in place for

them to continue with release six. They cannot do it in 2 or 3 months.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Mr. Michl, if you get the authorization in September to proceed with version six rollout, are you saying that it is going to take you until next summer to roll it out? The information I have is that it is going to be until next summer. Unless somebody said something in the room while I was gone.

Mr. MICHL. Yes, sir. You know, certainly it depends on the final outcomes, but that is a reasonable timeframe given what we know today.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Mr. Michl, how much of the software in the next release is already completed and what is left to do?

Mr. MICHL. The majority is complete.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. If the majority of the software is completed—I must be missing something—if the majority of the software is completed, you have the information that is available to you and you just need to finish up a contract, I do not understand why we are talking about next year before this can be rolled out. Somebody please enlighten me.

Mr. Michl.

Mr. MICHL. When we look at the deployments for the system, there is a small number of windows across the year where we can deploy. If you think about Enrollment Manager, we want to make sure we are not deploying things during a time of high enrollment.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay.

Mr. MICHL. There is approximately 14 out of 52 weeks of the year that we can deploy. You take that into consideration. There is also a need to go and test thoroughly, as you heard Mr. Garcia say, and those test cycles are months long. They take a substantial amount of time to make sure that we get this right. You add those together, along with the time to move forward on potentially new requirements, that is where the summer of 2024 comes——

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. If we have the information available, you have the software that is available, you have to have a little bit of time to go ahead and test it, 30 days to test your software out. You say the software is just about complete. Then we are looking at— we are trying to find a window of time when we do not have a large enrolment, then that would be December-January, during which you are not having enrolment time. It would seem to me that that would be when we could roll this out.

Mr. Chair, I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much.

I now recognize Ms. Cherfilus-McCormick for 5 minutes.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are aware that the G.I. Bill benefits change periodically as Congress provides for new benefits. In the past we have seen technology delays or otherwise create problems in the delivery of these benefits.

Mr. Garcia, how can the VA ensure that the new system is this is as future proof as possible.

Mr. GARCIA. I am sorry, ma'am. How do we ensure future proof, ma'am? How do you define future proof?

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Making sure that we are avoided the obstacles and the pitfalls from the past.

Mr. GARCIA. Avoiding obstacles? Yes, ma'am. I think that goes back to the governance structure that we have in place with the right people at the right time. We meet constantly, again, OIT, other players at this table. The governance structure is very important, right. It is the oversight from senior levels and then program governance is occurring. The PMO office that works for me also ensures the oversight that we continue moving forward. It is governance and the PMO office that we are increasing the staffing for.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. My question then is for Mr. Orifici.

What specific steps are being taking organizationally and technologically to ensure longevity?

Mr. ORIFICI. Yes. Thank you for that question. A big part of what we are trying to do is eliminate the 22 legacy systems that supported education benefits at the start of this process. To date, we have eliminated two and we have plans over the course of this effort to decommission all but two of the systems that currently support education system and move them onto this modern platform. All of the systems that support education service will be on modern technology. They will no longer be sitting on 50 year old COBOL programs.

In that effort, we should be able to continue to modernize and keep the systems current with today's technology.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Thank you.

Mr. Mueller, other technology modernization efforts at the VA have struggled with change management and communication. Has MITRE or the VA measured the success of these functions in the Digital G.I. Bill program? If so, how was it measured?

Mr. MUELLER. We have not measured the functions, but we are supporting the PMO in that space to develop organizational change and stakeholder engagement plans.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Are you using any variables to measure success?

Mr. MUELLER. We will be developing those measures as the PMO continues to mature.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. As of right now, do you know what variables you might consider in and what is the delivery date for those variables?

Mr. MUELLER. I will take that back and get back——

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. My next question for you then is where are there are lessons learned regarding change management or communication that can be shared with the rest of the VA modernization efforts?

Mr. MUELLER. At MITRE we actually have an innovation center that is focused on this space that we—and they work across our sponsor base across the Federal Government. We bring those lessons learned when we develop the plans that we work with this sponsor, with the VA on. That is how we bring that information back.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. What are a few of those lessons learned specifically?

Mr. MUELLER. I would have to get back to you to get specifics, but proactive engagement. I would start with that, proactive engagement, constant communication.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. Okay. As we are moving forward, what was that delivery date? We want to make sure that we have full implementation success and that we are measuring what is going forward. Do you know when you will have those variables and those lessons learned compiled and put together?

Mr. MUELLER. I will have to get back to you on the specific date.

Ms. CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK. All right.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, ma'am.

We will proceed to a third round of questioning and I recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Michl, there are 14 out of 52 weeks where you can implement this. Is this correct?

Mr. MICHL. Optimal weeks for deployment, sir, yes.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Right on. Do you have those like blocked off on a calendar?

Mr. MICHL. We do have versions of calendars for those.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Have you given a copy of that to Mr. Garcia?

Mr. MICHL. We have a road map, but it is probably not identified clearly. We could share——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Let us solve some problems here. Let us pretend like we are all enlisted people still. Sorry, Mr. Garcia. I want you to get a calendar, I want you to block off 14 out of 52 weeks where you can implement this and I want you to hand deliver to Mr. Garcia. Mr. Garcia, that is going to help you narrow down so you can answer my ranking member's question. You will be able to put your finger on this. I want to know when it is going to happen, because this is, again, completely unacceptable.

Are you familiar with the POA and M? Did you guys use that in the Air Force? Did you? You know what that stands for? Plans of Actions and Milestones. It is the way that you mission plan so that you kill terrorists because your guys are trained and women are trained and equipped and they are ready to go. Do you have the plans and actions of milestones developed for this program, which is going to cost over a billion, gazillion—I do not even know how much money it is going to cost. Do you have a written plan of action and milestone? Do you?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, it is in the integrated master schedule for the releases.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. If you have an integrated master schedule then either you have been disingenuous with me or it is a bad schedule, because if you have a schedule, sir, that means you have a calendar. If you have a calendar, you have dates on it. I am going to keep harping on this.

Okay. If you have time, Kyle, I would appreciate it, 14 weeks out of 52. Use a highlighter. Hand them to that dude. Mr. Garcia, I want you to put your finger on one of those weeks for us, and I want you to give it to this guy and to me. We are not doing this anymore. We are not doing bureaucratic gobbledygook and all that. We are not doing that.

Veterans risk their lives for us, as you did. They have earned these education benefits. They are not a gift. They will be able to exercise them and they are not going to have to worry about paying their rent because your 40 year old antiquated system does not

work and you cannot tell me when the new one is going to come
in. This is unacceptable and it will not be tolerated.

Mr. Garcia, it is you, it is not the Veterans Administration, it is
not a process or an organization, it is you as an individual. I re-
spect your service as a lieutenant colonel. You are a Mustang—that
is what we call them in the Navy. I respect that. With that respect
comes responsibility and you are responsible. With responsibility
comes accountability, and we are holding you accountable today. Is
that crystal clear, Mr. Garcia?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir, it is.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I appreciate that greatly.

Mr. Mueller, you guys are really quiet. I am sorry. I guess I do
not know if you are happy or not that you are not getting drilled.
I do not know. It is on either side of the fence.

Mr. Mueller, in 2018 one of the recommendations of your com-
pany was made to ensure that success of this project, which clearly
it has not been successful, was that the VA appoint a specific per-
son, like by name, one person, one stop shop, who would be held
accountable to shepherd this project, to champion it. Was that rec-
ommendation taken on board?

Mr. MUELLER. Thank you for the question.

Specific to that 2018 International Trade Administration (ITA)
recommendation, that was for the Forever G.I. Bill implementation.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes.

Mr. MUELLER. It was taken. It was identified as the undersecre-
tary of benefits at the time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Who was that?

Mr. MUELLER. That was Dr. Paul Lawrence.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Where did Paul go?

Mr. MUELLER. Well, no. That was the previous Forever G.I. Bill,
Colmery implementation. For the Digital G.I. Bill, the accountable
official is Mr. Garcia.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Aha. All roads lead to Garcia.

Mr. MUELLER. As I stated in my oral testimony, those rec-
ommendations were acted on——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. MUELLER. and carried through into the current moderniza-
tion program.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well.

Mr. Garcia, I believe that we have come to common accord and
I have presented my commander's intent. I understand that you
get what that means. Again, I respect your service tremendously.
I appreciate the fact that you have decided to continue serving our
Nation. I just want you to step up this game because all the an-
swers are there. Okay? Finger on calendar, please. I would appre-
ciate that greatly.

With that, I yield back and I recognize my ranking member, Mr.
Levin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the chairman again and promise this is my
last question for you. Although it might be one that we will have
to revisit in future hearings or future meetings.

In January 2022, the House passed with a broad bipartisan vote
the G.I. Bill parity legislation for Guard and Reserve. As we are
contemplating your timeline and your plan, which I know you are

going to provide to us after this back and forth, are you contemplating the possibility that we may be adding Guard and Reserve eligibility? If so, are you incorporating that into your thinking at all about the flexibility of more people that are all of a sudden going to be eligible for these benefits?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, we will take a look at anybody who is eligible that comes eligible, but I have to take that back and get that information to you.

Mr. LEVIN. In the last Congress we passed it in the House pretty overwhelmingly, and then the clock ran out with our friends in the Senate. We are just going to try again. It was not for a lack of interest or a lack of bipartisan agreement. The devil is always in the details on these things, but I think there is a reasonable possibility that in this Congress, next Congress, who knows. That is going to happen and we are going to see Guard and Reserve that are eligible. I think we learned a lot in the process and we are going to come back and hopefully get that across the finish line. I just want to make sure you guys are prepared if there are all of a sudden a lot more people who are eligible, that your system can handle it. Is that fair?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir. We will be prepared.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Again, I appreciate all that you are doing, and we look forward to seeing those timelines from you.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, ranking member.

I now recognize Chairman Rosendale from the great state of Montana.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Garcia and Mr. Michl, what does delaying the next release of the summer of 2024 do to the future releases seven, eight, nine, for both time and cost? If you could give a quick summary, what we could expect. Mr. Michl first and then Mr. Garcia, your estimate. Time and cost with the delay of seven, eight, and nine.

Mr. MICHL. Sir, so moving release six, there is a degree of critical path, so we need to analyze what can happen for future releases, seven, eight, and nine, but they will likely also need to move from current schedule.

Mr. ROSENDALE. That was stating the obvious, okay. I know that. What kind of time are we talking about though?

Mr. MICHL. Without additional inputs from the VA on what the scope is and how we want to address the dependencies, it is hard for me to speculate in that, sir.

Mr. ROSENDALE. You could not even estimate the time or cost on that? We are right in our schedule to have this project—the rollouts are supposed to be completed by the end of 24. Am I correct there? Okay. If we are not going to have version six rolled out until next summer, then clearly seven, eight, and nine are not going to be able to be rolled out until 25 or later, 26. Is that a safe assumption?

Mr. MICHL. As I said, sir——

Mr. ROSENDALE. Are you telling me that there is any realistic possibility that they would be able to be rolled out after the summer of 24? Seven, eight, and nine?

Mr. MICHL. Sir, we are looking at options to try to pull back pieces where it makes sense, but also recognize that a number of those are going to be dependent upon completing release six and getting final inputs from the VA.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Understood. If the VA gave you everything that you requested, are you telling me that there is any potential that you would be able to roll those out by the end of next year?

Mr. MICHL. Not in their entirety.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay.

Mr. Garcia, tell me, version six is not going to roll out until next summer. What do you think time and cost wise this is going to end up taking to complete this project?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, I agree with Mr. Michl. The schedule will be dependent on certain actions occurring first. I think the first commitment is at release six for the summer, seven, eight, nine will follow that. I cannot give you that time schedule right now. As far as the cost, MITRE will produce the life cycle cost estimate that will address that additional cost and provide that to you accordingly.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Both of you,—let us say we go beyond the time, because I think that we are stating the obvious again. You are not going to be able to get this work completed by the end of 24, unless something miraculous happens. The window of cost is somewhere between 1.3-and $1.9 billion. Can I at least get a commitment that you will not be coming back to this room and saying we ran out of time and we ran out of money?

Mr. GARCIA. The Undersecretary is committed to not coming back for additional funding.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. That does not make me sleep well, but I guess that is what we have right now.

Mr. Michl, is it true that the project will not be completed before your contract is slated to expire?

Mr. MICHL. Our contract has multiple option years out to, I believe 2029 or 2030. I am not sure that that is a true statement, sir.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Is it broken out to the actual implementation and the operation and maintenance? Are there provisions in there? The 2029 is probably the operation and maintenance cost, I would assume.

Mr. MICHL. It is, sir.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Do we have provisions in there that are going to end before you have the rollout completed? Because the rollout is not going to be completed by the end of next year. We are kidding ourselves. Does your contract call for that in version seven, eight, and nine—is that portion of the contract going to expire at the end of next year?

Mr. MICHL. I would have to take this—and get you more detail. I do not believe that there are details at that level within the contract and I think modifications——

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. We are going to need a copy of that so that we can see exactly how this is going to be able to proceed. Okay.

I am down to about 36 seconds here.

Mr. Garcia, the next DGIB release is on track for a 1 year delay. The project would not produce any new capability for an entire year. Do you think that is acceptable?

Mr. GARCIA. We will continue with other thing besides the major releases. Automation efforts that we have been talking about, other minor releases that occur, and the planning that will be in place along with testing to make sure that we will continue with those major releases in the future. It is not that we are stopping. We will continue to make progress.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay.

I yield back Mr. Chair. Thank you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would just like to make a couple closing remarks here.

I want to thank you all for coming. I appreciate it greatly. Mr. Garcia. Not a great afternoon for you. I appreciate that. I want you guys to come back here and I want to have a great day together. That is what I want. The sole intent of this subcommittee, the reason we exist in Congress, is to make sure that our veterans receive the benefits that they earned. They are not going to do that unless you step up your game. It is not going to happen. I expect you to be more proactive with us. I am telling you If we do not get the answers that we want in a timely manner, I will subpoena you. I will bring you here, and I will call CNN, and we will shine bright lights right in your eyes, and it will be a very bad day. I do not want to do that, but I will. It is not about me or you or Mr. Levin or Rosendale or anybody else here, it is about the person that does their time in the military, risk their lives, they leave their family, and they want to better themselves and become a productive member of society just as they were a productive member of the military, and they do that through education because education is the only way that you can free the mind. You know that.

We are going to get this done and we are going to get it done with you or we are going to get rid of you and we are going to find somebody else to do it because it has to happen. It is not an option. All right.

With that, I yield back.

I would like my ranking member—recognize him if you have any closing comments.

Mr. LEVIN. I cannot follow that.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Chairman Rosendale, do you have any closing comments?

Mr. ROSENDALE. Just look, thank you all for coming in. This is one system that started off really well and we just want to make sure it finishes well. That is all. We just want to make sure it finishes well. Let us not drop the ball at this point. Let us keep this thing going.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well.

I ask unanimous consent that all members may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material.

Without objection, so ordered.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:36 p.m., the subcommittees were adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENT OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Joseph Garcia

Chairmen Van Orden and Rosendale, Ranking Members Levin and Cherfilus-McCormick, and other Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA or the Department) Digital GI Bill (DGIB) program and the continued information technology system improvements and upgrades. Accompanying me today is Mr. Robert Orifici from the Office of Information and Technology (OIT).

To ensure VA serves all Veterans and their families seeking to use their GI Bill benefits and equip them with the tools and resources necessary to reach their academic and career goals, VA is modernizing the GI Bill's Information Technology (IT) platform to deliver benefits faster and enhance customer service. The goal of this effort is to develop a modern digital platform, leveraging cloud-based automation, digital service transformation, human-centered design, world-class communications, analytics, and other important IT services. The improvements will provide world-class customer and benefit services to Veterans and VA's partners, enabling more timely and accurate delivery of education benefits, providing near real-time eligibility and benefit information, and allowing for first contact resolution.

Digital GI Bill Overview

Each year, approximately 200,000 Service members transition from the military to civilian life. Over 875,000 Veterans, Service members, and family members used VA education benefits last year alone, receiving nearly $10 billion in education and training-related benefits. The GI Bill provides an opportunity to skill up for the civilian workforce by expanding opportunities for Service members, Veterans, and eligible family members to pursue their academic goals, enhancing the nation's economic strength with innovative programs that support employment in high-demand fields and enriching lives by giving beneficiaries the tools they need to further their education to lead to fulfilling careers.

On March 11, 2021, VA awarded a contract to Accenture Federal Services, which has partnered with VA Education Service (EDU) and VA OIT to develop the DGIB. DGIB is a modernized business platform that will feature world-class customer and financial services to enable timely and accurate delivery of payments, real-time eligibility and benefit information. This new platform will provide an end-to-end systems management perspective to ensure proper compliance and oversight of GI Bill programs and will allow the use of data and business intelligence tools to monitor and measure school and student outcomes. Using this platform, GI Bill students will have the ability to engage with VA and their earned benefits through electronic outreach, intake and communication tools for on-the-spot service.

Claims and Automation

Process automation is key for improving a veteran's GI Bill experience. VA is striving to meet the goal of automating 50 percent of original claims and 80 percent of supplemental claims. In just six months after the contract was awarded, VA successfully deployed the processing of Post–9/11 GI Bill claims to the DGIB Managed Service, marking the first major milestone in the modernization journey. The Managed Service allows for agile decision-making in a single, managed platform that grows with VA's needs and responds to changes in technology through continuous end-to-end updates.

Since the beginning of the program in March 2021 VA has identified and resolved more than 20 automation improvement opportunities for original and supplemental claims. Through multiple releases, VA has made significant improvements in claims processing. In May 2023, the full automation rate for supplemental claims was at 61.7 percent, 12.7 percent percentage points higher than the 49.0 percent automation rate in May 2022 and 26.7 percent higher than the program baseline automation rate of 35 percent in May 2021. In February 2023, VA automated a record 68 percent of supplemental claims, automating the processing of 188,000 claims.

VA's automation efforts to this point have created more streamlined processes, updated tracking systems, eliminated redundancies, and reduced overall manual intervention required from Veterans Claims Examiners (VCEs).

FY	CH33 Supplemental Claims Processed	CH33 Supplemental Claims Automated	Percent CH33 Supplemental Claims Automated
2019	2,284,340	872,750	38.21%
2020	2,356,732	875,975	37.17%
2021	2,288,125	1,079,945	47.20%
2022	2,556,949	1,323,301	51.75%
2023*	1,754,572	1,006,774	57.38
Grand Total	11,240,718	5,158,745	45.89%

*FYTD as of June 23rd

For the first time since the inception of the program, almost 80 years ago, many GI Bill applicants can receive a same-day education benefits eligibility decision, thanks to a simplified Post–9/11 GI Bill application experience enabled by DGIB. It provides Veterans the ability to download and view digital copies of their Certificate of Eligibility and decision letters, so Veterans no longer need to wait up to five days for a paper copy to arrive in the mail. Through the integration with VA/Department of Defense Identity Repository (VADIR), Veterans may now experience pre-filled service history when entering an online application for original claims, and no longer need to enter that information by hand. VA continues its efforts to improve automation, identifying and actively working on the following seven automation improvement opportunities as of June 2023:

1. Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) CH33 Supplemental End Product (EP) Creation

2. Enrollment Manager (EM) non-standard remarks

3. EM Mandate (7/1/23)

4. Automate My Education Benefits (MEB) Transfer of Entitlement (TOE) Claims

5. Automate Non-College Degree (NCD) Claims

6. CH33 Award Letter Modernization

7. Release 6 Enterprise Management of Payments, workload, and Reporting (eMPWR) switch

Recent Accomplishments

In the most recent DGIB major release in March 2023, VA deployed EM to help School Certifying Officials (SCOs) at educational institutions process enrollments more efficiently. This will help SCOs submit enrollments faster, allowing them more time to assist GI Bill students in reaching their educational goals. In only 3 months since EM launched, VA surpassed one million enrollment certifications received. Over 14,000 SCOs from over 10,000 institutions are using EM to deliver earned benefits to Veterans and their families faster than ever before. In the legacy system, VA Online Certification of Enrollment System (VA-ONCE), claims took approximately one business day for the Long-Term Solution system to process during business hours. In EM, claims are created from school inputs within 5 minutes, during business hours, which is 96 times faster than before. Finally, rapid releases of additional functionality continue monthly demonstrating agility, including 28 new requirements and 61 new user stories developed in releases 5.2.0.1–5.2.2. between March and June 2023.

In future releases, Veterans, their families, SCOs, and other partners can expect to see more user experience enhancements. For example, GI Bill beneficiaries will benefit from a streamlined application process, improved processing times and faster eligibility decisions and entitlement adjudications, allowing them to focus on their education and career goals. Through VA's modernization efforts and the removal of redundant processes, VA is increasing efficiency while allowing its employees and SCOs to focus on the mission of supporting Veterans and their families.

Challenges

Implementing a Managed Service and improving automation involves integrating numerous complex IT systems and decommissioning decades old systems. For example, in navigating the complexity of decommissioning BDN, the DGIB team continues to prioritize the development of system requirements that can be readily implemented. By applying an all-hands-on-deck approach, VA has been successful in creating a realistic plan to transition legacy systems into the Managed Service. However, VA acknowledges several challenges during this transition, such as a March 2023 issue that affected Monthly Housing Allowance payments.

As with any major issue, VA immediately established an incident response team comprised of OIT experts, analysts, and engineers, to identify and resolve the problem in several days and ensure payments were completed. Through review of logs, processes, and code, the root cause was identified as a configuration applied to the payment queuing service as part of Release 5 on March 4, 2023. The configuration triggered an unexpected pause in the payment queuing service. However, thanks to valiant efforts of many employees at both VA and the Department of Treasury, payments were still able to be released that day, although later in the day than originally planned. As part of our post-incident analysis, VA conducted a thorough review of the infrastructure and processes to identify potential vulnerabilities and ensure appropriate safeguards are in place. Specifically, multiple actions were taken to mitigate this in the future, including auditing of configuration for service condition execution establishing additional business operations checks, and expanding operations testing prior to Go-Live. These actions were driven by a commitment to protect our organization's operations and to preserve trust with those we serve. Working with Accenture Federal Services, our contracting team, and OIT, VA is confident that appropriate safeguards are in place to prevent similar incidents in the future. Additionally, these specific issues were added to how VA examines all managed services across all benefits portfolios to ensure similar safeguards are in place across the enterprise.

Other challenges include limitations on the availability and number of testing environments that have affected the overall timeline; and the urgency of BDN shutdown has driven much of the timeline and implementation capabilities delaying other automation and modernization goals of the program. The mainframe manufacturer and support company for BDN announced that there will be no continued support moving forward due to lack of resources and equipment. Also contributing to the urgency of BDN shutdown is the fact that most of the remaining education benefit payment systems began development and were implemented in the 1970's using outdated programming tools and techniques that are no longer viable. The human resource pool is aging out and finding new developers is very difficult. As a result, BDN costs VA in excess of $20M+ per year which is compounded by an increasing scarcity of replacement parts and human resources. The amalgamation of these challenges has subsequently delayed the overarching ability to apply technical solutions to increase automation throughput, which impacts the requirement for maintaining current level of full-time employees to manually process Education claims. Additionally, the current contractual adjustment allows for the inclusion of automation improvements not found in the initial contract.

VA is also navigating through external dependencies and complex integrations with DoD's information, namely VADIR. VA is taking an agile approach to be flexible in addressing service changes in VADIR that impact critical systems integration and data ingestion. Due to service changes in the way data is delivered within VADIR, a higher rate of off-ramping resulted, which occurs when a claim is removed from the automated process and reverts to manual processing. Consequently, automation rates trended toward 49 percent, which was a drop from the increased rates that had been achieved by the Managed Service. Automation of Post–9/11 GI Bill claims is fluctuating due to these ongoing VADIR service changes, but rates are expected to return to higher levels over the next several months. VA is already seeing this happen as automation rates have returned to the mid–50s percentile range previously mentioned. Additionally, VA is developing a permanent solution to the excess off-ramping by incorporating additional service data from VADIR.

These back-end system improvements are improving claims processing, reducing redundancies, and enhancing the overall GI Bill experience for students as well as VA's partners. In line with its overall program objectives, VA is continuing its commitment to measuring and improving automation of Post–9/11 GI Bill claims and will continue to take an agile approach to address and navigate complex external dependencies.

DGIB Releases

Since March 2021, VA has deployed six major releases and several smaller releases to modernize GI Bill services and deliver benefits faster, provide better customer service and strengthen its compliance and oversight activities.

Release 1: Successful Legislation Implementation

On July 31, 2021, VA successfully rolled out its first DGIB release, which implemented requirements associated with the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, and added functionality to increase automation. Most notably, the release incorporated legislative updates which included providing a simple and secure method for non-college degree (NCD) students to verify monthly enrollment via text, a desired method based on user feedback. VA's updates incorporated changes for five provisions of the law: Section 1001: Rogers STEM Scholarship improvements; Section 1005: Requirements for In-State Tuition; Section 1010: Monthly Enrollment Verification; Section 1019: Overpayments to Eligible Persons or Veterans; and Section 1020: Improvements to Limitation on Certain Advertising, Sales and enrollment practices. Implementation of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 required multiple, complex IT updates during an unprecedented pandemic and demonstrated VA's ability to modernize while systematically implementing critical pieces of legislation impacting GI Bill beneficiaries.

Release 2: Launching the DGIB Managed Service

On September 29, 2021, just 6 months into the DGIB contract, VA activated the DGIB Managed Service, providing for improved processing of Post–9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims and marking a major step in the modernization journey. This involved migrating data from VA's legacy environment so that VCEs could process Post–9/11 GI Bill benefits in the DGIB Managed Service platform. The Managed Service enables VA to be better prepared to initiate end-to-end updates, minimize downtime, accommodate agile decision-making, more quickly respond to legislative changes and reduce manual and redundant processes. With Release 2, VA took additional major steps in transforming GI Bill claims processing. As VA continues to bring legacy systems into its Managed Service, efficiency and user experience will continue to improve for VA employees and Veterans alike.

Release 3: Introducing Enrollment Verification via Email

On January 15, 2022, VA expanded the rollout of Section 1010 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 to students attending Institutions of Higher Learning, added an email verification option, and deployed additional capabilities designed to make enrollment-related processes faster and simpler than ever before. With this release, over 300,000 GI Bill students are now able to verify their enrollment status each month via email or text message to receive their monthly housing allowance and/or kicker payments. This release expanded upon VA's successful rollout of text-message verification to the NCD facility population (approximately an additional 30,000 GI Bill students) in August 2021. Additionally, release 3 enhanced system capabilities to refine and improve automation of supplemental claims processing for Post–9/11 GI Bill students.

Release 4: Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Managed Service Go-Live

On April 16, 2022, VA deployed Release 4 of the DGIB, providing additional Post–9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims processing improvements by removing certain off-ramps and decreasing manual processing actions for VCEs to enable faster claims processing. This release also migrated the processing of VET TEC claims to the Managed Service, which includes entry of VET TEC applications, calculation of VET TEC awards for enrollments and terminations with and without amendments and manual upload of letters for VET TEC claimants. This will result in improved processing of VET TEC claims.

Release 5: Improved Application Experience for First-Time Applicants

On August 20, 2022, VA made applying for the Post–9/11 GI Bill on VA.gov easier than ever for eligible Veterans and Service members who have verified their identity through ID.me or Login.gov and are applying for the first time. By streamlining and automating the Post–9/11 GI Bill application experience, VA is now able to pre-fill service history for some Veterans and Service Members and provide them with eligibility decisions within seconds, and give them quick access to digital copies of eligibility letters and a better user experience with intuitive designs.

Release 6: Enrollment Manager Launch

On March 4, 2023, VA successfully launched EM, which replaced VA-ONCE. This new system modernizes the process for SCOs to certify and submit student enrollments, streamlines user experience, and improves claims processing. Since its launch, over 10,000 education providers have used EM to process more than 1 million enrollments.

Future State

The future State of the DGIB is driven by the people who support and receive benefits from the GI Bill program, leveraging human-centered design (HCD). The end-users – including Veterans and their families – are at the center of the experience. The future state will seek to deliver the experience end users desire, by identifying both pain points and the experiences they enjoy when interacting with other websites and commercial entities. DGIB leverages the HCD process to inform updates to the program roadmap. To support this, HCD User Feedback Sessions are conducted with GI Bill students, SCOs, State Approving Agencies (SAAs) and internal VA staff to understand user experience, pain points and areas for improvement and a research readout was created to summarize findings. This feedback informs the design stage where ideas are designed to address pain points and opportunities during concepting and sketching sessions. Before moving on to development, testing and validation of prototypes with different internal and external users is completed to measure success and feasibility of designs. The benefit of DGIB's HCD approach continuously puts the end-user at the center of the modernization and experience that we are creating. In 2024, VA plans to deploy further business capabilities including:

- CH 33 Automation Improvement
- Approval Manager
- Web Enabled Approval Management System (WEAMS) Consolidation
- Workload Manager
- Image Management System (TIMS)/eFolder Migration
- Chapter 33 eMPWR-VA Interface
- Payment Service

VA is developing a new capability, Approval Manager, to replace WEAMS, as we continue to move functionality into the DGIB Managed Service. Approval Manager will be the new system for Education Liaison Representatives, SAAs, and VA staff to approve new programs for education benefits. Approval Manager will help improve the end user interface, save Education Service staff time generating Compliance Survey Worksheets, and streamline the profile for each school, including a consolidated list of all SCO and Point of Contact types, as well as a single page that displays all programs by approval status. Additionally, Approval Manager's connection with Enrollment Manager will help more quickly reflect any changes to a school or program in Enrollment Manager.

Another new capability, Workload Manager, will replace TIMS as the new method for VCEs to view and manage workload of GI Bill claims that need processing. This system will connect with My Education Benefits (the VA.gov site where GI Bill students go to apply or receive updates on their education benefits) and Benefits Manager (a future DGIB microsystem in which VCEs will create and update claims) to transform how they are assigned tasks. Workload Manager will bridge the gap from a Veteran's application to the claims processing end of Benefits Manager. A VCE will review new claims in Workload Manager, create work credits, and route it to Benefits Manager for processing.

The DGIB team is continuing to make enhancements which contribute to direct, online, one-stop access to education benefit resources. These changes will continue the evolution of a Managed Service that increases efficiency and reduces manual processes, allowing VA to focus more on serving Veterans and their families.

Reassessment

VA is committed to ensuring the DGIB program and continued system improvement and upgrades provide optimal support of student Veterans and the SCOs that support them. Additionally, VA will continue to be an effective steward of all taxpayer provided resources. VA has worked with Accenture Federal Services on a modification to the current contract to meet emerging requirements, clarify testing capabilities and add additional integrations to other VA systems. VA has reviewed a proposal from the vendor to ensure that the needs of VA are met and the impacts to cost and schedule are well understood. VA is working toward a course of action

to address cost, risk and business-related concerns and will continue to work closely with AFS to ensure VA's needs are addressed. Although we are proceeding with a sense of urgency, sufficient time will be allotted to validate that the key objectives will be met.

Communications with Partners

VA continues to advance its ability to effectively speak directly with students, schools, and other partners. To increase awareness of how DGIB releases positively impact VA GI Bill students' and partners' experiences, it is making targeted outreach efforts to effectively communicate GI Bill modernization updates to partners. With an omnichannel outreach strategy, VA is amplifying awareness and increasing adoption of complex IT and policy changes. In the months leading up to the deployment of Enrollment Manager, VA reached out to over 91,000 SCOs and administrators through 68 emails. VA used both the SCO in the Know and SAA newsletters, to amplify tips and IT updates for using EM effectively. VA also closely monitored questions that the Education Call Center (ECC) receives to address students' and SCO's most pressing questions in VA communication efforts and help alleviate ECC call volume.

In Winter 2022, VA EDU hosted three SCO EM Soft Launch Events at GI Bill schools to validate Enrollment Manager during the transition period. The schools included American University, George Mason University, and GT Aviation. VA was able to identify required system updates in real-time, triaging and addressing them with the DGIB development team. All updates were taken back, and several were addressed immediately while others were addressed for implementation in future releases. VA also conducted six virtual training sessions covering the EM experience, providing SCOs an opportunity to ask questions and get a final look at Enrollment Manager before it went live.

VA Education Service also recognized that the successful rollout of EM required not only the system to be up and running, but pre-and-post go-live support for end users to drive system adoption. The ECC alone was not enough to support SCOs questions; SCOs needed system experts who could walk through their questions with them. In March 2023 in tandem with Enrollment Manager go-live, VA stood up a Customer Experience Group (CEG) to triage questions and issues in real time. Externally, the CEG connected with the SCO hotline and provided a means to escalate certain SCO questions to a one-on-one over-the-shoulder setting using Adobe Captivate; internally, VA had daily meetings with stakeholders to work together to identify, discuss, triage and work through issues. During its 2-month run, the CEG responded to over 9,700 calls from SCOs, initiated more than 3,000 Adobe Connect sessions to provide more detailed assistance, and created over 100 Service Now tickets to track potential IT updates required in Enrollment Manager.

The rollout of the new system, including first call resolution of SCO questions and issues, garnered accolades from SCOs and Veterans Service Organizations. One SCO who called the CEG and worked together to submit an enrolment said, "Is that it? Wow, that's amazing, this is so simple. Are you sure there isn't more buttons to press? Enrollment Manager is one and done!" In the month leading up to the Enrollment Manager deployment, VA's GI Bill Enrollment Manager videos reached over 11,000 views on VBA's YouTube channel and 2,500 individuals on the Post–9/11 GI Bill Facebook page. In addition, over 220 SCOs posted comments and questions regarding the Digital GI Bill's newest interface, Enrollment Manager. Through VA's outreach efforts and communication platforms, it is committed to informing its partners and listening to Veterans' needs.

In tandem with its modernization efforts, VA EDU delivers communications and messaging to students and schools via multiple channels. VA EDU produces newsletters for students, schools, and SAAs as an opportunity to streamline delivery of GI Bill updates but also to provide additional services and resources from VA. Past newsletters have included updates to the Veterans Crisis Line, legislative updates and VA hiring opportunities. Communication campaigns are done via email, video, blogs, training updates and social media to ensure students and schools are receiving information in multiple ways, but also through different channels to increase its effectiveness and awareness.

Conclusion

Chairmen, VA has made tremendous strides in the administration of VA education benefits in recent years through modernization efforts. Many lessons have been learned along the way, and VA continues to seek feedback from partners and find ways to improve education benefits delivery through modernization. VA looks forward to continued opportunities to work with Congress to address Veterans' concerns and provide a better GI Bill experience. VA appreciates the support of these

Committees as VA continues its effort to modernize VA educational assistance programs. This concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I look forward to responding to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittees may have.

————

Prepared Statement of Troy Mueller

Chairman Van Orden and Rosendale, Ranking Members Cherfilus-McCormick and Levin, and other Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on matters relating to the Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) Digital GI Bill program. Successful modernization of legacy IT is critical to improving the veteran experience. 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 six FFRDCs. The Center for Enterprise Modernization was established in 1998 by the Department of Treasury and we have been proud to support many modernization efforts under that FFRDC, which is now jointly sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Commerce and the Social Security Administration (SSA). Currently, I am a Department Head in MITRE's Center for Government Effectiveness and Modernization, responsible for directing our support to modernization of benefits and service delivery across all Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) lines of business. 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 which operates the National Cybersecurity Center of Excellence; the Federal Aviation Administration; and the Department of Homeland Security.

As an Air Force veteran, I know firsthand that serving in the military opens the door to many benefits including the life-changing opportunity to access higher education. Education benefits span those entering the service through officer training programs, tuition assistance and fully funded degree programs while on active duty, and the GI Bill and other education programs for veterans and their families. I myself have benefited from each of these programs. I received an Air Force ROTC scholarship for my undergraduate degree. I completed my master's degree under tuition assistance, and I earned a doctorate via the Post–9/11 GI Bill. If not for these benefits, I would not be sitting here before you today. Supporting the VA's mission is not merely a job or an assignment, it's personal. It's my way of giving back.

A Trusted Partner

MITRE has been a partner with Education Service since 2008. We were brought on board to support the implementation of The Post–9/11 Veterans' Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post–9/11 GI Bill). MITRE worked alongside Education Service, its VBA partners, and the Office of Information Technology (OIT) to help drive development of a new system to process Post–9/11 GI Bill claims.

Education Service again reached out to MITRE in 2019 to prepare for an extensive modernization of their claims processing systems. MITRE worked with Education Service to draw up the Modernization Value Proposition to include the path forward for modernizing claims processing and customer service, providing direct, online, one-stop access to GI Bill benefits and information. Speed and simplicity are essential for veterans trying to access their benefits while facing college application deadlines. This modernization vision is a transition to a holistic service that improves user experiences across the entire internal and external environment.

MITRE's role has focused on providing strategic advice, guidance, and assistance in the areas of systems engineering, program integration, and organizational change. Representative activities include formulating a concept of operations, eliciting operational requirements, co-creating acquisition artifacts, developing the life cycle cost estimate, establishing and refining program governance and management processes, assessing organizational impacts of modernization, and providing recommendations to improve stakeholder communications and outreach. Most recently, MITRE worked closely with Education Service to establish a new Program Management Office to ensure effective oversight and governance for the program by developing standard operating procedures, implementing new change control processes, developing a change management roadmap and communications plan, crafting customer experience group implementation plans, and conducting PMO capability gap and staffing analyses.

A Record of Accomplishment

Over the past three-plus years, the Digital GI Bill program has had many accomplishments delivering six major releases, including providing the ability for same-day education benefits eligibility decisions, allowing access to digital copies of Certificate of Eligibility (COE) and decision letters, and deployment of Enrollment Manager, a capability that compressed the time of claim creation from school inputs to less than 5 minutes.

The integrated DGIB team is extremely sensitive to the impact of time on veterans and beneficiaries. Delays in processing could drive a semester or entire academic year-long delay for some students as some degree completion or accelerated graduate programs only start once a year. These delays are not just start dates for school, they are delays in pursuing dreams and achieving life goals.

In addition to program delivery accomplishments, the VA has demonstrated gains in maturity regarding program governance, execution, and decision-making. In September 2018, MITRE was tasked to conduct an independent technical assessment of the implementation of Sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act, or Forever GI Bill, which resulted in 20 recommendations. The acceptance and implementation of these recommendations contributed not only to the December 1, 2019, on-time delivery of capability, but these lessons of cross-VA partnership, accountability, and bias for action have influenced the structure and execution of the DGIB program and other VBA modernization programs.

Programs of this size and complexity intended to modernize an environment of multiple legacy systems with numerous dependencies in an enterprise that includes parallel modernization efforts are never without risks. VBA to its credit is currently conducting a strategic review of this program as part of an effort to identify and evaluate opportunities to improve delivery of benefits and services. This review is an example of using governance, processes, tools, and experienced staff to illuminate challenges, craft options, and propose adjustments and improvements that will increase the probability of future success. The outcome of this review will position the VA to maintain a rhythm of capability delivery while ensuring good stewardship of the taxpayers' dollars.

Recommendations

Recognizing that there will always be challenges, complexity, and risks, I have two recommendations to share with you.

The first recommendation is to encourage the VA to continue to mature its contracting and program management capabilities and ensure proper allocation and alignment of resources with demonstrated knowledge, skills, and experience to appropriate programs and projects. A contracting officer with extensive experience procuring commodities is not the same as one who has worked on and led development and execution of exquisite acquisition strategies for large, complex transformational programs impacting entire enterprises. The same can be said of program managers. Both are scarce resources that require agencies to be deliberate about career development and assignments.

The second recommendation is for the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs to continue the direct monthly engagement of their staff with Education Service. This meeting, which started during the Colmery Act implementation, has become a critical part of the battle rhythm of the DGIB program, just as important as program increment planning sessions, technical working groups, and program governance meetings including the executive steering committee. From our vantage point, these monthly engagements promote transparency, provide the opportunity for dialog, and contribute to the momentum of risk and issue identification, mitigation, and decision-making on the program.

In closing, let me just note that of MITRE's roughly 10,000 personnel, over 1,600 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 today, and I look forward to your questions.

————

Prepared Statement of Kyle Michl

Chairman Van Orden, Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Levin, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, and members of the Subcommittees on Economic Opportunity and Technology Modernization, thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing. I am Kyle Michl, the Senior Delivery Lead for the Digital GI Bill ("DGIB") Delivery Program and the Chief Innovation Officer of Accenture Federal Services ("Accenture Federal" or the "Company"). We are proud to testify here today

with our client and partner, the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs ("VA"), and our colleagues from MITRE, on our joint efforts to modernize and improve GI Bill claims processing for beneficiaries including Veterans, service members, and their dependents.

Accenture Federal Services

Accenture Federal is a leading U.S. federal services company and subsidiary of Accenture LLP. For more than four decades, we have helped clients in defense, national security, public safety, civilian, and military health organizations take on the demands of their mission, mandate, or moment. We put our clients at the forefront of change, harnessing it to solve the country's mission-critical challenges. Our teams bring the most advanced R&D, latest technologies, and human-centered design together with the power and commercial innovation of Accenture's global network to help clients achieve desired outcomes and build a digital core that fuels continuous innovation and creates value for their customers, workforce, and partners. Mission success is at the heart of everything we do, and we are privileged to advance our clients' priorities, particularly as we serve our Veteran community through our work with VA.

Accenture Federal has a longstanding partnership with VA collaborating on programs that deliver meaningful outcomes for Veterans, service members, and their families. For example, Accenture Federal was selected to successfully implement the Harry W. Colmery Act—delivering mission-critical VA Education Service claims processing that Veterans rely on for timely, accurate disbursement of payments. We support the VA Home Loan Program by providing development, security, and operations of Loan Guaranty ("LGY") systems, and platform configuration and implementation alongside VA's Office of Information and Technology's ("OIT's") Service Management Office.

I have worked for Accenture for 26 years and had the privilege to serve our government clients for nearly 20 years. I have been a member of our federal leadership team since July 2020 when I became Accenture Federal's Chief Innovation Officer. In that role, I focus on bringing the best of emerging technologies to help our clients modernize and transform their business. Over the years, I have delivered large scale programs for both civilian and defense agencies and took on the Senior Delivery Lead role for the VA DGIB program in May 2022.

DGIB Program History and Successes

Since March 2021, Accenture Federal has supported VA under the DGIB Delivery Program to improve access for Veterans to the educational benefits they have earned. Together, we are streamlining education claims processing and transforming systems for VA's Veterans Benefits Administration ("VBA") through human-centered design, service modernization, analytics, training, communications, and other services. With DGIB, we are creating simple digital experiences to help Veterans and their families complete their educational journeys more efficiently. In addition to transforming the user experience, the DGIB Program enables implementation of legislation in a more rapid and agile manner, including the Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020. Below are examples of how this program is serving Veterans:

- **Continuous Delivery of Meaningful Outcomes**: VA and Accenture Federal have delivered six major releases, as well as a regular cadence of smaller, agile releases to our platform. With each release, VA provides requirements for Accenture Federal to implement within VA's complex ecosystem of policy, procedures, and integrated systems. In addition to providing enhanced Veteran and stakeholder services, these releases are aimed at driving automation and improving time to receipt of benefits. Together, VA and Accenture Federal have made significant strides in areas including user experience, service enhancements, program insights, and processing efficiencies. Release spotlights include:

- **Intuitive User Experience & Rapid Decisions for Eligible First-Time Beneficiaries**: We delivered new functionality for beneficiaries applying for their Post–9/11 GI Bill benefits for the first time. Through new, intuitive designs and updated functionalities—such as a pre-filled service history function—we have streamlined and simplified the process to apply for Post–9/11 GI Bill benefits, making it easier than ever to complete. By reducing eligibility processing from 30 days down to a matter of minutes, as well as providing the ability to retrieve digital copies of decision letters, we are helping applicants start their educational journey faster than ever before. For the first time in the GI Bill's 79-year history, these enhancements automate original claims.

- **Providing Schools Modernized Claim Capabilities**: After beneficiaries start their educational journey, School Certifying Officials ("SCOs") are the front door to continuing and completing their educational goals. To better serve SCOs' Veteran-focused mission, we introduced Enrollment Manager—replacing a decades old legacy system—streamlining the process to submit enrollments for students. More than 15,000 SCOs have accessed Enrollment Manager since launch. The new system has reduced the number of steps to enter an enrollment to as few as five (5) clicks, and, already, more than 1.4M enrollments have been submitted. Most importantly, SCOs now have more time to focus on what matters most—helping Veterans, service members, and their families meet and exceed their educational goals.
- **24/7 Chat Support for Schools**: With the release of the new GI Bill Chatbot, SCOs now have live 24/7 support and quick access to answers and key information. Since the release, there have been over 7,000 sessions with SCOs resulting in a decreased number of calls to the VA Education Call Center (ECC) and real-time triage of questions from schools. This new functionality helps SCOs rapidly complete accurate claims to support beneficiaries.
- **Powering Meaningful Employment for Veterans**: We migrated the processing of VET TEC claims—a pilot program aimed at connecting Veterans to with leading technology training programs and employment—to DGIB. The results are improved processing of claims and monitoring of Veteran training and attainment of meaningful employment.
- **Omni-Channel Communication Outreach to GI Bill Beneficiaries**: By adding new email and text message enrollment verification options, we reduced the risk of students having their payments withheld, all without overwhelming the VA Education Call Center ("ECC"). This implements part of Section 1010 within the Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, which requires students to verify enrollment for housing allowance and/or kicker payments. This is just one example of many agile legislative implementation successes.

- **Demonstrated Claim Automation Improvement**: By automating the first original claim in VA Education Service history, DGIB increased original automation rates from 0 percent to 32 percent in May 2023. For supplemental claims, the automation rate in May 2023 was 62 percent, 13 percentage points higher than the same month last year and 27 percentage points higher than when DGIB efforts began. Notably, DGIB achieved a record high supplemental claim automation rate of 68 percent in February 2023.
- **Modernized Legacy Systems**: With streamlined VA processes and our new technology platform, we have achieved a 99.99 percent system availability rate for claims processing and we are helping VA decommission antiquated legacy IT systems to improve the speed and accuracy of its education claims processes. We have sunset a number of legacy systems, including retiring two of the three largest legacy systems. As part of our modernization efforts, we have exceeded DGIB's three-year IT infrastructure reduction targets. The improvements provide enhanced user experience, near real-time eligibility and benefits information, and more timely and accurate delivery of education services to hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries annually.
- **Analytic Insights Powering Service Improvements**: A recently deployed new DGIB analytics capability provides several benefits, such as enabling certain reports to be completed in hours rather than days. This new capability acts as a single source of data for ad hoc requests, and providing a foundation for AI use cases that may include claims optimization, operations, user experience, automation, fraud detection, compliance, and oversight.
- **Award Winning Transformation Approaches**: Working with VA, we are reimagining the GI Bill experience in other ways by driving transparency and outcomes and keeping stakeholders informed. To help communicate awareness, impact, and outcomes, we have applied an omni-channel, comprehensive, data-driven approach for key stakeholder groups (e.g., beneficiaries, SCOs, employers, State Approving Agencies ("SAAs"), Congress, Veterans Service Organizations ("VSOs"), and media outlets). This includes over 500 email campaigns, 35 videos, in-person outreach events, and hundreds of social media campaigns to successfully reach nearly two million stakeholders. The results—recognized by the 2022 International Marcom and PR Daily Awards—have successfully increased the awareness of the GI Bill, further enabling more Veterans, service

members, and families to achieve their educational goals, increasing their opportunities and lifetime earnings.

Path Forward

A large complex program like DGIB has numerous dependencies,[1] both within and external to the program. Recognizing this, VA and Accenture Federal have established governance processes to identify risks early and assess impacts. Accenture Federal worked jointly with VA to outline and agree to an updated roadmap, key dependencies, and target schedule. Subsequently, gaps were identified in the availability and number of planned VA testing environments and the timelines for external non-DGIB system development. Together, VA and Accenture Federal have continued to make progress on DGIB milestones while jointly working through options to address the gaps in these dependencies.

We are actively engaged with VA to replan future releases and address challenges to the path forward. We have worked closely with VA to outline potential options for a path forward while continuing to fulfill program commitments. Given the significant progress made jointly with VA on future release capabilities, we are optimistic our partnership with VA will continue to provide world-class modernized services to Veteran beneficiaries. This includes deploying developed capabilities like Approval Manager, Workload Manager, and Benefits Manager that will replace aging legacy systems with modern technologies and digital experiences.

Conclusion

We remain steadfast in our commitment to deliver modernization, improve user experience through human centered design, seamlessly implement legislation, execute a clearly defined communications and training strategy, and integrate legacy IT systems to make a dramatic difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Veterans, service members, and their families. Through the use of innovative technologies, we are strengthening the foundation that provides agile, rapid deployments, improved automation, and enhanced data insight using machine learning. We are proud to help VA bring to life its truly bold DGIB vision. This transformation puts Veterans at the heart of the experience and positions VA as a leader in providing benefits. Our focus will always be on delivering the best outcomes for our client, for Veterans and for the American taxpayer.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

○

---

[1] A dependency refers to any number of prerequisite requirements for contract performance. Numerous contract dependencies exist with respect to other VA programs.