

**Testimony of Troy J. Mueller, Sc.D.**  
**Before the Subcommittees on Economic Opportunity and Technology Modernization**  
**of the**  
**House Veterans Affairs Committee**  
**July 13, 2023**

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 reached out to MITRE again 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 dialogue, 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.