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Accenture Federal Services

Hearing before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs' Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

"Digital GI Bill in Disarray: Holding the Biden-Harris Administration Accountable for VA's Costly Mismanagement."

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Intro

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing. I am Justin Parke, Accenture Federal Services ("Accenture Federal") Managing Director, a member of Accenture Federal Leadership, and Digital GI Bill ("DGIB") Program Manager leading the implementation and operations of Accenture Federal DGIB systems. We are happy to testify with our client, the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs ("VA"), on the progress we've made to improve the GI Bill experience for Veterans and their families.

About Accenture Federal Services

Accenture Federal Services is a leading U.S. federal services company and a subsidiary of Accenture LLP. For more than four decades, we have helped clients in defense, national security, public safety, civilian, and federal health organizations take on the demands of their mission, mandate, or moment.

Our teams bring enterprise-grade transformation capabilities and the most advanced technologies and human-centered design together with the power of commercial innovation of Accenture's global network to help clients achieve desired outcomes and mission success. 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.

I have worked for Accenture for 17 years and I am a member of Accenture Federal Leadership. Additionally, I have had the honor of serving our VA clients since 2019 as the Accenture Federal Services Program Manager working with the Veterans Benefits Administration ("VBA") Education Service, Office of Information & Technology ("OIT"), Office of Business Integration (OBI) and MITRE on the timely and successful implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Act. Then and now this interdisciplinary team works closely together to improve the technologies, processes and communications supporting education benefits delivery, while reducing legacy technical debt. It is vitally important to get these programs right to deliver Veterans the benefits they have earned. Under the VA's leadership and guidance, I am confident in this team's continuing ability to do so.

A Challenging Task

Modernization of a VA program that provides more than $10B in education benefits to 860,000 beneficiaries annually is no small feat. The VA has made multiple attempts over the past several decades to transition education benefits payment processing off of the Benefits Delivery Network ("BDN"). The simple fact that this has been attempted at various points throughout recent history underscores the complexity in orchestrating the people, process, technology and data considerations required to support this transition. With this goal in mind, DGIB is also not simply conducting a lift and shift of existing, outdated functionality. We are using this opportunity to fix long-standing challenges experienced by VA, Veterans and school administrators with these legacy technologies, including general usability and system responsiveness, out-of-system workarounds that over time became standard practice, missing or inaccurate data, and lacking or missing integrations with DoD and VA enterprise systems. These challenges, and the failed historical attempts to surmount them, invited the innovative decision to adopt an agile delivery and contracting approach that could expand as necessary to achieve the program's objectives. Accenture Federal Services was up to the challenge.

DGIB Achievements

Since the competitive contract award in March 2021, Accenture Federal Services has supported VA under the DGIB Modernization effort to deliver benefits easier, faster and more accurately than ever before. DGIB continues to deliver positive outcomes for Veterans, beneficiaries, school certifying officials ("SCOs") and VA staff by enhancing VA education benefits processing systems and automation, streamlining the GI Bill benefits application process, implementing automation, and improving access to and utilization of data, and, most recently, aligning claim and payment processing with VA's modern payment processing system eMPWR. In total, DGIB has helped over 1.5 million unique beneficiaries access their GI Bill benefits.

Key achievements realized thus far in this critical program include:

- **Intuitive User Experience and 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 80-year history, these enhancements automate original claims.

- **24/7 Chat Support for Schools**: With the release of the 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 14,000 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.

- **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 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.

- **Modernized Legacy Systems**: With streamlined VA processes and our new technology platform, we have achieved a 99.99% 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 and have made significant progress toward retiring the third. 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.

- **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 600 email campaigns, 40 videos, in-person outreach events and hundreds of social media campaigns to successfully reach nearly two million stakeholders. The results—recognized by the 2023 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.

Achievements Since 2023 Hearing

Since Accenture Federal last testified before this Subcommittee in July 2023, DGIB has delivered several tangible results that have positively impacted the GI Bill benefits process. Accenture Federal has gone live with 19 significant enhancement releases to our platform, including major Release 6, six Data Mart releases and twelve-point releases. These are meaningful steps on the path toward a full overhaul of the antiquated system for delivering education benefits to Veterans.

Accenture Federal digitized the popular VET TEC program, which expanded access to these educational benefits and enabled VA to expend all congressional funding for this program to Veterans exploring technology training as part of their career path. DGIB has successfully delivered Isakson and Roe functionality, digitally decoupling the legacy Long-Term Solution (LTS) within a new resilient cloud-based infrastructure-as-code platform. Improvements to automation across the board have significantly improved timeliness, reducing the processing time for original claims received via the new GI Bill Application experience, My Education Benefits ('MEB'), by two-thirds. In some instances, the increased productivity has reduced the time it takes for Veterans to apply for and receive a benefits eligibility decision from days to a matter of minutes. In March 2024, DGIB automated benefits decisions for over 50% of claims received that month, the highest ever

automation rate for original claims submitted through the Veteran-facing MEB site. As of July 2024, more than 827,000 beneficiaries received benefits through fully automated processes in DGIB. The increased speed has not affected quality of payments, demonstrated by the substantial reduction of instances of improper payments. This focus on accuracy is also reflected by the integration of DGIB platforms to VA's enterprise systems.

Accenture Federal Services completed six releases to the EDU Data Mart, enabling data-driven decision making by integrating data from multiple legacy sources into a single source of truth. Practically, this provides VA with more self-service reporting and visualization capabilities, including 50+ operational reports, 70+ analytic queries and 20+ interactive dashboards. The Data Mart has streamlined EDU's reporting abilities, regulatory compliance and enhanced data-driven decision making around claims optimization, automation, fraud detection and operational improvements. The Data Mart has been an essential capability to support data-related activities for subsequent DGIB releases, including legacy data migration, reconciliation of payment address and veteran identity data and evaluating the impact of new or changing legislation.

In our most recent major release completed in July 2024, Release 6 ("R6"), DGIB aligned claim and payment processing with VA's modern payment processing system eMPWR. This release transitioned all Chapter 33 claim payments processing, which accounts for approximately 87% of total education claim volume, from the BDN to eMPWR, marking a major step towards the decommissioning of VA's fifty-year old legacy mainframe.

These releases have not just increased the modernization of the GI Benefits program, they have also had a real impact on relevant stakeholders. In March 2024, we recognized the one-year anniversary of the release of Enrollment Manager ("EM") and retirement of the legacy VA Online Certification of Enrollment (VA-ONCE) system. EM serves as a crucial "front door" for SCOs to help Veterans access GI Bill benefits. Over seven million enrollments have been submitted to date within EM by approximately 18,000 SCOs, and as of a recent feedback poll, over 95% of SCOs reported that they feel much more comfortable submitting enrollments within EM. To recognize this milestone, we hosted the virtual Enrollment Manager Anniversary Workshop. Over 750 School Certifying Officials (SCOs) from across the country attended, and 85 SCOs had the opportunity to participate in focus groups, providing us with valuable feedback on their experience with the platform. Additionally, we co-hosted over 150 virtual Office Hours sessions to actively share updates about EM and refreshed 14 EM training course materials. We continue to work with VA to identify and prioritize enhancements to EM that reflect ongoing feedback received by SCOs.

We completed development of all code for our next major release (Release 7), which includes the Benefits Manager application and migration of payment processing for the remaining 13% of education claims off BDN into VA's eMPWR payment processing system. Release 7 will further streamline the claims processing experience for Veteran Claims Examiners (VCEs) by introducing the Benefits Manager application, a new system for VCEs to review and process non-33 GI Bill claims including applications for eligibility and school enrollments. Benefits Manager coordinates directly with Enrollment Manager school information and payment services to help VCEs do their jobs more efficiently and improve the user experience. Benefits Manager is the first of a series of processing and workload management features planned for Releases 8, 9 and 10 that will permanently optimize

the claims processing workflow. Code for Benefits Manager is currently in user acceptance testing, with expected deployment later this year.

Contract Evolution

When the VA competitively awarded the original DGIB contract in 2021, it included high-level capabilities and expectations for the DGIB platform. In anticipation of the possible need to quickly address future emerging requirements, the VA adopted the concept of an optional, capacity-based contract task where such requirements could be addressed based on VA priority. Unfortunately, insufficient quantity of this capacity was established at the start of the DGIB program. As is typical of any large agile IT implementation, additional details emerged over time that helped all parties further refine initial effort estimations, reasonable delivery timeframes, and desired scope. To meet newly identified Veteran beneficiary needs, VA determined the scope and value of the contract had to increase.

While Accenture Federal Services sought more detailed requirements to implement VA objectives, in partnership with VA, we immediately started delivering value implementing critical legislative mandates like Isakson Roe, enabled the DGIB platform to digitally decouple the Long-Term-Solution (LTS) and improve resilience, enabled VET TEC, replaced VAONCE with Enrollment Manager, and dozens of other significant enhancement releases. Expanded scope was added to the contract to address legacy data migration (LDM) support necessary to help correct and move decades old records from legacy systems to DGIB and Data Mart for rapid insight cloud-based capability to answer critical operations, ad-hoc, automation, and other Education Service analytical needs.

Meanwhile, challenges posed by external dependencies, such as aligning partner system implementation timelines and corresponding end-to-end test environments, became clearer. VA and MITRE, as the program PMO and overall integrator, engaged with each external dependency that had their own VA defined program, roadmaps, priorities, separate contract support and budget limitations. Significant increases in VA requested requirement scope was considered. To address the need, VA executed appropriate change control and contract processes.   In December 2023, an updated DGIB contract reestablished the path forward to continue meeting VA priorities and serving Veterans.

In addition to expanded scope, the renegotiated contract established a structure that enables VA to expand the program to include the features absent from the prior contract, resolve scope discrepancies and give the VA flexibility to fully exercise the optional task units required to meet its original objectives for the DGIB platform. By focusing on execution and aligning with all stakeholders, VA made thoughtful and authoritative decisions to get the second contract established, so Veterans can continue to receive the impactful benefits of the DGIB platform. Overall additions to scope included the migration of legacy data to support the decommissioning of existing systems, implementation of the EDU Data Mart to support analytics and self-service reporting, additional required capabilities for new DGIB applications and detailed requirement additions that were not captured in the original contract, and additional support services requested by VA EDU and OIT (e.g., application support for The Image Management System (TIMS) used by VA to track claims work products).

Path Forward

We understand the seriousness of our work and the real-life implications it has for our Veterans, service members and their families. We are guided by the VA's leadership and interests in how to accomplish the work necessary to deliver benefits using DGIB in an efficient and easy to use manner. We regularly engage with VA to ensure that Accenture Federal Services continues to meet or exceed our contractual obligations while tackling the challenges in transforming education services and systems for veterans' benefit. Our goal has never faltered—we remain focused on delivering value and outcomes to the VA, Veterans and their beneficiaries, along with school certifying officials.

Conclusion

The GI Bill is cited as one of the most impactful economic programs that exists today. For the past 80 years, it has supported Veterans and their families in pursuing their education goals and achieving economic stability. When we last testified with this Committee, the progress we were able to make in the first year of our commitment was acknowledged as being more successful than other major modernization efforts at VA. We remain deeply focused and committed to continuously delivering outcomes and being the best partner we can be to VA by helping do the right thing.

Over the past three years, DGIB has similarly and fundamentally transformed the way beneficiaries and stakeholders engage with education benefits and improving the end-user experience for VA staff, school officials and Veterans. The DGIB program is nearing another significant milestone in being able to fully transition education claims off of BDN. This statement reminds us how much progress we've made toward delivering a modern technology platform that positions VA to provide an exceptional education benefits experience for the next 80 years to come.