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PERFORMING THE DELEGABLE DUTIES OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR
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OFFICE OF INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERAN'S AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

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Good afternoon Chairman Mrvan, Ranking, Member Rosendale and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) efforts to modernize and secure the Department's information technology (IT) infrastructure. I am accompanied today by Mr. Todd Simpson, Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS), Development Security Operations, Office of Information and Technology (OIT); Mr. Paul Cunningham, DAS for Information Security, Chief Information Security Officer, Office of Information and Security, OIT; and Mr. Charles Worthington, VA Chief Technology Officer.

VA continues to deliver on its unique mission to provide health care and benefits to Veterans, their families and caregivers. VA's information technologies are critical to effectively delivering benefits and providing health care across VA's vast network – optimizing communications, enhancing workforce efficiency and empowering data-driven decision-making. With the rapid acceleration in technology-driven solutions and innovation in the marketplace, VA's technological infrastructure needs to be continually updated to current standards and requirements to support state-of-the-art health care delivery. VA currently owns nearly 6,300 buildings, including 1,293 health care facilities and 1,112 outpatient sites of care. On average, VA health care facilities are nearly 60 years old. By comparison, the median age of U.S. private sector hospitals is roughly 11 years. OIT supports the digital aspects of VA's massive infrastructure and, while modernizing is no easy feat, OIT in partnership with the rest of the Department, is pushing forward an ambitious and robust plan to bring state-of-the-art technology to VA and to Veterans themselves. Maintaining and optimizing our IT infrastructure is critical as we strive to provide VA's workforce with the tools, they need to deliver direct care and services to the Veteran community. Enhancing our Veteran-facing digital technologies is just as critical, improving the experience for Veterans and their caregivers as they interact with VA.

As a practicing physician at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center for the past 20 years, I have first-hand experience with VA's facilities and IT infrastructure and understand the impact that access to the most up-to-date and advanced medical technology can have on serving the Nation's Veterans. Technology is at its best when it fades into the background, seamlessly enhancing the connections between VA team members and the Veterans they serve. For example, during the pandemic, VA leveraged its technology investments and pivoted to a predominantly virtual

environment in order to scale services for both employees and Veterans. As the Chief Officer for the Office of Connected Care with the Veterans Health Administration, I closely observed how VA's investment in telehealth technologies and Veteran-facing digital health capabilities allowed services to continue at scale and drove real-time innovation in care delivery throughout the pandemic. VA's agility is dependent on our IT foundations – to include VA's network, communications infrastructure, implementation of VA's cybersecurity strategy, medical devices, data systems, software applications and much more.

IT Modernization and Digital Transformation Strategy

The OIT is supporting VA's infrastructure modernization efforts by ensuring that the Department's digital transformation strategy is implemented at the ground level of all IT projects. OIT's mission is to collaborate with our business partners to create the best experience for all Veterans. Our guiding principles are to be transparent, accountable, innovative and team oriented. Our office continues to work closely with our business partners to transform processes and prioritize implementing the technologies they need most.

OIT works to support Secretary McDonough's vision for the Department. His three major priorities are:
- Providing Veterans with timely world-class health care;
- Ensuring Veterans and their families have timely access to their benefits; and,
- Honoring Veterans with a final resting place that is a tribute to their service.

OIT works to ensure the Department is making smart and comprehensive IT investments that will enable VA to modernize its offerings and provide Veterans the health care, benefits and burial services they have earned. In December 2020, OIT released its fiscal year 2020 - 2022 IT Information Resource Management Strategic Plan to continue its transformation into the 21st-century IT organization VA needs. Developed in collaboration with OIT's business partners and stakeholders, the plan provides direction for OIT's business operations and ensures funds and resources are working toward a common vision—a seamless, unified Veteran experience.

At the core of VA's Digital Transformation Strategy are five imperatives – Exceptional Customer Service, IT Modernization, Strategic Sourcing, IT Workforce Transformation and Seamless and Secure Interoperability. In support of these imperatives, VA is focused on several key areas from a technology perspective including data management, migration to the cloud, improvements in cybersecurity, digitizing key business processes, decommissioning outdated legacy systems and recruiting and retaining a world-class IT workforce.

Veteran Digital Experience Strategy

Initiated in 2018, VA continues to execute on a digital modernization strategy to enhance Veterans' experience when interacting with VA in digital environments. The goal of this strategy is to provide a modern and seamless service experience for those we serve, meeting Veterans' 21st century digital service expectations. Achieving this goal requires modernizing the software, workflows and infrastructure that converge to provide services to our Veterans. Veterans deserve an online and mobile customer experience that meets their 21st-century expectations for a digital experience that is integrated, easy to use, and highly capable. OIT is identifying best practices, processes and the technology approaches necessary to create a best-in-class digital experience for those who served; one that will not only meet expectations in the near-term, but adapt to the changing needs of Veterans served by a 21st century VA.

On average, over 11 million unique users per month have at least one digital interaction with VA. Approximately 1.3 million of these users log in to VA's digital health care tools, which are among the most used and most well-liked in the health care industry. Since 2018, VA's Digital Experience Strategy for Veterans has been to unify their digital experience across business lines, allowing Veterans to manage their VA health care, community care, disability benefits, education benefits, debts and payments, dependents and other VA information through a single experience on VA.gov and forthcoming flagship mobile applications. This strategy is paying dividends. Since the relaunch of VA.gov in November 2018, customer satisfaction with VA's online services has risen 20% and usage of VA's self-service tools are up over 50% in many categories.

Infrastructure Readiness

Another key component of IT modernization is infrastructure readiness. The Infrastructure Readiness Program (IRP) guides the ongoing refresh and replacement of the IT infrastructure that sustains all VA IT operations. IRP identifies the current state and provides analysis that supports modernization of infrastructure assets, to include reducing technical debt within the Department. Drivers of technical debt include equipment age, expiration of warranties, support limitations (which can lead to software vulnerabilities), new business requirements, technology roadmap, software life cycle, financial planning, vendor supply and policy changes. IT modernization reduces and mitigates known technical debt and enhances VA's ability to address security vulnerabilities.

In 2022, OIT will use IRP resources to support several IT infrastructure initiatives. OIT completed an enterprise-wide assessment of each of the critical infrastructure components identified to determine the scope of the IRP. Each component used criteria unique to that specific infrastructure element to derive the needs for improvement and basic capability evolution. For instance, desktop computing requirements were derived from reviewing literature for industry standard life-cycle refresh recommendations; a comparison of our installed base using automated tools such as Microsoft's System

Center Configuration Manager; and a replacement strategy informed by that research to create an optimized schedule of replacement. Bandwidth modernization applied a model based upon years of experience supporting business requirements across three administrations as well as utilization and consumption metrics from automated discovery tools to map out a logical, efficient and cost-conscious provisioning schedule.

Managing a diversified program like IRP requires executive oversight, effective program administration, coordinated strategy development, disciplined delivery modes and overarching governance. As such, OIT established the IRP Executive Working Group (EWG), responsible for ensuring timely resource allocation, program delivery, financial guidance and strategic leadership towards the program's primary directive. The IRP EWG has been formalized and incorporated into VA OIT's established IT governance structure.

OIT's IRP continues to evolve as business drivers shape and influence the IRP prioritization. From emerging requirements to existing IT infrastructure, a properly funded IRP is critical to support continued progress in reducing accumulated technical debt and staying ahead of demand – in support of VA's modernization objectives.

Cybersecurity

Protecting the Department's information resources is a critical priority. This includes safeguarding Veteran information and protecting the systems that store, process and transmit data. A compromise of Department IT systems could lead to fraudulent activities, exposure of a Veteran's personal information, or corruption of critical data. More importantly, poor cybersecurity practices could erode Veteran's confidence in VA. Cybersecurity is essential to the success of VA's mission.

The Department is leveraging our proven success in risk management, driving toward a more proactive and resilient secure IT infrastructure. VA recently developed a new VA Cybersecurity Strategy that is forward thinking, while still balancing Federal Information Security Modernization Act and National Institute of Standards and Technology standards and guidelines, as well as Department mission requirements. VA's new cybersecurity strategy and the recent Executive Order 14028, *Improving the Nation's Cybersecurity*, serve as drivers for VA's information security processes, including identifying innovative capabilities to improve the security of VA and Federal networks and information. These activities include exploring new architectures like zero-trust, enhancing capabilities to protect data and reducing reliance on Veterans' social security numbers in information processing.

Veterans expect that their data are appropriately protected. VA's technical solutions must consider the interaction with users, the value to the Veteran as well as the confidentiality, integrity and availability of VA's information resources. With a balanced, risk-managed approach toward secure computing, we will maintain the confidence and trust of Veterans, our stakeholders and the public.

Conclusion

IT is a key mission enabler for VA, supporting VA staff as they execute VA's mission and the Veterans who rely on VA. Veterans have come to expect the same level of access and convenience in their engagement with VA as they experience with many other modern online activities. They should expect no less. We are committed to continued modernization and enhancement of the digital capabilities of this Department.

Chairman Mrvan, Ranking Member Rosendale and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your continued support of VA and our mission, as well as the opportunity to testify before you today. We appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you VA OIT's progress in supporting our digital transformation efforts: increasing the efficiency of our operations, securing our critical data and enhancing the experience and services for the Veterans we serve. We look forward to responding to your questions.