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SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

"EXAMINING VA.GOV"

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) VA.gov website. I am accompanied today by Mr. Charles Worthington, the Chief Technology Officer of VA and Mr. Ray Tellez, Executive Director, Office of Business Integration, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

OVERVIEW

VA is committed to providing exceptional care, services and a seamless, unified experience to Veterans. VA's Office of Information and Technology (OIT) collaborates with VBA and various VA offices to achieve this mission through the delivery of state-of-the-art technology, including VA.gov, a modernized website and VA's digital front door. Nearly 14 million unique Veterans and others per month use VA.gov to access information about the services and benefits provided by the Department. In August we had over 19 million unique visits. The website is designed with a clear and intuitive navigation menu enabling users to quickly find the information they need.

The VA.gov project is one of the Department's most important initiatives, providing for the first time a single, comprehensive digital experience that provides Veterans a single online location to learn about, apply for, use and manage their VA health care and benefits. On VA.gov, Veterans can complete an assortment of actions from applying for health care, to updating a mailing address, to managing health care appointments, to checking on the status of an upcoming benefit payment.

Since its relaunch in 2018, VA.gov has seen dramatic growth, both in terms of usage and in the breadth of services offered on the platform. For example:

- Over the past year, VA processed 1.9 million digital benefit application form submissions, including health care enrollments, disability benefit applications, education benefit applications and more. These digital submissions were, up 9.1% from 2022 and a 95% increase from 2019, the first full year the platform was launched.
- Veterans viewed their claim status online over 30 million times, up over 37% from the prior year. And, for the first time ever Veterans can view their claim decision letter online instead of waiting for it to arrive in the mail—a feature that has already been used 3.8 million times since its launch in December of 2022.
- Over FY23, VA.gov has seen over 700,000 digital disability claim submissions (out of 2.3 million total FY23 submissions),, which is a 30% increase from fiscal year (FY) 2022 and a 152% increase from FY 2020. Online submission account for approximately 2928% of the total disability claims submission (2.4 million) received during FY 2023.

VA has added numerous features to VA.gov during this period of high growth. To name a few: Veterans can now apply online for caregiver benefits. They can digitally submit all three types of appeals under the new Appeals Modernization Act (higher level reviews, supplemental claims, Notices of Disagreement). They can request a debt waiver and view their debt and copayment balances. They can view, request and schedule health care appointments and check in for those appointments on the day of the appointment. And they can customize their digital notification preferences at a granular level.

Additionally, in 2021 VA launched the Health and Benefits flagship iPhone and Android mobile app, a companion product to VA.gov that leverages the same backend infrastructure to provide Veterans an easy-to-use personalized experience in their pocket. This product has been one of VA's most successful digital experiences, with over 1.8 million downloads, 800,000 monthly users and a 4.8-star rating in the Apple app store (with over 95,000 ratings)—on par with our peers like USAA, Bank of America and even Amazon.

CHALLENGES

Integrating the various legacy systems into VA.gov has not come without challenges. We proactively notified you on September 5, 2023, that VA recently uncovered several technological issues, which we are working hard to address. Broadly, there have been the following two types of errors:

First are issues that prevent some Veterans from accessing some part of VA.gov's functionality. One such error briefly prevented some Veterans from completing a disability claim application during the high-traffic period leading up to the August submission deadline for the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise

to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 (PACT Act) while another prevented some Veterans from accessing the online “Notice of Disagreement” appeal form due to a software bug. Both issues have been resolved. All Veteran who submitted a claim or intent to file for PACT Act benefits received an outreach letter on August 14, 2023, assuring them that despite the error message, VA received their online submission. The Board of Veterans’ Appeals has a complete list of Veterans potentially impacted by the Notice of Disagreement error, so we can ensure no one loses out on a potential benefit due to one of these errors. All Veterans impacted by these issues received an outreach letter on August 14, 2023, assuring them that despite the error message, VA received their online submission.

Second are issues that resulted in delays in processing some disability compensation and dependent claims submitted on VA.gov. In the case of the disability compensation claim submission issue, approximately 32,000 claims submitted on VA.gov were not appropriately created in the claims processing system, resulting in potential delays. VA has completed 12,490 claim reviews of these cases and is working urgently to review the remaining claims. In the case of the dependency claim issue, VA has determined 45,903 claims submitted on VA.gov since 2011 may have had a similar issue. VA is expeditiously reviewing these dependency claims, which may affect the total number of claimants impacted by this error. VA expects to validate the number of impacted Veterans by the end of October 2023. The resolution of potentially impacted dependency claims will depend on the volume of reviews needed.

VA remains committed that all underpaid Veterans will receive the full backdated benefits they deserve, and that no Veterans are negatively impacted by our error. These reviews could result in either no action (in cases where VA has already updated the dependency status) or adjustments to monthly benefits payments. VA is also determining the number of Veterans who may have an impacted VA.gov submission, but has already repaid a debt to VA. These Veteran records will be reviewed to determine if any undue debt was recovered and ensure any debts related to VA.gov submission delays are appropriately adjusted.

I want to be clear that we view these problems as unacceptable, and we at VA deeply apologize to all impacted Veterans. We are working hard to ensure no Veteran is negatively impacted due to one of these technical issues, by ensuring Veterans receive effective dates that respect their original submission timeline and forgiving any overpayment debts that may have been created due to VA’s technical mistakes.

FUTURE STATE

While these issues have impacted only a small percentage of total VA.gov users and transactions, it is unacceptable for even one Veteran to be delayed due to technological issues. Moving forward, the Department is taking immediate steps to prevent issues like this from happening in the future—and to ensure that when issues do arise, they are identified and fixed quickly. These steps include the following:

- **Conducting a full review of all VA.gov processing systems.** VA will look at every place where Veterans submit applications, claims, or other forms to ensure that the process is working quickly and efficiently—and that no Veterans are being delayed as a result of technological errors.
- **Creating new system functionality to detect and alert OIT and VBA team members and leadership when submissions are not processed correctly,** so that these submissions can be addressed appropriately. Submissions that experienced errors will be routed to be processed manually with high priority, and OIT will trigger an analysis as to the cause of the error.
- **Investing in modernizing our claims processing infrastructure** to ensure a seamless, error-free experience for Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors on VA.gov.

VA will resolve these issues, prevent them from happening in the future, address them more quickly when needed and—most importantly—make sure that all impacted Veterans get the benefits and services that they deserve as quickly as possible.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. As I mentioned, VA.gov is one of the Department's most important initiatives and we have made a great deal of progress amid the tremendous growth in capability and capacity. I look forward to continuing working with this Subcommittee and to address our greatest priorities and the challenges we face in our digital transformation. We value your continued commitment and support for our Veterans.

This concludes my testimony, and I look forward to answering your questions.