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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**JUNE 11, 2024**

Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss VA's Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS). I am joined by Ms. Carrie Lee, Deputy Chief Information Officer from the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) and Mr. Benjamin G. Williams, Director, Veterans Transportation Program, Member Services, VHA.

Beneficiary Travel (BT) is a crucial program for eligible Veterans, providing essential travel reimbursement and transportation services to ensure access to necessary health care. The program addresses the financial and logistical challenges of travel for medical care by reimbursing eligible Veterans for travel expenses such as mileage, lodging, and meals. This enhances access to medical appointments and reduces financial stress, allowing Veterans to prioritize their health. Veterans are eligible if they meet certain criteria such as having a 30% or higher service-connected disability rating, traveling for any service-connected condition, receiving a VA pension, or having an income below the maximum VA pension rate.

With the introduction of BTSSS – a new system for processing mileage reimbursement claims – VA began a transformation aimed at streamlining reimbursement, providing Veterans the ability to submit claims online 24 hours a day/7 days a week/365 days a year, and improving the Agency's ability to pay eligible Veterans the correct amount for travel reimbursements.

### **Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS) Implementation**

BTSSS underwent phased implementation, with pre-deployment testing in July 2019 and national deployment from September to December 2019. During the transition, claims processing time increased due to manually scanning paper claims. VA intentionally extended the legacy system alongside BTSSS to manage staffing challenges during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic. This strategic decision temporarily delayed full BTSSS implementation but also allowed for the introduction of several key user, experience-focused enhancements to the BTSSS interface.

These updates to the Veteran-facing portal included a more prominent sign-in button, clearer language, and direct links to beneficiary travel and eligibility information, including job aids. By December 2023, BTSSS became the exclusive solution, offering 24/7 self-service options, automated rules engines, and controls for proper benefits distribution. Additionally, two additional user authentication modalities ensured compliance with access standards and provided single sign-on options that simplified Veterans' access to BTSSS.

## Impact of Implementation

Since 2020, VA has experienced a significant surge in both total claims received and unique Veterans submitting for BT benefits. This influx resulted in financial implications and cost overruns as VA facilities grappled with operational challenges in processing these claims. One major obstacle is the challenge in retaining qualified BT clerks. While staffing levels for the BT Office have increased, enhanced cohesion within VA facilities is still needed to ensure a seamless user experience.

To address this, the Veterans Transportation Program (VTP) established a Consolidated Processing Team (CPT) in July 2023 to assist facilities with completing BTSSS claims. During the first 2 quarters of fiscal year (FY) 2024, the CPT provided claims processing support to 19 facilities, adjudicating over 698,000 BTSSS claims, bringing those facilities back within the Agency's 10-day processing goal. VTP also provides field staff with ongoing training and guidance to effectively manage travel claims. Increased outreach and continued training opportunities assist Veterans and staff in submitting complete claims, allowing them to successfully move through the adjudication process, and improving the time to payment of reimbursement.

## **Oversight & Accountability**

VA is committed to maintaining robust BT project oversight and accountability, through both formal and informal channels, ensuring efficient and effective support for the Veteran community.

## Inspector General Report

In 2023, VA concurred with VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report (No. 21-03598-32)<sup>1</sup> that examined the development and implementation of BTSSS and identified four key metrics that had not been met – auto-adjudication rate, Veteran outreach feedback mechanisms, legacy system decommissioning, and the reconciliation of duplicate payments. VA moved vigorously to address these findings, and the only recommendation that is still pending closure is the system change to meet auto-adjudication goals. This system enhancement successfully launched on May 30, 2024. The other OIG report recommendations have been remediated and closed out by the OIG.<sup>2</sup>

## Internal Management Evaluation

Internally, VA self-imposed a 10-day inventory goal in March 2020, with the intent to drive faster processing times, greater efficiency, and improved visibility of inventory of open BT claims across the enterprise. The goal served as a gauge for Veteran Integrated Service Networks and VA medical centers (VAMC), indicating where VA leadership could best position additional claims processing support. VA closely monitored critical performance

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.vaog.gov/reports/review/goals-not-met-implementation-beneficiary-travel-self-service-system](https://www.vaog.gov/reports/review/goals-not-met-implementation-beneficiary-travel-self-service-system).

<sup>2</sup> Recommendation 2 (Veteran outreach and feedback mechanisms) was closed in May 2024. Recommendation 3 (legacy system decommissioning) was closed in January 2024. Recommendation 4 (reconciliation of duplicate payments) was closed in May 2024.

indicators like the auto-adjudication rate and Veteran portal utilization to evaluate oversight mechanism effectiveness and guide necessary corrective actions. VA redesigned the BTSSS rules engine to improve efficiency and enable staff to focus on claims requiring manual review.

### Stakeholder Feedback

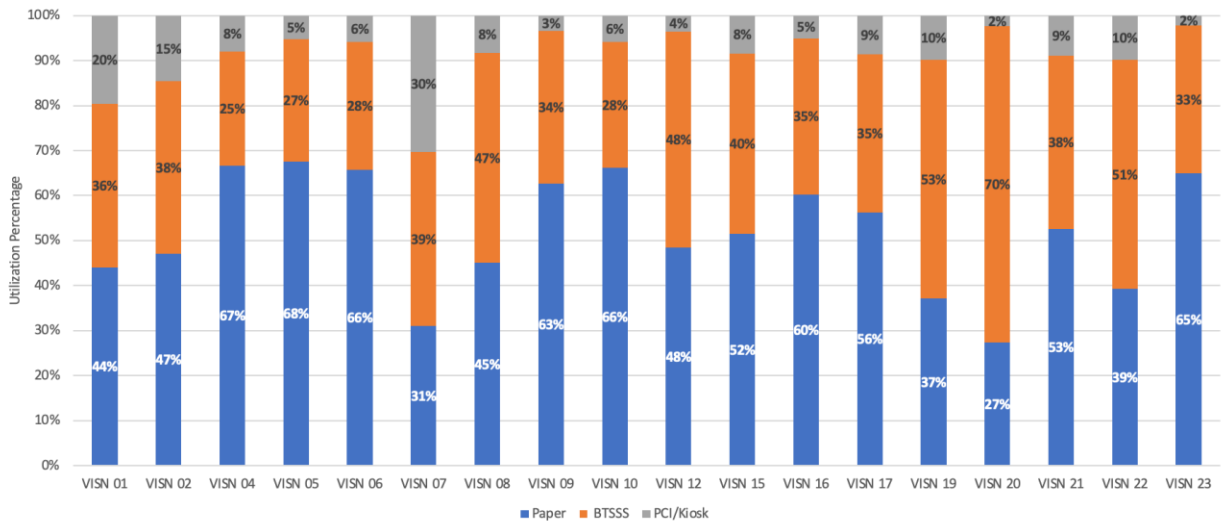
Feedback gathered from Veterans, VA staff, and other stakeholders has been crucial in identifying areas for improvement within BTSSS. In FY 2024 to-date, VA has received over 11,000 completed BTSSS user satisfaction surveys. The two improvements respondents most wanted for the BT process were increased claims automation and process simplification. Based on this feedback, VA launched a working group using a Veteran-centered design approach to improve travel claim submissions, keeping Veterans' voices central. As a result, between October 2023 and April 2024, there was a 17% increase in the perceived ease and simplicity of BTSSS use, from an average score of 2.9 to 3.4, and a 16% increase in satisfaction with BTSSS, from 3.1 to 3.6.

VA has also implemented several strategies to enhance and integrate BTSSS, providing modality options for Veterans to submit travel reimbursement claims, improving design, functionality, and user experience, including:

1. VA is working closely with OMB to bring BTSSS and VA Form 10-3542 into compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act. As part of that process, we are updating the BTSSS and the Form to include clearer instructions to improve the Veteran experience.
2. VHA employed an Integrated Project Team (IPT), comprised of representatives from the VHA Digital Health Office, OIT, VTP, the Veteran Experience Office, field staff, and other offices, to understand Veteran concerns and preferences for BT claim submission, providing recommendations for BTSSS project oversight, monitoring, and evaluation.
3. Bi-weekly meetings were established between VTP and OIT to maintain and prioritize BTSSS functionality change requests.
4. Current modalities for Veterans to submit their BT applications include:
  - a. BTSSS – Online, on mobile devices, or via laptops and tablets offered at many VAMCs.
  - b. Paper Claims – VA Form 10-3542, Veteran/Beneficiary Claim for Reimbursement of Travel Expenses,<sup>3</sup> submitted for manual entry.
  - c. Patient Check-In (PCI) App - Mobile check-in through va.gov, integrating BT claims for appointments into BTSSS.
  - d. VetLink Kiosk Integration – Available at 38 VAMCs with Vecna contracts.

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<sup>3</sup> Available at [www.va.gov/find-forms/about-form-10-3542](http://www.va.gov/find-forms/about-form-10-3542).



*Title: Modalities Veterans are currently using to submit travel claims, January 1, 2024, through May 31, 2024.*

- In Quarter 2, FY 2024, VTP assessed and eliminated or modified several BTSSS rule engines to improve automated claim processing efficiency.

Upcoming improvements

VA is continuing to upgrade tools through FY 2024 and FY 2025 to improve the system’s design, functionality, and user experience to better serve Veterans and streamline travel reimbursements. For example, VA will be expanding its Short Message Service-initiated simple claims submission process, currently available through mobile patient check-in at Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture sites, to Oracle sites as well. Veterans will be able to text a number to begin the simple claims process. Additionally, VA will be adding a travel claim feature to its popular VA Health and Benefits mobile application. In response to Veteran feedback about the benefits of the Kiosk system, VA has also launched a working group that is taking a Veteran-centered design approach to improving the experience of travel claim submission while keeping the voice of the Veteran at the center. Lastly, VA will be transitioning the Veteran-facing user experience of BTSSS into VA.gov over the next 18 months, providing tighter integration with other digital health features such as managing health care appointments, as well as offering Veterans increased visibility into the specific status of their travel claims. There are also improvements coming to the underlying Application Programming Interface, including a renewed focus on auto-adjudication, an improved rules engine, and longer-term efforts to evolve and ameliorate the burden on Veterans to apply for benefits travel after every appointment encounter.

**Conclusion**

Chairman Rosendale and Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, thank you once more for the opportunity to speak with you today. VA remains deeply committed to expanding self-service options and streamlining the BT reimbursement process to enhance the overall health care experience for Veterans. We value your ongoing engagement as we

embrace our shared responsibility to better serve those who have served. This concludes my testimony. Ms. Lee and I are prepared to respond to any questions you may have.