



Washington Headquarters
1300 I Street, NW, Suite 400 West
Washington, DC 20005
tel 202-554-3501
dav.org

**STATEMENT OF
JON RETZER
DAV ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
June 11, 2024**

Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to testify at today's oversight hearing of the Technology Modernization Subcommittee on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS).

DAV, a congressionally chartered non-profit veterans service organization (VSO), is comprised of over one million wartime service-disabled veterans. Our single purpose is to empower veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. DAV is pleased to provide our perspectives on the BTSSS being discussed today by the Subcommittee.

Transportation Programs

DAV is involved in the VA's network of transportation and due to the selflessness of DAV volunteer drivers, we provide free transportation to and from VA health care facilities to veterans who may not otherwise have access to the vital medical care and services they need. The DAV Transportation Network is the largest program of its kind for veterans in the nation and provides thousands of rides to veterans each year to ensure they receive the care they need. However, there are still gaps in VA's transportation services for veterans that require attention and solutions.

VA understands the importance of improving access to health care services for ill and injured veterans, and the need to address the unique transportation obstacles many veterans face. VA provides transportation grants for highly rural communities, rides through the Veterans Transportation Service, and beneficiary travel benefits to help defray travel costs that veterans incur to overcome access barriers to care.

The Veterans Transportation Service, with a focus on veterans living in rural and remote areas, offers secure and dependable transportation to and from VA health care facilities and authorized non-VA health care appointments. Eligible veterans can receive these services at little or no cost through this critical program. To reimburse veterans

and caregivers for travel expenses to and from approved health care appointments, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) established the Beneficiary Travel Reimbursement Program. Beneficiary travel benefits include round-trip transportation from the veteran's home to the medical center, mileage reimbursement, or special mode transport. Transportation at government expense may be available to beneficiaries traveling to or from VA facilities, or other places of examination, treatment, or care.

VA offers two types of travel benefits under the Beneficiary Travel Program: general health care travel and special mode transportation. Veterans may be eligible for one or both if they have a service-connected rating of 30% or more; are traveling for treatment of a service-connected condition; receive a VA pension or income does not exceed the maximum annual VA pension; are traveling for a scheduled compensation or pension exam; have a vision impairment or spinal cord injury or disorder; have double or multiple amputations; or are enrolled in the VA Rehabilitation Program.

VA Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System

To streamline and improve oversight of the program, reduce fraud, and expedite reimbursement, VA rolled out a program created in September 2016 that allows veterans to submit their travel reimbursement claims online. BTSSS, a web-based system, was intended to automate the travel reimbursement claims process, reduce long-term costs, and decrease the risk of improper payments.

In November 2020, the VA transitioned from travel reimbursement kiosk machines at VA medical facilities to the BTSSS computer-based program nationwide. Veterans were required to use the new travel reimbursement website, leading to over six million beneficiary travel claims being submitted between February 2021 and July 2022. Despite the new program and the hope for a more streamlined process, the changes failed to meet intended goals, resulting in veterans experiencing slow claims processing.

Office of Inspector General Report

The May 21, 2023 Office of Inspector General (OIG) report (21-03598-92) stated that despite making certain improvements since system rollout, VHA needs to do more to ensure successful implementation of BTSSS and complete the transition away from the legacy Veterans Health Information System Technology Architecture (VistA) system. The Veterans Transportation Program (VTP) office deemed auto-adjudication and self-service portal usage as key critical goals. These two goals were deemed critical to ensure success of the program as they would result in spending less time on claims, either to review or to manually input data, which will result in faster claim processing and ultimately help decrease staffing levels.

The OIG attributes the Department's goal of veteran utilization of the new system falling far short because of the lack of solicitation of feedback from veterans and veterans service organizations (VSOs) prior to implementation. The program office did

not offer training to veterans or VSOs on how to enter claims in BTSSS until nearly five months after system launch. While rolling out the system, veterans encountered difficulties in creating user accounts and lacked the training on how to use the new system to enter their travel claims.

High veteran portal usage is critical to the new system's success because it eliminates the need for travel staff to manually input claims, ultimately contributing to faster claims processing. However, during system development, VTP only solicited feedback from a narrow group of veterans who worked within the program office—excluding both veterans not employed by VA and VSOs. Better communication and earlier veteran involvement would have helped ensure that veterans were provided and received the training they needed to use the self-service portal and ultimately adopt the new system.

Veterans Experience

The mission has definitely not yet been accomplished. Since the program's implementation, veterans report they continue to struggle with getting reimbursed because of challenges accessing and using BTSSS, insufficient resources and/or lack of staff or facility assistance. For veterans that have a VA.gov account, it takes two log-ins for two sites and four screen changes simply to create a new travel reimbursement claim. Despite the ability of veterans to access the scheduled medical appointments that are within, and outside of the 30-day period associated with their claim, they find that the experience is not user-friendly or seamless because of system delays, multiple screen changes, and the need for verification when the appointment is not at a VA Medical Center.

Veterans want options to file their reimbursement claims more seamlessly and timely while they are engaged in their actual medical appointment. While they appreciate the mobile text feature to start the reimbursement process, this has also been a challenge at certain locations because of lack of staffing knowledge or facilities not being enrolled in the new process. To increase self-service portal usage, we recommend VHA conduct outreach to veteran and VSO users, solicit feedback, and consider whether system changes are needed based on the comments and recommendations received.

Additional interaction with veterans and VSOs would provide VA with ideas on how to improve technical issues in BTSSS and better understand the need for alternative options to filing travel reimbursement claims. For example, the need for kiosks at medical facilities, assistance with on-site computer access to file a beneficiary travel claim, and/or direct assistance on how to submit reimbursement claims from the front desk when checking in and out for appointments. VA needs to ensure staff are trained and available to assist veterans onsite. All facilities need to provide better signage and communication to assist veterans in accessing onsite computers that can access BTSSS or other facility resources.

The VA can and should do more to assist veterans with filing beneficiary travel claims. Despite implementing a self-service beneficiary travel system, not all veterans have access to personal computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, or adequate bandwidth at home. Many veterans are not familiar with or do not feel confident in using online web-based technology. The Department has the resources to enhance onsite real-time services by integrating needed data and banking information from VBA to VHA and expanding technology through the use of signature pads and ID verification onsite to filing digital reimbursement claims on direct contact.

Travel Reimbursement Rates

We appreciate that VA is proactively working to improve the veterans' experience by improving self-service through BTSSS; however, that does not fully meet the needs of the veterans who are entitled to travel reimbursement benefits. In 2010, Congress passed legislation that set the mileage reimbursement rate at a minimum of 41.5 cents per mile, which was the rate federal employees were being reimbursed for work-related travel. The law gave the VA Secretary the authority to adjust rates in the future based on the mileage rate for federal employees using private vehicles for official business, as determined by the GSA Administrator.

The VA travel mileage reimbursement rate has not kept up with the rising gas prices and costs of auto maintenance and insurance. While the GSA rate has increased over time to 67 cents per mile for government employees, the mileage reimbursement rate for veterans has remained at 41.5 cents and is well overdue for an increase. Associated travel costs have increased significantly since the enactment of this law. Unfortunately, with gas prices continuing to rise, the current mileage rates for veterans' beneficiary travel do not always cover the actual expenses for gas and the associated costs of using a personal vehicle; as such, these expenses may serve as a barrier to care.

We strongly recommend the Secretary exercise his full authority, under the law, to adjust mileage reimbursement rates for veterans to 67 cents—in alignment with the current rate for government employees and keep on pace with GSA rates into the future.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony on behalf of DAV. I am pleased to answer questions you or members of the Subcommittee may have.