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OFFICE OF POLICY AND OVERSIGHT
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEES ON
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

"MODERNIZING VETERAN EDUCATION IN THE SHADOW OF COVID-19"

July 20, 2022

Good afternoon, Chairmen Levin and Mrvan, Ranking Members Moore and Rosendale and other Members of the Subcommittees. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to provide updates on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) information technology (IT) modernization efforts for education benefits adjudication and delivery. Accompanying me today are Mr. Ricardo Da Silva, Program Integration Officer, Education Service, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and Mr. Dan McCune and Mr. Robert Orifici, Office of Information and Technology (OIT).

To ensure VA serves all Veterans and their families seeking to use their GI Bill benefits and equip them with the tools and resources necessary to reach their academic and career goals, VA is modernizing the GI Bill's IT platform to deliver benefits faster, enhance customer service and strengthen its compliance and oversight activities. VA's transformational goals include modernizing technology; delivering the highest standards of world-class customer service; improving oversight and accountability; expanding opportunities for Service members, Veterans and eligible family members to pursue their academic goals; enhancing the Nation's economic vitality with innovative programs; and enriching lives by giving beneficiaries the tools and resources they need to further their education and achieve their career aspirations.

VA has made tremendous advancements toward streamlining and automating systems and processes to increase efficiency and drive outcomes for its Veterans and their families. It is VA's job to serve Veterans as well as they have served us, and VA is keeping its promise to modernize and improve the GI Bill experience by delivering timely access to world-class earned benefits. VA is working to increase efficiency at every turn and keeping Veterans at the forefront of the improved user experience.

Pre-COVID-19 Pandemic Modernization

Colmery Act (P.L. 115-48, January 6, 2017)

VA's modernization efforts date back to its successful deployment of IT solutions to support sections 107 and 501 of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (the "Colmery Act" or "Forever GI Bill"), P.L. 115-48, on

December 1, 2019. These sections dealt primarily with the calculation and processing of monthly housing allowance payments under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.. Following its initial implementation, a wholesale change was needed to modernize Digital GI Bill (DGIB) systems and provide accountability to measurables such as timeliness, accuracy, and percentage of claims adjudicated through automation . However, VA's need for a modern IT solution was accelerated by the demand placed on VA and students alike by new programs and changes to learning and working environments brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC)

The Colmery Act authorized the VET TEC 5-year pilot program that provides tuition and housing assistance to help Veterans advance in an IT career. Through VET TEC training programs, Veterans acquire high-tech skills to assist them in moving quickly into in-demand jobs in the following five areas: information science, computer software, computer programming, data processing, information science, and media applications. VET TEC training programs are typically shorter and usually, run from 6 to 28 weeks in length, which allows Veterans to complete training and enter the job market more rapidly than traditional college programs.

In October 2020, VA launched the VET TEC Employer Consortium to accelerate hiring opportunities for participants and provide them additional employment resources and tools. The collaboration between training providers, employers and VA within the VET TEC Employer Consortium creates a key space for students to make connections, attend events hosted by VA and employer-partners and be primed for employment success at the completion of their program. The VET TEC Employer Consortium seeks to engage VET TEC participants by hosting several monthly events where VA connects participants and those supporting the program, including employer-partners, and other partners committed to Veteran hiring. The Employer Consortium supports VA's commitment to shorten the hiring window from the time of program completion to employment in the field of study. Data shows that VET TEC graduates hired by an Employer Consortium partner have higher salaries on average and find employment faster than those not hired by a Consortium employer.

VA has 19 employer-partners, including Accenture, Amazon, Blackbox, Delaware Resource Group of Oklahoma, Electronic On-Ramp, ERA Solutions, Google, Maximus, MITRE, Oaklea Simpson Security, Pocket Prep, Skillstorm, VA's OIT, VetsEZ, Veterans In Parking, Walmart and Windstream. VA also partnered with Hiring Our Heroes and LinkedIn to provide resources that increase VET TEC graduates' success in being hired and provide opportunities for employers to locate them. In VA's partnership with LinkedIn, graduates receive one year of access to LinkedIn Premium. These premium accounts entitle graduates to enhanced career connections and to access LinkedIn's library of online courses.

Demand for VET TEC has remained strong since its launch on April 1, 2019, and the program continues to provide positive results. VA exhausted available VET TEC funding on three occasions – May 2020, October 2020, and August 2021. When this occurs, VA can no longer support new enrollments, but students currently participating in a VET TEC program continue to be supported through completion of their training. Additionally, VA continues to adjudicate Certificates of Eligibility (COE) and training provider applications during these periods. As of June 1, 2022, a total of 5,020 Veterans have graduated from VET TEC training programs, 2,325 (46 percent) of whom have secured employment and another 1,680 (35 percent) of whom are within their 180-day employment window; 1,391 Veterans are currently enrolled. On average, students are earning a \$60,780 annual salary. The five-year pilot program is scheduled to conclude April 1, 2024. VET TEC students hired by a consortium partner are onboarded on average in 48 days and receive a higher average annual salary of \$78,000.

Due to the success of the Colmery Act implementation model, including the successful implementation of an IT solution for adjudicating and paying VET TEC claims, VA began to gain congressional, Veterans Service Organization, school and Veteran support and trust to continue modernizing the GI Bill experience. In preparation for a future where an IT system rebuild might be a reality, VA chartered MITRE Corporation, a federally funded research and development center, to gather and assess requirements from across the various business lines such as VA Education Service, VA OIT and external organizations to guide its effort to modernize the GI Bill.

COVID-19 Pandemic Modernization

Prior to securing funding from Congress to transform VA's IT systems, COVID-19 changed our priorities virtually overnight. VA worked with Congress from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to preserve GI Bill benefits for those students impacted, collaborating on emergency protections embodied in five public laws that ensured that the maximum protections were in place for Veterans to stay safe while continuing to apply for and receive the benefits to which they were entitled. In particular, the Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, P.L. 116-128, March 21, 2020, and P.L. 116-140, April 28, 2020, established new rules for the administration of GI Bill benefits.

While working in a completely virtual environment, VA quickly adapted and implemented these laws to preserve and protect GI Bill students. Those benefits were extended until December 21, 2021, by the Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other Extensions Act, P.L. 116-159, enacted on October 1, 2020. Student COVID-19 protections were further augmented in January 2021 by the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, P.L. 116-315. Lastly, in December 2021, the Responsible Education Mitigating Options and Technical Extensions Act, P.L. 117-76, extended all COVID-19 protections from December 21, 2021, until June 1, 2022. As of June 1, 2022, there were 4,804 schools with 205,859 enrolled Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries who used the emergency COVID-19 education authority for certain programs of education converted to distance learning

by reason of emergencies and health-related situations under P.L. 116-128. To accomplish these significant changes, VA employees stepped up to the challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic and quickly implemented the public laws without interruption.

Additionally, to raise awareness and encourage usage of the expanded authorities available to VA to mitigate the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, VA launched a multifaceted communications campaign that featured a significant presence on social media and inclusion in VA's "coronavirus chatbot." Specifically, VA distributed 29 total posts on the topic of the COVID-19 provisions across three platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram between September 2021 and June 2022. There were 29 instances of COVID-19 provision awareness delivered to Facebook, with four of the 23 instances distributed to the VBA Facebook page. For the Post-9/11 GI Bill Facebook page, over 75,000 individuals were reached, with engagement by more than 2,300 and post-clicks of more than 1,700, to pursue more detailed information regarding the provisions, be it their extension beyond December 21, 2021, and/or their sunset. There were two instances delivered to twitter and four instances delivered to Instagram. This initiative allowed Veterans to receive answers quickly to a variety of topics, such as information on health care and appointments at VA health facilities, benefit payments, claims and other services, information on debt and copayments and status information on VA's national cemeteries and burials.

In support of GI Bill beneficiaries seeking careers in high-demand Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and technology fields, VA ensured that those receiving or seeking assistance through the Rogers STEM Scholarship or VET TEC Pilot Program received award letters and other benefit information electronically to ensure no interruption in their education. To ensure VA beneficiaries maintained their earned benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic, VA worked closely with its partners to develop policies that allowed Veterans and their families to continue to receive their education benefits in a virtual environment.

Digital GI Bill

VA's need for speed and agility with regard to IT implementation was being pushed to its utmost limits during the spring of 2021. VA Education Service was implementing 32 provisions of P.L. 116-315 while simultaneously implementing new COVID-19 protections, adjusting to a virtual work environment and dealing with the other stresses caused by the global pandemic. Fortunately, it was at this time that Congress provided funding for what would become known as the Digital GI Bill.

Since the historic enactment of the GI Bill in 1944, VA has made a huge impact on the lives of Veterans, Service members and their families, providing more than \$400 billion in education benefits to over 25 million beneficiaries. While the GI Bill continues to have a profound impact on over 800,000 beneficiaries yearly, the processes to provide these benefits have relied on the use of many complex legacy IT systems and manual processes that created inefficiencies and delays in benefit delivery. This has

made it difficult to implement new legislation and adapt to new technologies, as seen in the delayed implementation of a few provisions within the Colmery Act (section 107 required adjustments in the calculation of housing allowances which required significant IT changes and, therefore, was not implemented on the effective date of the law). After delivering on Colmery, VA knew these problems needed to be remedied and, in March 2021, awarded a contract to Accenture Federal Services to kick-off the transformative DGIB modernization effort.

The goal of this effort is to develop a modern digital platform, leveraging cloud-based automation, digital service transformation, human-centered design, world-class communications, analytics and other important IT services.

VBA and VA OIT are in the midst of the DGIB modernization effort to automate and transform how VA delivers benefits and services to beneficiaries. Through the DGIB modernization effort, VA is simplifying the user experience for beneficiaries, while reducing the burden on VA staff and partners. VA is developing end-to-end systems integration and business intelligence tools to further improve and automate the processing of education benefits claims. As a result of VA's efforts, the number of records processed through the automation rules has increased by 75 percent, from 1,800 records per hour (median) to 3,144 (median).

The improvements will provide world-class customer and benefit services to VA's partners, enabling more timely and accurate delivery of education benefits, providing near real-time eligibility and benefit information and allowing for first contact resolution to over 800,000 beneficiaries yearly. The DGIB modernization effort combines functionality from multiple legacy systems into a single DGIB Managed Service platform, bringing activities like entitlement adjudication, enrollment processing and oversight together under one roof. Implementing a Managed Service will help streamline business services and practices into a single, managed platform, allow for continuous end-to-end updates, streamline system configuration and management, accommodate agile decision making and changes in technology and reduce the need for manual and redundant processes, allowing VA staff and partners to focus on what's really important: serving Veterans.

Automation

Process automation is key for improving the GI Bill experience. VA is striving to meet the goal of automating 50% of original claims and 80% of supplemental claims. In September 2021, just 6 months after the contract award, VA successfully deployed the processing of Post-9/11 GI Bill claims to the DGIB Managed Service, marking the first major milestone in the modernization journey. The Managed Service allows for agile decision-making in a single, managed platform that grows with VA's needs and deals with changes in technology through continuous end-to-end updates. Additionally, in VA's most recent release in April 2022, VA deployed further automation updates to improve Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims processing and migrated VET TEC

claims to the Managed Service.

VA has made significant improvements in claims processing automation through these releases. Specifically, automation of Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims processing was operating at 56% by the end of March 2022, reflecting a 23% increase in automation compared to March 2019. Since January 1, 2019, Education Service has automated 3.4 million of the total 8 million Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims processed. VA's automation efforts to this point have created more streamlined processes, updated tracking systems, eliminated redundancies and reduced overall manual intervention required from Veterans Claims Examiners (VCE).

Fiscal Year (FY)	CH33 Supplemental Claims Processed	CH33 Supplemental Claims Automated	Percent of CH33 Supplemental Claims Automated
2019	2,284,340	872,750	38.21%
2020	2,356,732	875,975	37.17%
2021	2,288,125	1,079,945	47.20%
2022*	1,144,382	606,840	53.03%
Grand Total	8,073,579	3,435,510	42.55%

*FY to date as of June 23, 2022

In future releases, Veterans, their families, school certifying officials (SCO) and other partners can expect to see more user experience enhancements. GI Bill beneficiaries will benefit from a streamlined application process, improved processing times and faster eligibility decisions and entitlement adjudications, allowing them to focus on their GI Bill journeys. Through VA's modernization efforts and the removal of redundant processes, VA increased efficiency while allowing its employees and SCOs to focus on the greater mission of supporting Veterans and their families.

Challenges

Implementing a Managed Service and improving automation involves integrating numerous complex IT systems and decommissioning decades old systems. For example, in navigating the complexity of decommissioning the Benefits Delivery Network (BDN), the DGIB team continues to surge to elicit implementable requirements. By applying this all-hands-on-deck approach, VA has been successful in creating a realistic plan to transition legacy systems into the Managed Service.

VA is also navigating through external dependencies and complex integrations with the Department of Defense's (DoD) information, namely the VA-DoD Identity Repository (VADIR). VA is taking an agile approach to be flexible to address service changes in VADIR that impact critical systems integration and data ingestion. Due to service changes within VADIR in the Spring of 2022, automation rates trended toward 49%, which is a dip from the increased rates achieved by the Managed Service. Automation of Post-9/11 GI Bill claims is fluctuating due to these VADIR service changes, and rates are expected to return to higher levels over the next several months.

VA is already seeing this happen as automation rates have returned to the mid-50s percentile range previously mentioned. Additionally, VA is developing a permanent solution to the off-ramping process by incorporating additional service data from VADIR.

These back-end system improvements are improving claims processing, reducing redundancies and enhancing the overall GI Bill experience for students as well as VA's partners. In line with its overall program objectives, VA is continuing its commitment to measuring and improving automation of Post-9/11 GI Bill claims and will continue to take an agile approach to address and navigate complex external dependencies.

Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP)

Most COVID-19 protections were implemented in the spring of 2020, extended into the fall of 2020, and were further augmented in winter of 2021. VA's strength and agility were called upon again in the spring of 2021 to provide even more COVID-19 benefits to Veterans. On March 11, 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, P.L. 117-2, was signed into law. Section 8006 of this law requires VA to carry out a retraining program (the Veterans Rapid Retraining Assistance Program, or VRRAP) which provides up to 12 months of retraining assistance to not more than 17,250 eligible Veterans who are unemployed due to a covered public health emergency. Eligible individuals receive a monthly housing allowance for each month a covered program of education is pursued, and retraining assistance for tuition and fees is paid directly to institutions in the following increments: 50% at the beginning of the program of education, 25% at the completion of the program and 25% after the Veteran finds employment in a field related to the program of education. VA collaborated with its partners at the Department of Labor to identify high-demand occupations and successfully implemented the training program by receiving applications within 60 days after the date of enactment of the new law.

On June 8, 2021, the Training in High-demand Roles to Improve Veteran Employment Act or the THRIVE Act, P.L. 117-16, was signed into law, which made many improvements to the VRRAP program, including enabling VA to have more input in determining the high-demand occupations for which VA will provide retraining assistance; requiring VA to coordinate with the Department of Labor to notify participating Veterans of the availability of employment placement services; requiring VA to contact Veterans at regular intervals after completing VRRAP to inquire about their experience in the program and their employment status; and requiring VA to enter into a memorandum of understanding with qualified nonprofit organizations to facilitate the employment of participating Veterans.

As of June 27, 2022, there have been a total of 6,425 VRRAP participants. VA received 21,832 applications for VRRAP benefits, and 14,776 Veterans received a COE. To date, 1,607 Veterans have graduated from programs using VRRAP benefits, and 333 have been employed as a result of their participation in VRRAP. A total of 1,077 training providers have been approved for VRRAP, and VA allocated \$182.9

million of the \$386 million in total program funding. VRRAP is available until December 11, 2022, or until the funding or participant limit is reached. However, benefit payments may continue to be paid after that date for individuals already pursuing a program under VRRAP.

VA employed several outreach tools to encourage participation in VRRAP. Specific dissemination tools include GovDelivery email messaging, a GI Bill Student Newsletter, the Know Newsletter for School Certifying Officials, a THRIVE Act Fact Sheet, social media and other communication channels. VA continues to conduct analyses of the program to identify gaps and increase program awareness. VA recently analyzed VRRAP data from May through September 2021 of approved schools, approved applicants, and enrollees, to determine if there were trends or gaps based on locations at the state/district level. VA found no clear correlation between location and the percentage of approved applicants or the percentage of enrollees. The outreach is ongoing.

Recognizing that VRRAP is being underutilized by those who applied for and received a COE, VA fielded a VSignals survey to understand why over 5,000 Veterans who originally sought a COE for the program have not yet enrolled in a program of education. The survey results show that, of the 500 respondents who confirmed they were NOT in a program of education:

- 231 (46%) respondents still say they plan to enroll;
- 230 (46%) answered one of the choices that indicate they had an issue with finding a program in their locale or a program that suited their needs or their schedule; and
- 39 (8%) checked "other," not permitting VA to make a determination for the reason they had not enrolled (the survey instrument did not permit free-form responses).

Although there are 1,048 facilities approved for VRRAP training, very few of those participating facilities are public institutions. Based on feedback VA received from several institutions and State Approving Agencies (SAA), the payment terms associated with VRRAP, as outlined in the statute, are not conducive to the participation of public facilities, especially for degree programs, as those facilities are not able to easily adjust their tuition and fee payment requirements and/or absorb those costs during program pursuit. These payment terms have caused VRRAP to disproportionately attract private, for-profit and non-degree facilities.

On June 6, 2022, VA sent additional targeted outreach via GovDelivery to 4.9 million Veterans to increase interest and school enrollment for VRRAP. VA received an additional 1,582 applications in 2 days, and traffic to the VRRAP webpage increased from 2,400 daily page views to over 52,000 page views for the June 6-7, 2022, timeframe.

Education Development Management System (EDMS)

VA's modernization effort under the DGIB and its need to work completely virtually as a result of COVID-19 also spotlighted an opportunity to modernize and improve its communication tools with partners at DoD.

Recently, VA released the Education Development Management System (EDMS), which is a Salesforce-based program for VA to track education claims and development requests with DoD. VA's goal was to develop the EDMS program's ability to grant access to each DoD service component so they can answer requests directly, eliminating the back and forth of email requests containing personal data.

VA continues to strive earnestly to process claims as accurately and efficiently as possible. Two of the challenges to VA's accuracy and efficiency are data integrity and reliability. Oftentimes in the absence of required data elements, or if there is a data conflict, education claims processors must contact the claimant and/or DoD to obtain missing elements or to resolve data conflicts. This process is referred to as "development." The critical aspects of the development process are ensuring clear and concise messaging to procure the information necessary to accurately adjudicate the claim. EDMS was developed as an innovative and sophisticated solution to VA's development process and allows VA employees to enter the development request into an electronic application that can track requests from creation to completion.

Prior to EDMS, there was a manual development and tracking process involving multiple people, multiple systems and no automated tracking. EDMS removed the need for multiple people to monitor pending requests and eliminated the need for tracking on spreadsheets. EDMS also eliminated the need for the submission of requests containing personally identifiable information using encrypted and/or password protected documents through email. EDMS allows for requests to be instantly and securely transferred to external DoD users for a response.

Furthermore, the built-in functionality of EDMS allows for the creation of detailed reports to monitor aging requests for follow up and to track requests by type, response timeliness and responses received per day. These program reporting capabilities allow for development enhancement reviews to be done at higher levels, which in turn can cut down on the types of development VA may need to send in the future. EDMS is helping bridge the communication gap between VA and DoD service organizations, and VA has received excellent feedback from all service components on the ease of use.

In February 2022, VA granted access to the EDMS program for external DoD partners utilizing Common Access Cards. Program demonstrations and training calls were set up with each DoD service component. While it took years to prepare the program for release to external users, once the program was available, VA granted access and trained all external DoD users in 2 months. More specifically, between March 20, 2022, and May 16, 2022, VA successfully transitioned all 14 DoD service components, as well as Defense Manpower Data Center representatives into the EDMS

application. By eliminating the need for a VA employee to transfer the development information from EDMS to email to send manually, and by providing a platform for external DoD partners to respond directly to VA claims processors, the average response times have been reduced. Average response times are tracked for each service component and currently range anywhere from 0.5 days to 11.2 days for the current fiscal year.

Digital GI Bill Marches Along

Since March 2021, VA has deployed four major releases and several smaller releases to modernize GI Bill services and deliver benefits faster, provide better customer service and strengthen its compliance and oversight activities.

Release 1: Successful Legislation Implementation

On July 31, 2021, VA successfully rolled out its first DGIB release, which implemented requirements associated with the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, and added functionality to increase automation. Most notably, the release incorporated legislative updates which included providing a simple and secure method for non-college degree (NCD) students to verify monthly enrollment via text, a desired method based on user feedback. VA's updates incorporated changes for five provisions of the law: Section 1001: Rogers STEM Scholarship improvements; Section 1005: Requirements for In-State Tuition; Section 1010: Monthly Enrollment Verification; Section 1019: Overpayments to Eligible Persons or Veterans; and Section 1020: Improvements to Limitation on Certain Advertising, Sales and enrollment practices. Implementation of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 required multiple, complex IT updates during an unprecedented pandemic and demonstrated VA's ability to modernize while systematically implementing critical pieces of legislation impacting GI Bill beneficiaries

Release 2: Launching the DGIB Managed Service

On September 29, 2021, just 6 months into the DGIB contract, VA turned on the DGIB Managed Service, providing for improved processing of Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims and marking a major step in the modernization journey. This involved migrating data from VA's legacy environment so that VCEs could process Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in the DGIB Managed Service. The Managed Service enables VA to be better prepared to initiate end-to-end updates, minimize downtime, accommodate agile decision making, more quickly respond to legislative changes and reduce manual and redundant processes. With release 2, VA took the first step in transforming GI Bill claims processing. As VA continues to bring legacy systems into its Managed Service, efficiency and user experience will continue to improve for VA employees and Veterans alike.

Release 3: Introducing Enrollment Verification via Email

On January 15, 2022, VA expanded the rollout of Section 1010 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 to students attending institutions of Higher Learning (IHL), added an email verification option, and deployed additional capabilities designed to make enrollment-related processes faster and simpler than ever before. With this release, over 300,000 GI Bill students are now able to verify their enrollment status each month via email or text message, a new requirement to receive their monthly housing allowance and/or kicker payments. This release expanded upon VA's successful rollout of text-message verification to the NCD facility population (approximately 30,000 GI Bill students) in August 2021. Additionally, release 3 enhanced system capabilities to refine and improve automation of supplemental claims processing for Post-9/11 GI Bill students.

Release 4: VET TEC Managed Service Go-Live

On April 16, 2022, VA deployed release 4 of the DGIB, providing additional Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims processing improvements by removing certain off-ramps and decreasing manual processing actions for VCEs to enable faster claims processing. This release also migrated the processing of VET TEC claims to the Managed Service, which includes entry of VET TEC applications, calculation of VET TEC awards for enrollments and terminations with and without amendments and manual upload of letters for VET TEC claimants. This will result in improved processing of VET TEC claims.

Current Status and Upcoming Releases

To support emerging requirements and optimize the Veteran experience through the modernization of VA claims processing, the Digital GI Bill program is undergoing a resequencing effort to establish a reprioritized DGIB program timeline. VA is reviewing the program schedule, milestones and dependencies aligned with VA business priorities and updating the DGIB delivery plan. Due to the extent of the reprioritization, a contract modification was required and was effective July 8, 2022.

This updated plan ensures the DGIB team builds on the automation foundation established and provides clear path to increasing the automation of original and supplemental claims. The plan includes updates to future release dates that considers the emerging requirements and increased visibility to detailed requirement through program execution to date. The plan also addresses the complexity of decommissioning a BDN mainframe legacy system.

Following scaled agile, VA has evolved, iterated and improved on its methods to generate and manage requirements. This has yielded greater clarity and higher confidence in the maturity of BDN non-Chapter 33 and overall program requirements. VA continues to track progress daily and report outcomes during VA Executive Steering Committee meetings with senior leaders across OIT and VBA, to include Education Service, Office of Business Integration and Office of Financial Management.

VBA received a total of \$337 million, transferred from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Medical Services, as provided by the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021, P.L. 116-260, Division J, sections 514 and 515. VBA obligated \$195 million of this funding for the Digital GI Bill. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the shortcomings of Education Service's systems, which led to VA awarding a contract to Accenture Federal Services for the modernization effort. VBA anticipates de-obligating approximately \$8 to \$10 million of the \$195 million obligated for Digital GI Bill based on an adjusted timeline of deliverables by Accenture. This Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding cannot be repurposed for fiscal year 2023. VA is currently in the process of testing and implementing exciting new features for future releases that will deploy DGIB microservices, improving the user experience for GI Bill students, SCOs and VA staff.

Human-Centered Design

Putting Veterans, their families and other end-users at the center of the new experience, VA is applying a human-centered design (HCD) approach to modernization and is utilizing user feedback to guide its platform development process. HCD efforts have included over 100 focus groups, user feedback sessions and usability testing sessions with over 900 participants across multiple partner groups, including GI Bill students, SCOs, VA staff and others. VA tested over 80 design features with users to understand pain points and growth opportunities within the user experience. VA is committed to obtaining and acting on partner feedback early and often in the design process, as it is crucial to develop systems that meet the needs of over one million GI Bill students, 40,000 SCOs and 1,000 VA employees.

HCD sessions have and will continue to inform updates to the user interfaces and improve the user experience. VA developed updated designs for many applications and pages, including Chapter 33 Original Claims: 22-1990 Application for Education Benefits; Chapter 1606 & Chapter 30 Original Claims: 22-1990 Application for Education Benefits Expansion; Chapter 33 Transfer of Entitlement Original Claims: 22-1990e Application for Education Benefits; Chapter 33 Fry Scholarship & Chapter 35 Survivors' and Dependents' Education Assistance: 22-5490 Application for Education Benefits; Chapter 30 Claims Process Flow; Chapter 1606 Claims Process Flow; Chapter 35 Claims Process Flow; SCO chatbot frontend and technical designs; microservices designs; and more. VA received overwhelmingly positive responses at feedback sessions, with participants voicing how grateful they are to have the opportunity to provide feedback and help inform the design of the new systems. Feedback from SCOs include the following: "I love all of the different options that are now populated. It is easy to use, access and update," and "Being able to see the benefits remaining is huge for SCOs! Thank you!" VA looks forward to continuing HCD sessions and incorporating user feedback to best meet partner needs.

Modernizing Communications with Partners

VA modernization is not limited to implementing new legislation and improving claims processing. VA also made great advances in its ability to effectively speak directly with students, schools and other partners. To increase awareness of how releases positively impact VA GI Bill students' and partners' experiences, it is making targeted outreach efforts to effectively communicate GI Bill modernization updates to partners. With an omnichannel outreach strategy VA is amplifying awareness and increasing adoption of complex IT and policy changes. VA reached 16.9 million GI Bill students through email alone and is improving its targeted email marketing strategy using analytics and data-driven insights. To improve both the SCO in the Know and GI Bill student newsletters, VA used A/B testing to identify the most effective article headlines. VA also closely monitored questions that the Education Call Center (ECC) receives to address students' most pressing questions in VA communication efforts and help alleviate ECC call volume.

VA is focused on looking for ways to better serve and communicate with GI Bill students. Feedback VA consistently received while on a national school tour indicated that students preferred to communicate with VA through text messaging. In 2021, VA introduced text messaging as a quick and easy method for students to verify their monthly enrollment, in accordance with Section 1010 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020. Since this was a new requirement for the majority of Post-9/11 GI Bill students, VA launched an innovative, exhaustive and data-driven campaign to promote the successful implementation of monthly enrollment verification. Both text and email verification are currently available to students, providing multiple options to verify using a channel that works best for them. VA has maintained consistent outreach to inform students of the requirement and encourage opt-in to text message and email leading to a current combined opt-in rate of 98%. VA sent 795,043 texts and 162,066 emails to 307,000 impacted students (based on their preferred method), resulting in a total opt-in count of 302,000. One GI Bill student mentioned, "Remembering to verify enrollment is easy because VA sends you a text message," and another mentioned, "It has all been pretty seamless."

Most recently, on April 28, 2022, VA enhanced the enrollment verification experience by implementing a Short Message Service (SMS) short code. Short code senders are verified by all mobile carriers which allow VA to send enrollment verification texts and confirmation texts faster, reduce concerns of spam and increase the legitimacy and trust students have in the process.

Additionally, in Spring 2022, VA Education Service leadership hosted the first-ever GI Bill Summit. Education Service leaders connected with Veterans, Service members, their families and other partners across all 50 states and in 10 different countries to talk about exciting updates to the GI Bill experience and answer their education benefits questions. The three-part event included: 1: Q&A on [RallyPoint](#) (a military community site) where VA gathered and responded to over 200 questions; 2: [Facebook Live](#) event answering top questions; and 3: User feedback session demonstrating DGIB system updates for users. On the day of the Facebook Live, VA

saw a 10% increase in traffic to VA.gov web pages, a 7.7% increase in application submission and an 82% increase in web traffic from Facebook.

The Summit gave VA great insight into topics that matter most to GI Bill students, including monthly housing allowance rates for online or remote students; expiration and extension of education benefits; and transfer of entitlement after separation. VA responded to questions on these topics and is incorporating them as key topics to continue to communicate about through its newsletters, social media and other channels going forward. VA promoted the Summit with extensive, omni-channel marketing efforts and featured VA leadership directly answering GI Bill beneficiaries' questions during a Facebook Live stream. The 2022 GI Bill Summit video reached over 5,600 individuals on the Post-9/11 GI Bill Facebook page. In addition, over 600 SCOs across 48 U.S. states participated providing feedback to enhance the user experience with Digital GI Bill user interfaces and functionalities. Through VA's outreach efforts and communication platforms, it is committed to informing its partners and listening to Veterans' needs.

Continuing with its modernization efforts, VA Education Service delivers communications and messaging to students and schools via multiple channels. In the last year, VA Education Service introduced newsletters to students, schools and SAAs as an opportunity to streamline delivery of GI Bill updates but also to provide additional services and resources from VA. Past newsletters have included information from VHA related to available mental health resources and VA hiring opportunities. Just-in-time communications are critical to keeping students and schools informed of legislative changes like those related to the now expired COVID-19 authorities, the availability of VET TEC funding (which has exhausted three times leaving Veterans unable to participate), or when a school closes (ensuring impacted students understand the next steps with their GI Bill). Communication campaigns like those supporting enrollment verification are done via email, video, blogs, training updates and social media to ensure students and schools are receiving information in multiple ways, but also through different channels to increase its effectiveness and awareness. To better support GI Bill students through the usage of their benefit, and in reaction to customer service data and feedback received, VA Education Service launched a milestone-based communications initiative, the GI Bill Journey. GI Bill Journey sends emails with resources and assistance options to students when they receive a COE, enroll in school, are at the halfway mark of their entitlement and when they are nearing the end of their entitlement. These emails have proven popular with students with an open rate above 50%. VA Education Service launched a Public Service Awareness campaign to support VRRAP in February 2022, and TV ads for VRRAP were aired nationally on the CBS Morning Show and the Late Show with Stephen Colbert. The campaign, which also features radio and digital advertisements, led to an increase of 400% in traffic to VRRAP's landing page from 11 states targeted by the campaign as having Veterans most in need of VRRAP.

GI Bill Comparison Tool Redesign

The GI Bill Comparison Tool is one of the first VA resources that GI Bill students depend on to guide them in making important life decisions. It is crucial that GI Bill students can make informed decisions and know what their GI Bill benefits will cover before enrolling in a school or program, so they can start off on a successful path from the moment they begin using their entitlement. Based on user feedback, VA learned that choosing the right school or program is a particularly difficult step in a GI Bill student's education journey. Using insights from GI Bill students, VA identified key areas where the GI Bill Comparison Tool could be improved to help GI Bill students find the right school or program for themselves. On January 4, 2022, VA successfully released an improved version of the GI Bill Comparison Tool with the ability to compare up to three institutions side-by-side, highlight key differences and utilize a map to look for schools or programs by location. VA also made the tool mobile-friendly, improving the way users search, compare and select the facilities that meet their needs. The feedback from existing and potential GI Bill students has been overwhelmingly positive, and it is evident that the redesign has made a significant difference in the lives of Veterans and their families. All these transformation efforts have been closely coupled with extensive partner communications.

Oversight and Accountability: Updates to VA System—Salesforce

Another area where VA has grown and modernized is its safeguarding of Veterans' benefits. Regarding oversight, VA has developed and implemented a strategic plan geared towards modernizing its business practices to improve partner experiences by adopting technology that enables VA customers to interact with us in a modern, more streamlined way. VA Education Service is leveraging best practices to provide the best customer service experience in the delivery of benefits and services to Veterans, Service members, their families and survivors.

VA partnered with Salesforce, a cloud-based software business, which provides customer relationship management software and applications focused on sales, customer service, marketing automation, analytics and application development. The collaboration with Salesforce allowed VA to become more accountable for its benefit delivery systems. More specifically, VA has made multiple enhancements to capture several provisions of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020. For example, managed program modules have been added to track benefit waivers established by sections 1015 and 1018. Additionally, prototypes have been built to track section 1016 waivers and 38 U.S.C. § 3696 enforcement actions. These prototypes will be launched no later than December 2022. These prototypes will monitor and alert VA to any rapid increases in tuition and fees and Veteran enrollment, as well as track Veteran completion rates and violations of the so-called "85/15 rule" (38 U.S.C. § 3680A(d) limitations on the enrollment of students using GI Bill or school financial assistance). The tracking capabilities of the Salesforce application have already begun to enhance VA's ability to pinpoint and address financial stability concerns, strategically plan corrective measures for prohibited advertising, marketing and recruitment practices, as well as assist us in zeroing in on

other potential governmental concerns.

VA Education Service, in collaboration with Salesforce, will continue to tactically analyze, pinpoint and strategically build a software system that benefits all its organizational partners; but more importantly, Veterans and their families.

Oversight and Accountability: Reducing Risks for Taxpayers

In addition, VA currently partners with the Departments of Education and Defense as it pertains to violation of statutes, 38 U.S.C. §§ 3690 and 3696; 38 C.F.R. §21.4210, or other activities/actions that could negatively affect Veterans' welfare in the realm of education and GI Bill benefits. VA Education Service works jointly with these agencies on activities with a primary focus of supporting VA's mission to provide transparency to the recipients of education benefit programs. Some of the focal areas include audit findings of institutions to include, institutional financial disparities and responsibilities, loss of participation (school closures, loss of accreditation, denial of recertification, withdrawn, revocation of termination), instances of suspected fraud or abuse by institutions, any enforcement action that could lead to loss of eligibility, a suspension of enrollment or suspension or termination of licensure and loss of Federal funding.

VA also supports the Principles of Excellence requirements to ensure institutions provide meaningful information to prospective and current military associated students about the financial cost and quality of the institution; assist students in making choices about how to use their Federal educational benefits; prevent abusive and deceptive recruiting practices that target the recipients of Federal military and Veterans educational benefits; and ensure that the institution provides high-quality academic and student support services to the respective group of students. This is consummated through risk analysis, mitigation and enforcement. VA can analyze and report data that is used to form patterns, routines, or behaviors that result in the violation of statute, regulations and or policies governing Veteran education benefits. Conducting official examination of trends, services and complaints identified through formal protocols and methodologies permits VA to formulate solutions based on data and research that will make a condition or consequence less severe. Risks for the taxpayer are reduced extensively when proactively informing beneficiaries of issues affecting their education experience. They are better equipped to make the best decision for their personal and professional career pathway.

85/15 Rule

VA is also taking steps to protect Veterans and prevent schools from inflating tuition charges to VA education beneficiaries. By law (38 U.S.C. § 3680A(d)), VA is prohibited from approving the enrollment of new GI Bill beneficiaries in any program for which more than 85% of the students enrolled are receiving support from the school or VA (the so-called "85/15 Rule"). However, schools for which GI Bill beneficiaries comprise 35% or less of the total student population are exempt from routine

compliance reporting (the so-called “35% Exemption”), unless VA believes that one or more programs may be out of compliance with the 85/15 Rule.

Because of historic inconsistencies regarding the cadence at which schools were required to reapply for the 35% Exemption, VA announced a “35% Reset” in October 2020, requiring reapplication for the 35% Exemption to ensure continued compliance and establishing a regular cadence for future reviews. VA subsequently chose to delay the reset until October 1, 2021, due to training needs and the impact of changes in the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 legislation. Schools were notified of the delay until October 1, 2021, and the coming need to submit an 85/15 Statement of Assurance along with a request for a 35% Exemption. By VA regulation, codified in 38 CFR § 21.4201(f)(1), schools must submit 85/15 reports within 30 days after the start of a regular term for institutions structured on a term-basis or within 30 days after the beginning of each calendar quarter for institutions structured on a non-term basis. Consequently, even though the reset was effective on October 1, 2021, the vast majority of 85/15 reports and 35% Exemption Requests were submitted in January and February 2022.

Representatives from schools and school organizations have voiced a few concerns regarding the 35% Reset. The issues raised and concerns received have been limited to accredited institutions of higher learning (IHLs) that have long had 35% Exemptions in place, have numerous approved programs and have not reported 85/15 computations in quite some time. The concerns voiced cover two common themes—training and forms. VA addressed the concerns by providing additional training and publishing additional guidance on the GI Bill website and in the SCO Handbook. VA will also accept attached spreadsheets for submissions by schools with a large number of approved programs or program concentrations.

Conclusion

Distinguished Chairmen, VA has made tremendous strides in the administration of VA education benefits in recent years through modernization efforts. Many lessons have been learned along the way, and VA continues to seek feedback from partners and find ways to improve education benefits delivery through modernization. VA looks forward to continued opportunities of working with Congress to address Veterans’ concerns to provide a better GI Bill experience. VA appreciates the support of these Committees as VA continues its effort to modernize VA educational assistance programs. This concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittees may have.