

**STATEMENT OF JOSEPH GARCIA
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEES ON
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION**

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Chairmen Van Orden and Rosendale, Ranking Members Levin and Cherfilus-McCormick, and other Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA or the Department) Digital GI Bill (DGIB) program and the continued information technology system improvements and upgrades. Accompanying me today is Mr. Robert Orifici from the 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 Information Technology (IT) platform to deliver benefits faster and enhance customer service. 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. The improvements will provide world-class customer and benefit services to Veterans and 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.

Digital GI Bill Overview

Each year, approximately 200,000 Service members transition from the military to civilian life. Over 875,000 Veterans, Service members, and family members used VA education benefits last year alone, receiving nearly \$10 billion in education and training-related benefits. The GI Bill provides an opportunity to skill up for the civilian workforce by expanding opportunities for Service members, Veterans, and eligible family members to pursue their academic goals, enhancing the nation's economic strength with innovative programs that support employment in high-demand fields and enriching lives by giving beneficiaries the tools they need to further their education to lead to fulfilling careers.

On March 11, 2021, VA awarded a contract to Accenture Federal Services, which has partnered with VA Education Service (EDU) and VA OIT to develop the DGIB. DGIB is a modernized business platform that will feature world-class customer and financial services to enable timely and accurate delivery of payments, real-time eligibility and benefit information. This new platform will provide an end-to-end systems management perspective to ensure proper compliance and oversight of GI Bill

programs and will allow the use of data and business intelligence tools to monitor and measure school and student outcomes. Using this platform, GI Bill students will have the ability to engage with VA and their earned benefits through electronic outreach, intake and communication tools for on-the-spot service.

Claims and Automation

Process automation is key for improving a veteran’s GI Bill experience. VA is striving to meet the goal of automating 50% of original claims and 80% of supplemental claims. In just six months after the contract was awarded, 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 responds to changes in technology through continuous end-to-end updates.

Since the beginning of the program in March 2021 VA has identified and resolved more than 20 automation improvement opportunities for original and supplemental claims. Through multiple releases, VA has made significant improvements in claims processing. In May 2023, the full automation rate for supplemental claims was at 61.7%, 12.7% percentage points higher than the 49.0% automation rate in May of 2022 and 26.7% higher than the program baseline automation rate of 35% in May of 2021. In February 2023, VA automated a record 68% of supplemental claims, automating the processing of 188,000 claims.

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 (VCEs).

FY	CH33 Supplemental Claims Processed	CH33 Supplemental Claims Automated	Percent 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	2,556,949	1,323,301	51.75%
2023*	1,754,572	1,006,774	57.38
Grand Total	11,240,718	5,158,745	45.89%

*FYTD as of June 23rd

For the first time since the inception of the program, almost 80 years ago, many GI Bill applicants can receive a same-day education benefits eligibility decision, thanks to a simplified Post-9/11 GI Bill application experience enabled by DGIB. It provides Veterans the ability to download and view digital copies of their Certificate of Eligibility

and decision letters, so Veterans no longer need to wait up to five days for a paper copy to arrive in the mail. Through the integration with VA/Department of Defense Identity Repository (VADIR), Veterans may now experience pre-filled service history when entering an online application for original claims, and no longer need to enter that information by hand. VA continues its efforts to improve automation, identifying and actively working on the following seven automation improvement opportunities as of June 2023:

1. Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) CH33 Supplemental End Product (EP) Creation
2. Enrollment Manager (EM) non-standard remarks
3. EM Mandate (7/1/23)
4. Automate My Education Benefits (MEB) Transfer of Entitlement (TOE) Claims
5. Automate Non-College Degree (NCD) Claims
6. CH33 Award Letter Modernization
7. Release 6 Enterprise Management of Payments, workload, and Reporting (eMPWR) switch

Recent Accomplishments

In the most recent DGIB major release in March 2023, VA deployed EM to help School Certifying Officials (SCOs) at educational institutions process enrollments more efficiently. This will help SCOs submit enrollments faster, allowing them more time to assist GI Bill students in reaching their educational goals. In only 3 months since EM launched, VA surpassed one million enrollment certifications received. Over 14,000 SCOs from over 10,000 institutions are using EM to deliver earned benefits to Veterans and their families faster than ever before. In the legacy system, VA Online Certification of Enrollment System (VA-ONCE), claims took approximately one business day for the Long-Term Solution system to process during business hours. In EM, claims are created from school inputs within 5 minutes, during business hours, which is 96 times faster than before. Finally, rapid releases of additional functionality continue monthly demonstrating agility, including 28 new requirements and 61 new user stories developed in releases 5.2.0.1-5.2.2. between March and June 2023.

In future releases, Veterans, their families, SCOs, and other partners can expect to see more user experience enhancements. For example, 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 education and career goals. Through VA's modernization efforts and the removal of redundant processes, VA is increasing efficiency while allowing its employees and SCOs to focus on the 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 BDN, the DGIB team continues to prioritize the development of system requirements that can be readily implemented. By applying an all-hands-on-deck approach, VA has been successful in creating a realistic plan to transition legacy systems into the Managed Service. However, VA acknowledges several challenges during this transition, such as a March 2023 issue that affected Monthly Housing Allowance payments.

As with any major issue, VA immediately established an incident response team comprised of OIT experts, analysts, and engineers, to identify and resolve the problem in several days and ensure payments were completed. Through review of logs, processes, and code, the root cause was identified as a configuration applied to the payment queuing service as part of Release 5 on March 4, 2023. The configuration triggered an unexpected pause in the payment queuing service. However, thanks to valiant efforts of many employees at both VA and the Department of Treasury, payments were still able to be released that day, although later in the day than originally planned. As part of our post-incident analysis, VA conducted a thorough review of the infrastructure and processes to identify potential vulnerabilities and ensure appropriate safeguards are in place. Specifically, multiple actions were taken to mitigate this in the future, including auditing of configuration for service condition execution establishing additional business operations checks, and expanding operations testing prior to Go-Live. These actions were driven by a commitment to protect our organization's operations and to preserve trust with those we serve. Working with Accenture Federal Services, our contracting team, and OIT, VA is confident that appropriate safeguards are in place to prevent similar incidents in the future. Additionally, these specific issues were added to how VA examines all managed services across all benefits portfolios to ensure similar safeguards are in place across the enterprise.

Other challenges include limitations on the availability and number of testing environments that have affected the overall timeline; and the urgency of BDN shutdown has driven much of the timeline and implementation capabilities delaying other automation and modernization goals of the program. The mainframe manufacturer and support company for BDN announced that there will be no continued support moving forward due to lack of resources and equipment. Also contributing to the urgency of BDN shutdown is the fact that most of the remaining education benefit payment systems began development and were implemented in the 1970s using outdated programming tools and techniques that are no longer viable. The human resource pool is aging out and finding new developers is very difficult. As a result, BDN costs VA in excess of \$20M+ per year which is compounded by an increasing scarcity of replacement parts and human resources. The amalgamation of these challenges has subsequently delayed the overarching ability to apply technical solutions to increase automation throughput, which impacts the requirement for maintaining current level of full-time employees to manually process Education claims. Additionally, the current contractual adjustment allows for the inclusion of automation improvements not found in the initial contract.

VA is also navigating through external dependencies and complex integrations with DoD's information, namely VADIR. VA is taking an agile approach to be flexible in addressing service changes in VADIR that impact critical systems integration and data ingestion. Due to service changes in the way data is delivered within VADIR, a higher rate of off-ramping resulted, which occurs when a claim is removed from the automated process and reverts to manual processing. Consequently, automation rates trended toward 49%, which was a drop from the increased rates that had been achieved by the Managed Service. Automation of Post-9/11 GI Bill claims is fluctuating due to these ongoing VADIR service changes, but 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 excess off-ramping 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.

DGIB Releases

Since March 2021, VA has deployed six 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 activated 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 platform. 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 additional major steps 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, 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 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 an additional 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: Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (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.

Release 5: Improved Application Experience for First-Time Applicants

On August 20, 2022, VA made applying for the Post-9/11 GI Bill on VA.gov easier than ever for eligible Veterans and Service members who have verified their identity through ID.me or Login.gov and are applying for the first time. By streamlining and automating the Post-9/11 GI Bill application experience, VA is now able to pre-fill service history for some Veterans and Service Members and provide them with eligibility

decisions within seconds, and give them quick access to digital copies of eligibility letters and a better user experience with intuitive designs.

Release 6: Enrollment Manager Launch

On March 4, 2023, VA successfully launched EM, which replaced VA-ONCE. This new system modernizes the process for SCOs to certify and submit student enrollments, streamlines user experience, and improves claims processing. Since its launch, over 10,000 education providers have used EM to process more than 1 million enrollments.

Future State

The future state of the DGIB is driven by the people who support and receive benefits from the GI Bill program, leveraging human-centered design (HCD). The end-users – including Veterans and their families – are at the center of the experience. The future state will seek to deliver the experience end users desire, by identifying both pain points and the experiences they enjoy when interacting with other websites and commercial entities. DGIB leverages the HCD process to inform updates to the program roadmap. To support this, HCD User Feedback Sessions are conducted with GI Bill students, SCOs, State Approving Agencies (SAAs) and internal VA staff to understand user experience, pain points and areas for improvement and a research readout was created to summarize findings. This feedback informs the design stage where ideas are designed to address pain points and opportunities during concepting and sketching sessions. Before moving on to development, testing and validation of prototypes with different internal and external users is completed to measure success and feasibility of designs. The benefit of DGIB's HCD approach continuously puts the end-user at the center of the modernization and experience that we are creating. In 2024, VA plans to deploy further business capabilities including:

- CH 33 Automation Improvement
- Approval Manager
- Web Enabled Approval Management System (WEAMS) Consolidation
- Workload Manager
- Image Management System (TIMS)/eFolder Migration
- Chapter 33 eMPWR-VA Interface
- Payment Service

VA is developing a new capability, Approval Manager, to replace WEAMS, as we continue to move functionality into the DGIB Managed Service. Approval Manager will be the new system for Education Liaison Representatives, SAAs, and VA staff to approve new programs for education benefits. Approval Manager will help improve the end user interface, save Education Service staff time generating Compliance Survey Worksheets, and streamline the profile for each school, including a consolidated list of all SCO and Point of Contact types, as well as a single page that displays all programs by approval status. Additionally, Approval Manager's connection with Enrollment

Manager will help more quickly reflect any changes to a school or program in Enrollment Manager.

Another new capability, Workload Manager, will replace TIMS as the new method for VCEs to view and manage workload of GI Bill claims that need processing. This system will connect with My Education Benefits (the VA.gov site where GI Bill students go to apply or receive updates on their education benefits) and Benefits Manager (a future DGIB microsystem in which VCEs will create and update claims) to transform how they are assigned tasks. Workload Manager will bridge the gap from a Veteran's application to the claims processing end of Benefits Manager. A VCE will review new claims in Workload Manager, create work credits, and route it to Benefits Manager for processing.

The DGIB team is continuing to make enhancements which contribute to direct, online, one-stop access to education benefit resources. These changes will continue the evolution of a Managed Service that increases efficiency and reduces manual processes, allowing VA to focus more on serving Veterans and their families.

Reassessment

VA is committed to ensuring the DGIB program and continued system improvement and upgrades provide optimal support of student Veterans and the SCOs that support them. Additionally, VA will continue to be an effective steward of all taxpayer provided resources. VA has worked with Accenture Federal Services on a modification to the current contract to meet emerging requirements, clarify testing capabilities and add additional integrations to other VA systems. VA has reviewed a proposal from the vendor to ensure that the needs of VA are met and the impacts to cost and schedule are well understood. VA is working towards a course of action to address cost, risk and business-related concerns and will continue to work closely with AFS to ensure VA's needs are addressed. Although we are proceeding with a sense of urgency, sufficient time will be allotted to validate that the key objectives will be met.

Communications with Partners

VA continues to advance its ability to effectively speak directly with students, schools, and other partners. To increase awareness of how DGIB 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. In the months leading up to the deployment of Enrollment Manager, VA reached out to over 91,000 SCOs and administrators through 68 emails. VA used both the SCO in the Know and SAA newsletters, to amplify tips and IT updates for using EM effectively. VA also closely monitored questions that the Education Call Center (ECC) receives to address students' and SCO's most pressing questions in VA communication efforts and help alleviate ECC call volume.

In Winter 2022, VA EDU hosted three SCO EM Soft Launch Events at GI Bill schools to validate Enrollment Manager during the transition period. The schools included American University, George Mason University, and GT Aviation. VA was able to identify required system updates in real-time, triaging and addressing them with the DGIB development team. All updates were taken back, and several were addressed immediately while others were addressed for implementation in future releases. VA also conducted six virtual training sessions covering the EM experience, providing SCOs an opportunity to ask questions and get a final look at Enrollment Manager before it went live.

VA Education Service also recognized that the successful rollout of EM required not only the system to be up and running, but pre-and-post go-live support for end users to drive system adoption. The ECC alone was not enough to support SCOs questions; SCOs needed system experts who could walk through their questions with them. In March 2023 in tandem with Enrollment Manager go-live, VA stood up a Customer Experience Group (CEG) to triage questions and issues in real time. Externally, the CEG connected with the SCO hotline and provided a means to escalate certain SCO questions to a one-on-one over-the-shoulder setting using Adobe Captivate; internally, VA had daily meetings with stakeholders to work together to identify, discuss, triage and work through issues. During its 2-month run, the CEG responded to over 9,700 calls from SCOs, initiated more than 3,000 Adobe Connect sessions to provide more detailed assistance, and created over 100 Service Now tickets to track potential IT updates required in Enrollment Manager.

The rollout of the new system, including first call resolution of SCO questions and issues, garnered accolades from SCOs and Veterans Service Organizations. One SCO who called the CEG and worked together to submit an enrolment said, "Is that it? Wow, that's amazing, this is so simple. Are you sure there isn't more buttons to press? Enrollment Manager is one and done!" In the month leading up to the Enrollment Manager deployment, VA's GI Bill Enrollment Manager videos reached over 11,000 views on VBA's YouTube channel and 2,500 individuals on the Post-9/11 GI Bill Facebook page. In addition, over 220 SCOs posted comments and questions regarding the Digital GI Bill's newest interface, Enrollment Manager. Through VA's outreach efforts and communication platforms, it is committed to informing its partners and listening to Veterans' needs.

In tandem with its modernization efforts, VA EDU delivers communications and messaging to students and schools via multiple channels. VA EDU produces newsletters for 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 updates to the Veterans Crisis Line, legislative updates and VA hiring opportunities. Communication campaigns 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.

Conclusion

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 to work with Congress to address Veterans' concerns and 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 look forward to responding to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittees may have.