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EXAMINING VA'S INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS THAT PROVIDE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

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EXAMINING VA'S INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS THAT PROVIDE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS

Tuesday, November 3, 2015

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY,
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:30 p.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Brad Wenstrup [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Wenstrup, Costello, Radewagen, Bost, Takano, and Rice.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN BRAD WENSTRUP

Dr. WENSTRUP. Good afternoon, everyone. I want to welcome you all to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity's hearing today entitled Examining VA's Information Technology Systems that Provide Economic Opportunities for Veterans. The timely and accurate adjudication of the myriad of benefits that VA provides to veterans and their dependents is critical to their economic success. In order to process these claims effectively, VA must have modern IT systems in place that are adaptable and highly functional. That is what we are here to discuss today and by the end of today's hearing I hope that we all have a better understanding of how we can improve VA's IT systems to lead to positive economic outcomes for veterans and their families.

I would first like to touch on VA's Long Term Solution, or LTS. This system was designed to process and adjudicate Post-9/11 GI Bill claims with little to no human interaction. While great strides have been made since the initial onslaught of delayed GI Bill payments back in 2009, I remain concerned that improving and finishing the LTS is still not a priority for the department and its senior leaders. And while supplemental claims have been completed in a more timely fashion it is still taking far too long for original claims to be completed.

With the department moving the LTS into sustainment mode, there does not seem to be an appetite to make more improvements to the LTS, improvements that are needed, and that is disappointing. This committee has moved my legislation that would provide an additional $30 million to finish the LTS once and for all and I will do all that I can to push it across the finish line.

I do want to discuss for a moment some concerns that our witnesses and other individuals have raised about unexpected delays in GI Bill payments that occurred this fall. Due to the system shortfalls I have been told that in the past the Education Service has been granted overtime funding to help adjudicate claims for the typically busy fall semester time frame. We have been told, however, that this year was different and the overtime funding usually given to the Education Service was instead repurposed to fund additional overtime to bring down the disability claims backlog. This reallocation of money and shift in priorities left many schools waiting for tuition payments from the VA and left veterans waiting far too long to receive their living stipends. And some are still waiting.

While I know we can all agree that it is a worthy goal to bring down the disability claims backlog, it is not acceptable to leave another group of veterans waiting instead of coming forward with a clear plan to address both situations. It appears that the department once again took the misguided view that disability claims were more important than education claims. This is nothing more than just robbing Peter to pay Paul.

I also want to speak about the Veteran Employment Center, or the VEC. This is a job board that was created by the department through eBenefits and is now the sole employment portal for veterans in the entire federal government. While I understand that the VEC was created on a shoestring budget and is still being improved, I am concerned that VA may have been too hasty in promoting its use and may be inflating its true value as well as its functionality. We have been told that this program is now being taught at all TAP classes worldwide, but due to some possible data security breaches and the inability to actually access the system during the TAP sessions some senior officials at DoD have threatened to stop teaching the use of the VEC altogether.

I am also concerned that there is no way to track the number of jobs or successful outcomes that have come from the VEC. And I have even heard rumors that some VA contractors are required to log into the VEC everyday to improve page views. Finally, we have heard that employers do not want to use the VEC as they find the system not to be user friendly and ineffective in giving them a true idea of veterans" skills or talents. While I am not saying that the creation of the VEC was not done with the best of intentions, I do think the department should examine these types of concerns and take immediate actions to improve the VEC for veterans of all generations.

Finally as I have said in previous hearings I am interested in learning more about the more paperless case management system being developed for tracking VR&E participants. I am sure we can all agree that such a system is long overdue.

With that, I now recognize the Ranking Member Mr. Takano for his opening remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER MARK TAKANO

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. When the Post-9/11 GI Bill became law in 2008 it was clear that the array of benefits and beneficiaries included were far more complicated than had been the

case in previous GI Bill laws. It was also clear that it was going to take state of the art IT to make it all work in a timely and accessible way for student veterans.

So we are here today to assess how the original plans for quick paperless processing and easy access called the Long Term Solution, or LTS, have panned out and how we can speed matters along from here. It is clear that there have been bumps in the road. For example, this fall there were a significant number of complaints as student veterans experienced longer delays than usual in their receipt of tuition and housing allowance payments.

We also know from a recent GAO report that VA has been making overpayments on GI Bill benefits. This problem can arise when a student veteran drops classes but VA fails to adjust the veteran's status in its IT system. GI Bill overpayments have created financial hardships when student veterans learn about the overpayments and are asked to pay VA back. My greatest concern is that it is difficult enough for veterans transitioning from military service to student life without having to navigate the additional barriers to graduation that these IT problems can create for them. Clearly the demands of the Office of Information Technology at VA are huge. Our concern today is that the education and employment programs are a priority for VA just as the programs of the Veterans Health Administration must be.

In addition to hearing about progress on the LTS and GI Bill overpayments, I am looking forward to updates on the Veterans Employment Center, or VEC, and its promise of a one-stop internet source for veterans looking for meaningful employment. I will be interested to hear about VA's efforts to create a system for the paperless processing of VR&E claims and updates to the Post-9/11 GI Bill comparison tool.

Finally I look forward to the testimony of the Student Veterans of America and the American Legion about what their members have experienced in these areas. And I appreciate Deputy Under Secretary Coy and the others from VA who are all working on these challenges.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you, Mr. Takano. I now invite our first panel to the table. With us today we have Mr. Davy Leghorn, Assistant Director for the American Legion's National Veterans Employment and Education Division; and Mr. Will Hubbard, Vice President of Government Affairs for Student Veterans of America. Welcome back to both of you and I thank you for being here today. Your complete written statements will be made part of the hearing record and both of you will be recognized for five minutes for your oral statements. So let us begin with you, Mr. Leghorn. You are now recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF DAVY LEGHORN

Mr. LEGHORN. Improving the information technology used to manage VA education and employment benefits is important. It can save money and make programs and services run more efficiently to the benefit of veterans. However, we must not overlook human factors involved in ensuring that veterans get the tools and counseling they need to maximize their education opportunities and

transition into their civilian careers. Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Dale Barnett and the over two million members of the American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to testify on this issue.

As part of VA's efforts to improve Post-9/11 GI Bill claims processing, the automated Long Term Solution was implemented with the intention of having the time it takes to process benefit payments. In theory it is supposed to take human claims processors out of the equation using computer systems to process claims. However, VA's IT systems have not yet automated all original and supplemental claims. Due to time limitations and prioritization of effort VA has focused on automating the supplemental claims but not even all the supplemental claims have been automated at this point. It is clear that VA requires additional funding to enhance LTS with the functionality to process all original and supplemental claims with little human intervention.

In March of this year the American Legion supported legislation that would mandate that VA complete the transition to a full IT solution. A newly released GAO report further demonstrates room for improvement with VA IT. The report shows that VA is overpaying schools and veterans when Post 9/11 GI Bill users drop a class or leave school. The process that VA uses for addressing overpayments should be improved. This would create more certainty for student veterans and also help VA become better stewards of taxpayer dollars. The American Legion therefore encourages Congress to authorize and appropriate the necessary resources for IT solutions which would reduce the labor intensive nature of these tasks and reduce the burden for repaying overpayments which falls disproportionately on veterans.

With regards to VA's Veterans Employment Center, the American Legion believes there is a great potential in this one stop veterans employment platform. While continued IT improvements with online applications are encouraged we should not ignore the VA employment specialists and coordinators who work directly with veterans. We believe that the best thing we can do for the VEC is to build and improve the services around it. VA is the focal point of veterans programs and services so the consolidation of the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program and Jobs for Veterans state grants funding and services under VA's Office of Economic Opportunities simply makes sense. Therefore we reiterate our support for Chairman Miller's Jobs for Veterans Act of 2015.

Finally the American Legion does not oppose VA moving ahead to a paperless case management system for vocational rehabilitation and employment programs as they have done for disability claims with the Veterans Benefits Management System. However, we hope that problems that have plagued VA's previous attempts to go paperless will not plague any such effort. The American Legion understands that rehabilitation counselors' caseloads have increased dramatically as a result of better marketing of VR&E services and the influx of service disabled veterans over the last decade. We believe that the most effective way of decreasing the caseload assigned to each rehabilitation counselor is by hiring more counselors. We recognize that hiring additional full time counselors

may not be the most cost effective option, so alternatively VA might want to consider contracting out for employment and rehabilitation counselors until the caseloads can be brought down to a manageable level for VA counselors.

In summary, by improving the operations of the LTS VA can help process the education benefits more efficiently and reduce unnecessary processes that create debt problems for both the government and veterans pursuing their education. More attention to the functionality of the VEC can give both veterans and employers better tools to match capable veterans to the jobs they need. However, we must not forget the importance of the human factor and the need for employment counselors and specialists who can get veterans on the right track and avoid letting them slip through the cracks.

As always, the American Legion thanks this committee for the opportunity to offer testimony and I look forward to any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAVY LEGHORN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you, Mr. Leghorn. Mr. Hubbard, you are now recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM HUBBARD

Mr. HUBBARD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America to submit our testimony on examining VA's information technology systems that provide economic opportunity for veterans. With over 1,200 chapters across the country we are pleased to share the perspective of those most directly impacted by this committee here today. In this testimony we will address the Veterans Employment Center, or VEC, platform, and processing delays we saw with the student veterans headed to school this fall. We look forward to working with the Department of Veterans Affairs and this committee on these issues.

The VEC is the federal government's most recent response to unemployment among veteran populations. There are multiple positive aspects of the VEC which we would like to highlight. Notably, we applaud the intent to create a consolidated program. Also, the demonstration of real and impactful public-private partnerships is worth highlighting, especially the partnership with LinkedIn. While we note the positives and the potential of the VEC, we maintain concerns over several aspects of the program's operation.

First, we hope to see user adoption addressed in the coming months. The number of veteran profiles on the site is the true incentive for employer participation in the platform. Similarly, we believe employer participation is hampered by the platform's interface, which is not as intuitive or user friendly as we would hope to see in the future.

Second, it is clear that data tracking and the outcomes of the VEC are not presently available. Since the tool is meant to connect veterans with employers we would hope to see VA address outcome tracking related to hires resulting from connections through the platform, as well as employee retention data.

Third, discussions with potential site users demonstrated a desire to have a live coordinator or advisor to connect with. In particular we would like to see the functionality included to allow case managers to access profiles and the progress of military members and veterans in their portfolio.

In the process of reviewing the VEC there were some questions that we believe merit further discussion. These include how many hires have come from result of the VEC? How are job commitments by employers being translated into local jobs for veterans? What is the funding stream? What can be done to make the platform accessible to other browsers in addition to Internet Explorer? What is currently being done to make the tool mobile accessible?

We are highly appreciative of VA's commitment to supporting veterans in multiple aspects of their lives. The VBA has largely demonstrated the will and commitment that we believe is required to support veterans properly. We hope to see this will translate into future updates with the VEC so the intent and the mission of the program is fully achieved.

Turning to GI Bill processing issues, this fall highlighted several challenges that directly impacted student veterans. In early September significant delays in the processing of GI Bill benefits became an obvious concern. The impact of these delays is tangible and unfortunately very real. One of our own chapter presidents shared, I had one student vet surviving on his GI Bill by living in a storage unit and sometimes sleeping in the library. Ultimately the core challenge remains the VA's reliance on overtime hours for full time employees during the peak periods of the fall and spring enrollment. Under a unique solution with the National Student Clearinghouse, VA and taxpayers incurred no additional cost since schools select to send the data through NSC, paying for the cost of the service, while VA benefits from streamlined data submissions and research capabilities in conjunction with the Department of Education data is made available. This all with the added benefit of real time measurement of completions and program efficacy. We are happy to discuss this concept in more detail.

We understand there is ongoing discussion of a solution within VA and believe that the NSC proposal should be considered for incorporation, or as an advisory role.

On a separate note I would like to make mention that we recently signed the agreement with the VA and the NSC to pursue follow on research to the Million Records Project. I look forward to keeping this committee updated on the progress.

We thank the committee for this opportunity to testify on these important issues and we look forward to working with this committee and its members for any questions they may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF WILLIAM HUBBARD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well I thank you both for your testimony. And I now yield myself five minutes for questions. I also want to applaud the work that you are doing to try and cooperate with the VA and to try and make things better and to come forth with solutions. So the first question I have for both of you is were either of your organizations consulted by the VA during the development of the VEC? And was your feedback sought? Were you able to engage

and give some feedback for those trying to engage in the VEC? Mr. Leghorn, you can go first.

Mr. LEGHORN. Chairman Wenstrup, the American Legion was consulted when they created VEC. I believe VA brought the major VSOs into a room after their first or second beta testing and they asked for our feedback, and also to give us a briefing on it. One of our suggestions that we saw that they did implement was that we wanted it to be simple. You know, instead of building the next Career Builder, or you know, whatever job search employer website, we wanted something that would be really easy to navigate and I believe what we have now is something that is rather bare bones and really easy for the veterans to navigate at least.

Mr. HUBBARD. From our end, Mr. Chairman, I do not recall being consulted. But I do think that the plans that we have with VA currently to set up a demonstration presents the will and interest to making sure that this tool is working properly.

Dr. WENSTRUP. I think that is valuable and I appreciate it on both ends. Can you give me maybe some idea or of a type of metric that you think should be used for tracking the VEC's success or finding its flaws?

Mr. HUBBARD. I will take that, Mr. Chairman. So I believe that both hiring rates and then also retention rates are two key indicators that should be looked at. As a tool that is allowing for veterans to find employment, the ultimate outcome being employment, understanding what those hiring practices are, what the numbers look like, and then also on the retention side with those employers I think it would be valuable.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Yes, Mr. Leghorn.

Mr. LEGHORN. So much like what Will just said, two things that we noticed were severely lacking have always been performance metrics and retention statistics. Most of what we have right now are mostly anecdotal. And HR does not usually track things like how long a veteran currently stays at a job compared to their civilian counterpart. The VEC is a great platform to start convincing HR in government and the private sector to start collecting this information.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Yes, I would agree with you on that. I think really what you want to do is not only have someone find a job but be able to stay in a job. And to make sure that we are getting the right matches, if you will, and really knowing what your long term results are. So obviously there has to be a continuity of contact with the veteran. And I think that that is one of the metrics, obviously, that needs to be employed for that to work.

Let me ask you both, too, what are you learning from students nationwide? Are some students still waiting to receive their housing stipend, and some schools waiting to receive their tuition? What are you hearing on that front?

Mr. HUBBARD. So Mr. Chairman on that front we are hearing that the delays have persisted but are decreasing. I have not heard new cases of delays. To my knowledge the VA did submit for overtime to address the backlog that was presented and became obvious in September. I have not heard new cases and I do appreciate them taking the time to address that issue clearly and publicly.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Mr. Leghorn.

Mr. LEGHORN. Chairman Wenstrup, I am not the who handles education issues for the American Legion so I will have to take that question for the record.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Okay. I appreciate that. I guess the next question I have is what could we do, what are your suggestions on making this more user friendly? And I think you touched on that a little bit. But if you guys could share, either one of you or both of you, what suggestions you might have to make it more user friendly and more accessible, the VEC system?

Mr. HUBBARD. So I think what would be helpful first off is some type of mobile platform. We know that currently student veterans are a highly mobile population and oftentimes are quite connected to technology. So having that as a functionality would be helpful. But beyond that I think actually what would be more supportive is to have the ability for a case manager to be able to access profiles and track individuals that they are working with. If they have individuals in their portfolio, members of the military or veterans, to be able to look and see the employers that they are connecting with, how those interactions are going, and what the results are I think would allow for them to give tailored feedback and provide good advice on that search.

Mr. LEGHORN. So one of the things that we have heard from employers is that they are being asked by too many competing job search platforms to look for employees on their Web site. And this is a problem because VEC is a newcomer and if an employer hops on a site and the search and navigation function is not readily intuitive, HR is going to revert to using a platform that they are familiar with and they have been using already. When companies think about hiring veterans they usually flock to DoD programs because in their mind they are thinking about transitioning veterans. And VEC really needs more market share in the veterans hiring arena to let the companies know that they have access to an even larger pool of veterans and spouses on the website than compared to some of the DoD programs.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well thank you very much, both of you. And I now recognize the ranking member for his questions.

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, I am going to focus my first question, or questions, on the GI Bill comparison tool. Here is where I am coming from. I was impressed two years ago when I visited the community college veterans center in my district at Riverside Community College. The veterans there seemed to have a great awareness of conserving their benefits. We have a low cost community college system in California, which allows veterans to conserve their benefits for graduate school. And I thought, gee, they are really being taught a very sophisticated strategy and how to use the generous GI benefits we have under the Post-9/11 Bill.

So community colleges in my mind offer students, you know, a really good opportunity, especially in California, to combine low cost with curricular options that allow them to complete associates degrees, certificates, and a transfer to four-year schools. In your opinion does the current GI Bill comparison tool present community colleges as a favorable option for veterans compared to four-

year nonprofit schools or for profit schools? Either one of you, if you care to.

Mr. HUBBARD. Thank you for your question, sir. I think it does ultimately provide a pretty uniform and even look at different schools across different sectors and different levels. I think ultimately though it can sometimes be a little deceiving because in some cases an individual will look down at the section that shows if the school is POE compliant, if they have signed on to the various veteran supporting networks. And I think at times that provides maybe an unfair view of what the school actually supports.

What I always recommend for individuals to do as they are considering school is to reach out to the Student Veterans of America chapter on campus and to talk to the veterans who are right on the campus and get a very clear view of what they might do. I think that has been always a beneficial avenue for them to find out information. And if you go on to the tool as it stands there is a line on there that allows for individuals to see if there is a student veteran group on campus. If there is, they can go directly to the home page through the comparison tool which I think is highly beneficial.

Mr. TAKANO. You know, recently I was interacting with a veteran over the telephone. I often go to my office and call constituents who have written into us about a certain challenge they are having. This particular veteran needed an advocate, and he was on VR&E. He was financing his education through VR&E. And his counselor just did not have the time to be the advocate. He has a full caseload. And this particular veteran who I am thinking of had also some issues with PTS and contributed to part of his challenge on campus.

So I was interested to hear Mr. Leghorn talk about this concern about the goal of complete automation as opposed to also paying attention to hiring counselors. So my question, if you could explain this, we also had a great hearing last week we brought in a young man from Nebraska who was talking about the VSOC program. And I was surprised to learn that VSOC counselors also have a VR&E caseload, which to me means that they have little time to also address the wider veterans community that are not necessarily on VR&E but also need, you know, counseling advice. So I will just turn it over to either one of you to respond.

Mr. LEGHORN. Okay. So with regards to full automation, what we were talking about was with the GI Bill it is one of those benefits where if you, depending on your dates of service you either have it or you do not. So triaging something like that can be fully automated with minimum human interaction. With regards to the high touch counseling services, what we were talking about was building that around the VEC. It is great to have that platform but we need to have the counselors and the specialists there to work with the people after they have created a profile on the VEC, and the same thing with the VR&E. You know, obviously that is a place where you really need intensive employment counseling.

Mr. TAKANO. Great. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Mr. Bost, you are now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Leghorn, can you go into a little more detail maybe about the type of feedback you have

been getting from HR departments for larger employers on the effectiveness of the VEC?

Mr. LEGHORN. On top of what I said earlier, another issue that they have had was with the skills translator. Skills translators are supposed to crank out autogenerated civilian skills for the resume and that is what they are supposed to do. We cannot really change that. But for the HR personnel in these big companies what they find is that it is practically useless if it is put on a resume. Because they still have to devote time to calling the applicant and asking them what you did in service and what have you accomplished. And then the onus is really on the user to take the autotext that they get from the skills translator to paraphrase them into a narrative that reflects their time in service. Because they told us that a resume with generic bullet points that are obviously ripped from the website quickly finds its way into the trash bin.

Mr. BOST. Okay. Do you, and this is for both of you, do you believe that maybe the VEC was rolled out too fast? Maybe not ready for prime time?

Mr. HUBBARD. Sir, thank you for your question, sir. I think that ultimately there were over the last several years a lot of tools that have come out. Obviously veterans employment is a hot topic, a topic of priority for the American public as it should be. And with the interest in engaging in a comprehensive tool such as the VEC, I think ultimately a lot of the previous tools that maybe had been working, Hero to Hired is a good example of something that had been working, which incorporated, as my colleague pointed out, that high touch capacity, the ability for case managers to be involved directly. I think a lot of those functions were not necessarily incorporated into the current version. Which is not to say that they still could not be. In my conversations with individuals at the VA, they have expressed an interest in improving the tool which we are very interested in working with them on.

Mr. LEGHORN. Sir looking back I would say that yes, it was rolled out too fast. Because, you know, the success of the VEC really comes from the cache of resumes and profiles that you had in there. I think in the beginning we should have rolled it out to the transitioning servicemembers and veterans first to build up an ample cache of resumes and profiles before we fine-tuned it and turned it over to the large employers.

Mr. BOST. Yes, you know as I listen to this and listen to the fact that, great idea, would both of you agree with that? It is a great idea and it is trying to move ourselves into the future to make sure that we can get them hired as fast as possible and use technology to the best of our ability, correct? And I guess that the thing I see here is some things, no matter how much they change, are still the same. I am not going to try to date myself here but the month I went into the Marine Corps, the month before was when they stopped paying with cash on the parade decks all around the United States and world. And the next month was when they started paying with checks and all of a sudden many of us got no pay due. Because they rolled the system out very, very quickly and we want to move forward into the future but quite often we are not necessarily ready to do everything we are supposed to do. Do you see the opportunity for us to get this correct?

Mr. HUBBARD. Sir, I think there is an opportunity and I think the VA is trying to do that. In the conversations we have had it is clear that there is that intent to make sure that this tool is functioning properly. I do not think it is there yet.

Mr. LEGHORN. Sir, we absolutely think the VA is on the right track here. If we compared it to its predecessor, My Next Move for Veterans, I mean this platform has garnered more recognition than its predecessor ever did. So.

Mr. BOST. Well I know this committee appreciates your input. And hopefully we can work to try to work with them to improve it to where it works the way it is supposed to. And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you. Ms. Rice, you are now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So it seems to me that the veterans who are most in need of the services of the VR&E are those who are either unemployed or homeless or both. My question is how do we, what is the outreach to those veterans?

Mr. HUBBARD. Ma'am, if I could address this? I actually believe that what the VA has set up in the VSOC program, as the ranking member pointed out, is the right approach. The tools that they have set up with the VSOC program allows counselors to reach out directly to individuals but not just leave them. It allows them to work with them and understand their case and work effectively. So I think that is what needs to happen more broadly. It is not necessarily happening now and I think as a result some individuals are slipping through the cracks and individuals who do need more attention are getting less. So I think by taking that model of the VSOC program and applying it more broadly, I think some of that can be addressed.

Ms. RICE. So why has that not been done?

Mr. HUBBARD. I would defer to my colleagues from the VA on the next panel.

Mr. BOST. So in the instance where a veteran who is going to classes on the GI Bill either withdraws or drops out, withdraws from a class or drops out of the semester, how is that information communicated to VA? And in terms of to prevent the overpayment situation that we were talking about before, number one? And number two, is that a red flag for the VA to ensure that some counselor, the veteran is contacted by a counselor to see what is going on, what might be going on that is causing the withdrawal or, you know, the problems with continuing in school?

Mr. HUBBARD. Ma'am, I think this is a great question. To give you some idea of why some of that might be the case, I think it is important to understand the current process of how the payments are being made.

The way that things are working and the way the data is being reported right now, if you understand on one side you have schools and on the other side you have the Department of Defense, you have the Department of Education, the VA. Right now those schools are independently reporting to these different departments, just to name a few. So in the——

Mr. BOST. What do you mean independently reporting? They——

Mr. HUBBARD. So the schools currently, the Department of Defense asks certain questions of the schools for tuition assistance, for example. Department of Education has their own questions regarding Pell Grants, for example. And then the VA has their own questions regarding veterans benefits and the GI Bill. But right now the way the process works is the schools get essentially for lack of a better term surveys from the different departments and agencies and they are expected to reply differently. About 70 percent of the data that is being asked, name, social security number, program of study, is all the same. So right now these schools are being asked to reply to all of these different departments and agencies with a lot of the same information but some different. As a result it should not be a surprise that in this flow of data that some things come up missing. So with the proposal that we have addressed with the VA and we look forward to sharing with you in more detail, we think that this process can be streamlined through a single auditing agency that would allow compliance to be ensured but also to make sure that the data is clean, clear, and efficient.

Mr. BOST. And how does that get implemented?

Mr. HUBBARD. That is something that we are working with our colleagues at the VA on discussing and we would be happy to share more details with you.

Mr. BOST. So is it, can you tell us if they are open to that? I mean, it seems like a pretty common sense solution to at least consolidate all of the relevant information so that people do not fall through the cracks.

Mr. HUBBARD. In our conversations they have been very interested and I definitely applaud the VA for being open to new solutions that, you know, could potentially offer good support to student veterans, but really all students for that matter. Presently this process is being implemented with the Department of Education so the model is there. I think there is a lot to be learned from that.

Mr. BOST. So what is being done for the veteran in the situation where they withdrew from a class or a semester and the bills are still being paid, and now they have to, they are responsible for them? What is being done to help that veteran?

Mr. HUBBARD. In that case, that individual, the onus would be on them to ensure that they understand that the money that comes in for example, and you know the GAO came out with a fantastic report on these overpayments that I am sure you are referencing. In that scenario the individual would see the money to their account. What needs to be communicated to those individuals is that that money is not, is not necessarily for them to spend. It is the result of a change that has not hit the system yet. I do not think that that message is being communicated effectively, which is why I believe you have seen in many cases some overpayments.

Mr. BOST. So they are just seeing the money come in and they are assuming that it is theirs, and that the withdrawal has already been communicated? And they are spending that money?

Mr. HUBBARD. Right. And I think the Department of Defense actually has a great example of what a solution to this might be. When they have the Leave and Earning Statement, the LES, they are provided on a monthly basis, an itemized breakdown of what

money is coming in and what it is for. In such an example, if there was a mistake or an overpayment that was made, the individual could more readily identify that versus a lump sum payment to their account which is not clearly indicated what it is for.

Mr. BOST. So you two are obviously very impressive. But obviously the concern of this committee is how do we make things easier? It is like everyone's experience with their local DMV. I mean, you know, you would sooner bang your head against a concrete wall than go to the Department of Motor Vehicles. I mean, maybe I am, does everyone agree? And the veteran process, whether it is trying to get employment or access your GI benefits, should not be an exercise of banging their head against a wall and making them be the ones that jump through hoops. So I thank both of you and thank you for your ideas on how to make this a better experience for the veteran. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Mr. Costello, you are now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. COSTELLO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Hubbard, and Mr. Leghorn, thank you for your service to our country, and also thank you for testifying and your very substantive memos which I had the opportunity to review. And first, as for Mr. Leghorn, I think you did a very nice job of sort of outlining a lot of the technological challenges that we have, as well as some of the opportunities there. And you did point to VEC as some of the concerns that you have. And I think Mr. Hubbard you delved very deeply into specifically what some of the, whether we call them problems or challenges, but really some of the opportunities as to how VEC can be improved. And I looked a little bit further on with the VA testimony to come on VEC. And I am a little concerned about whether or not your suggestions are going to be implemented or what the status of what some of your proposals are. The automatically saving profile, you know, some of the stuff I think is really basic. But I think the more serious issues that really need to happen, and I am asking for your feedback, it does not seem as though veterans are using the site as much as they should. It really does not feel, leaving aside the LinkedIn partnership, it does not really seem from what I am reading that employers are using the site. And that is of concern because it is there to help veterans become employed. In fact, the questions that you asked many of them really suggest that it is not being used for what it should be used for, or at least we are not even able to evaluate whether or not that it is successful. It is a portal. It is there. But is it working? And so my question to you is what has been your interaction with the VA? Have they been responsive to some of your suggestions or other suggestions out there? And where do you think we go from here in order to improve it? Because I gleaned from your testimony that it is good, it is worth preserving, but we need to make it a lot better than what it is in order to have it accomplish the purpose for which it was intended.

Mr. LEGHORN. So the success of the VEC is based off of how many veterans are going to use it, or are using it. And the best way to do that is success stories. We mention in our testimony that we have not had a single case where a veteran was preemptively contacted by an employer for an interview for a job, or anything

like that. And I think that is what the platform was made for. You know? So if we could only get the employers to preemptively use the platform and reach out to a veteran, that is how we are going to get the success stories to sell the VEC to more veterans and get more utilization.

Mr. COSTELLO. Let me ask you this, then. Particularly on the issue of public-private partnerships, we have a shortage of truckers in this country. In my state the natural gas industry is going to be employing a lot more people in the years to come. From a public-private partnership perspective, getting certain industries where there is in demand employment opportunities to become more acclimated to VEC so that it is much employer driven as it is veteran driven, do you have any thoughts on making it, I mean, you seem to suggest though the demonstration of real and impactful public-private partnerships is worth considering. How should we consider that? How could we make it better by involving private industry more?

Mr. LEGHORN. The most obvious point of contact is obviously with TAP program at the point where the veteran is transitioning out from military service. I think if there is a place for the private sector to engage veterans to let them know what is out there, and what fields are direly in need of workers——

Mr. COSTELLO. And you would agree that that is not happening right now, but that should be happening? And if that were to happen, then the VEC program would be markedly improved, right?

Mr. LEGHORN. Correct.

Mr. COSTELLO. My time is expired. Thank you.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Ms. Radewagen, you are now recognized for five minutes.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member Takano. Gentlemen, thank you very much for your testimony today. Thank you for your service to our nation.

Mr. Hubbard, would you please explain why you believe a partnership between VA and the National Student Clearinghouse could improve GI Bill processing times?

Mr. HUBBARD. Thank you for the question, ma'am. Absolutely. So as I pointed out previously, the current process, you see the schools going to the different departments and agencies. To your question what we are proposing with our partner in National Student Clearinghouse is that schools would go directly through this centralized organization and then to the different departments and agencies. What this process allows is for the National Student Clearinghouse, who already collects 97.7 percent of all higher education data regarding completions, time to degree, and a various other host of information, what they can do is then understand what is going on on the ground, complement that with their research, use what they are getting from the Department of Education, the Department of VA, and the Department of Defense, in a combination to understand what they can do to improve. That streamlined authority would allow them to clean the data for compliance. If issues come up where the data is coming across and it is either fractured or they need to change something, they can turn that around much quicker and they do not rely on a paper-based system to inform

veterans of mistakes, thereby allowing them to turn it around quite quickly.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. Thank you. I have a couple of little questions for Mr. Leghorn. Can you please go into more detail about how a small investment in improving the system that certifies monthly enrollment for GI Bill users could save VA money in the end?

Mr. LEGHORN. Ma'am, again, I am not the person that handles education issues for the American Legion. So if I could take that question for the record I could get you a better answer.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. Thank you. Here is another one. Please expand on your statement that VA and Labor must not lose sight of the human factor when it comes to these IT systems. How is that?

Mr. LEGHORN. Okay. So thank you for your question. And the point of IT is to automate simple tasks. And what we found in the past was a veteran would usually come into a one-stop center and in the very beginning they were being triaged by DVOPs or LVERs. And then they thought, well, if we put an admin assistant there to triage the veterans we free up the DVOPs and LVERs to do their jobs. And then we are getting to the point where what we are seeing is in order to free up the secretaries' time they are using IT to triage the veterans by a website or the phone system. And but let us say you are dealing with a veteran that has great distrust in the VA, reluctant to seek government services, and the first contact they, or the first interpersonal transaction they have with the Department of Labor at the state level or VA is a machine. That is going to deter them from seeking more services. And that is what the American Legion is afraid will happen as we go forth and automate more and more functions.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well if there are no further questions you gentlemen are excused and thank you for being here today, and I appreciate your service.

I will call up our second and final panel to the witness table.

With us today is Mr. Curt Coy, the Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity for the Veterans Benefits Administration of VA. He is accompanied by General Rob Worley, Director of VA's Education Service; Mr. Jack Kammerer, Director of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service; and Mr. Steven Schliesman, Assistant Deputy Chief Information Officer for VA's Office of Information and Technology.

Welcome back, Mr. Coy, General Worley, Mr. Kammerer. And it's nice to have you with us here today, Mr. Schliesman.

STATEMENT OF CURTIS L. COY, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS. ACCOMPANIED BY JACK KAMMERER, DIRECTOR VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICE, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; MG ROBERT M. WORLEY II, USAF (RET.), DIRECTOR, EDUCATION SERVICE, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; STEVEN SCHLIESMAN, ASSISTANT DEPUTY CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER, OFFICE OF INFORMATION & TECHNOLOGY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF CURTIS L. COY

Mr. COY. Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the Office of the Economic Opportunity IT capabilities. I am accompanied today by my colleagues Rob Worley, Jack Kammerer and Steven Schliesman.

It has certainly been a very busy and challenging several years and we are proud to report to the committee several success stories. When the Post-9/11 GI Bill was established in 2008, we immediately began the process of developing a long-term solution for education claims processing. Perhaps the most significant enhancement was in September, 2012, when end-to-end automation was successfully activated. Since that deployment, over 6,000 claims a day are processed without any human intervention. The last fiscal year, 52 percent of all Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims were fully automated with another 35 percent partially automated.

This automation has significantly reduced education claims processing times from an average of 17 to 7 days for supplemental claims and 31 to 18 days for original claims. We have also maintained a payment accuracy rate of 99.4 percent.

The GI Bill Comparison Tool was internally developed and deployed in February, 2014, allowing prospective students to compare educational institutions using a number of measures and attributes, helping veterans be better informed consumers. As of this month, 1.2 million unique visitors have accessed the tool. We are working on the next release of the tool prior to Veterans Day this year, which will add even more functionality.

We also developed and launched the GI Bill Feedback System, a centralized online reporting system that allows students to report their experiences with educational institutions. Depending on the nature of the feedback, VA may also serve as an intermediary between the student and the school, or VA may launch a targeted risk-based review of the school.

We began accepting complaints in January of 2014 and as of this month there are over 4500 complaints submitted, of which 3700 have already been resolved.

Finally, as a result of market surveys, VA deployed an online assessment tool called Career Scope that allows users to assess their interests and aptitudes before using the GI Bill. As of last month, over 16,000 have already initiated assessments in Career Scope.

Certainly not to be outdone by their education colleagues, our VRE team is working on several enhancements. Perhaps the most significant is a new VRE case management system, a veterans-centered paperless service delivery tool. When delivered by our OIT colleagues, it is expected that VRE will be able to support veterans and reduce the administrative burden on their counselors. The total two-year IT development effort that began this September is the total funding of $9.7 million.

Leveraging an existing VHA system, VRE has also developed an online electronic medical referral process, eliminating a cumbersome, paper-based system. Since its release eight months ago, VRE has successfully referred over 1900 veterans to VHA for medical services.

This year, VRE also rolled out its Telecounseling Pilot Program in March. This provides secure video conferencing to enable VRE counselors to remotely meet with and counsel veterans. Although this is in its initial phase, it has significant potential to increase VRE's responsiveness to veterans' needs, reduce travel costs and time for veterans.

VA, Defense, Labor, Education, SBA and OPM collaborated to design and develop the Veterans Employment Center. With its inception, the VEC consolidated several government sites, bringing together job opportunities and allowing users to build an online profile that can be shared in real time. We also have a job bank that provides over 2.2 million jobs.

The VEC also integrates and promotes our public-private partnerships by linking a broad set of resources, programs and services offered by VA-partner organizations. As of this summer, the site has grown to nearly 1.5 million page views by approximately 135,000 users each month. We continue to improve the VEC thanks in large part to the support of DOL, DoD, and our public-private partners.

Interestingly, the VEC and the GI Bill Comparison Tool were built using a VA in-house digital services resources, a world-class team of talent from firms like Amazon and Google. As I have mentioned, it has been a busy time working to strategically leverage the best in IT, implementing legislative changes, and looking to help veterans attain personal and economic success, our core mission in the Office of Economic Opportunity.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement, and we would be pleased to answer any questions from you or other members of the subcommittee, sir.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF CURTIS L. COY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, thank you, Mr. Coy, for your testimony, and I now yield myself five minutes for questions.

The first question is, we have heard that there was a significant increase in processing delays for Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits after there was a decision by former Undersecretary Hickey to shift overtime funding that was originally allocated for education staff to instead fund mandatory overtime to bring down the compensation claims backlog, so VA can meet its self-imposed date; is this true?

Mr. COY. Yes, sir.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Do you find this to be true? You do find it to be true. Thank you.

Mr. COY. I would be happy to explain more by——

Dr. WENSTRUP. Sure, please.

Mr. COY. We generally allocate, in recent years it has been about $6 million for overtime. We basically split that in half, half for the spring semester, half for the fall semester. We do this so we don't have to hire more staff to cover those peak periods and so it sort of levels things out. This past year, we spent the $3 million in the spring semester and processing times were just fine. Coming up this fall, around April, May, June time frame, the decision was made that we had our $3 million left for the fall, that 2 million of that $3 million would be recouped. They did that and in fact processing times began to get delayed. Some time in September, we received an additional $500,000, but that wasn't enough to be able to keep us from getting back on track.

So the bottom line is, is we had at peak about 155,000 claims that we were behind in, right now we have an inventory of about 43,000 claims. In prior years—this is now after the automation of supplemental claims—in prior years, that high was around 95,000. So you can see that we exceeded that.

Dr. WENSTRUP. So what would you suggest going forward?

Mr. COY. I would suggest that hopefully this was a one-time anomaly, because much of the claims backlog is down, and so I don't anticipate this happening again.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you. We heard rumors that since VA can't truly track how many veterans actually use the VEC, there is potential that a large amount of the site visits are being done by automation and not actual individuals. Have you found that to be true? Can you comment on that?

Mr. COY. I'm sorry, comment on?

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, that there are a lot of the visits to the sites being done by automation rather than actual individuals checking into the site.

Mr. COY. I don't have any evidence of that, Mr. Chairman. We have seen the VEC usage grow over the course of time. Part of that is, is you heard some of the testimony from our VSA and Legion partners, we are listening to that feedback. One of the biggest complaints that we think we have heard from our customers, if you will, is the Skills Translator. We are releasing a new Skills Translator in hopefully the next week or two, barring a crash of IT, if you will, that will enhance that Skills Translator such that it can be much more useful to our veterans.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Going back to the potential for these automated visits. I guess the question would be, how long did someone stay on the site? Because if it is like ten seconds, then that probably gives us the wrong number as far as usage.

Mr. COY. Well, I have that in my cheat sheet, Mr. Chairman, it's about six minutes. And actually the real number is five minutes and I think 53 seconds on average.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Okay. So how long has VEC been in existence?

Mr. COY. It was released and announced in April of last year.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Okay. So we have about 200,000 veterans transitioning from military service every year and there are, what, about 20,000 veterans that have profiles on the VEC at this time?

Mr. COY. Currently, it's about 23,000, and that has grown somewhat significantly in the last several months. Part of the issues that you heard from our SVA and Legion partners is that the adoption of the VEC, part of that issue is that we have revamped our TAP curriculum to include the VEC. Our partner at the Department of Labor has also revised their curriculum. We are also seeing some significant help in our Veterans Economic Communities Initiative, where we have individuals that are accountable for leveraging the VEC.

So we hope and expect to see the VEC starting to gain in its use.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, I hope so too, obviously. And I just hope it is not based on little interest by our veterans or an access issue. So I will look forward to hearing how we do as we move forward.

Mr. COY. Yes, sir.

Dr. WENSTRUP. And with that, I yield back. And, Mr. Takano, you are now recognized for any questions you may have.

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Coy or Mr. Worley, I understand that the updates to the GI Bill Comparison Tool will include valuable information to help students decide where to use their GI Bill benefits, including information about transfer rates, the different types of degrees or programs offered, and the importance of school accreditation. Can you just tell me briefly, how do community colleges compare to four-year non-profits or for-profits on a GI Bill Comparison Tool calculus?

Mr. COY. Thank you, that's a great question. And the GI Bill Comparison Tool is what we think to be one of our real success stories. It's only 18 or 20 months old now and we have seen almost universal acceptance of the tool. We have had three new releases of the tool and we have never seen any downtime with the tool. Probably the only criticism that we get from the tool is that there is not enough and we want more.

We listen. We are going to do a significant release, as I indicated in my oral testimony, on or before Veterans Day, which will include outcome measures for all four-year and two-year schools. Part of those outcome measures is in fact the transfer rate of students going from community colleges to four-year school.

Rob, anything else you would like to add?

General WORLEY. The only thing I would add is just to back up to the creation of the outcome measures and the tool itself. The fact that we have a transfer-out rate on the tool is a result of the vetting of these tools with the larger community, both other federal agencies, as well as the community college associations. And so there are both completion rates, graduation rates, as well as the transfer-out rates that are focused on the two-year institutions.

Mr. TAKANO. Okay. Can you share with us your reasoning for including this new information about transfer rates, for example, on the GI Bill Comparison Tool? Was it based on problems you were seeing with certain types of schools?

Mr. COY. No, sir. The development of these outcome measures has taken several years and it has developed into a sort of seismic shift in the way schools are looking at leveraging the GI Bill and

serving our veterans. The outcome measures, and there's five or six of them, as Mr. Worley indicated, was done in conjunction and a partnership with Education, Labor, and a host of other associations, where we could narrow down getting information about individual schools. And what we are doing is we are taking the results of those outcome measures, which currently are on the GI Bill Web site and available for anybody to look at, and we're including that and inculcating that into our GI Bill Comparison Tool.

Mr. TAKANO. What information does the updated Comparison Tool provide students on whether their credits will transfer, say if they start at a community college, out of community college or a for-profit, or later transfer to a four-year, non-profit college, does it provide information such as that?

Mr. COY. We currently provide some minimal information on that. We expect some releases next year where schools are going to be able to ensure that they fill in those blanks. Right now we take that information from the Department of Education's Web site and put it in there. Soon in a release, hopefully early next year, we are going to have that capability to have schools input some of that information.

Mr. TAKANO. Well, information doesn't provide and help students understand school accreditation. For example, if students just see that a school is nationally accredited, they might not know what that means. How does the updated Comparison Tool explain aspects of accreditation that veterans need to know?

Mr. COY. There's two to three ways that we do that and we account for that. First on the tool itself, it reflects what the accreditation standards are for that particular school. There's also an info button for somebody to go what does accreditation mean, I don't get this. So we provide that information. Literally just yesterday, we released a three-and-a-half minute that talks about know before you go and it talks about accreditation in there. We also announced yesterday our new choosing the right school and the new updated piece in there as well with accreditation.

So we think we are getting the word out as much as we can on the issue of accreditation and we know that it is important to you as well, Congressman.

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you so much. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you.

Mr. Bost, you are recognized for five minutes.

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Coy, is the information on VEC a secure system, and is the system hosted on the VA's Web site or as a third-party system?

Mr. COY. It's a great question. First, yes, sir, it is secure. We have got no, absolutely no indication that there has been any intrusions. Currently, it is part of the VA's rollout this Veterans Day for Vets.gov. The server that it is hosted on is a VA-approved server, but it is in fact a server that we, if you will, lease from a company called SalesForce.

Mr. BOST. Okay. So that is the reason why if you click on it, it shows up that it is hosted by a third-party site, correct? That would be the reason it does that?

Mr. COY. I don't know where it says anywhere on there that it is hosted by a third-party site, but I can go back and check.

Mr. BOST. If you will check that?

Mr. COY. Absolutely.

Mr. BOST. And my next question, and I asked this of the other panel, following some of the functional issues we have heard and everything like that, do you think maybe it was rolled out too quick?

Mr. COY. Well, it is a great question, I don't know that I really have a great answer for that. We certainly probably would have liked in 20/20 hindsight to have resolved several things before we rolled out, but we did roll it out. And one of the great attributes of the VEC is that it is maintained by our digital services team, the team that I mentioned in my oral testimony, is a team that right now is about 20 or 22 folks, they want to grow to about 75 folks. And what this team does is it brings in talent from the outside, from Google, Amazon, LinkedIn. They are one or two-year appointments. So it is sort of like the Peace Corps, they come in and they do their thing for a couple years and then they leave, and it is a rotating basis.

And what this allows us to do is rather than this is Release 1, this is Release 2, this is Release 3, what it allows us to do is be very agile and very mobile, be able to change things pretty much on the fly.

As I indicated, one of the big things that we are going to change on the tool coming out in the next week or so is an enhanced Skills Translator, which we heard loud and clear was one of the bigger complaints.

Mr. BOST. Just one quick follow-up question on what I was asking before, because right now with the concerns we have had with every time we turn around someplace somewhere is broken into to get people's information. Are we sure that the people that sign up, all the veterans are protected and their personal information is protected through this system?

Mr. COY. Absolutely, sir. It is one of our highest priorities in this. First off, there's no PII information on the VEC, and it is one of the reasons why we have sort of a separate systems, because nobody can go to the VEC and then intrude their e-benefits account. We built the VEC such that if you want to save your resume and your profile, you have to go through the DS login, but you are not in, if you will, the e-benefits such, because e-benefits has a lot of information that is in there.

So I am pretty confident. I don't think in the world of IT anybody can say 100-percent confident, but we are pretty sure. We have not seen any intrusions as of yet.

Mr. BOST. Okay. Have you had any input at all from the DoD or DOL with any issues that they have with the system?

Mr. COY. We developed the VEC in concert with DOL and DoD, they were there with us every step of the way.

There is a bit of history to this. There was a task force that was developed on veteran employment, I was on that task force of senior leaders, and we looked at a number of different sites. We had a site, it was called VetSuccess, so we had the bones of a site. The decision was made that VA would take the lead on developing the VEC, and so we charged off and did that.

Mr. BOST. Okay, thank you.

Then I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you.

Ms. Rice, you are recognized for five minutes.

Ms. RICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

So, Mr. Coy, if I could just ask about a couple of the systems. I am curious with the GI Bill Feedback System that allows veterans obviously to—their dependents to talk about their experience. And in here it said that there were 4500 complaints submitted, 3500 of them were resolved. Can you just talk about how that is working? Because that seems to me to be, you know, any business, if you are going to be successful, you want to know do you have satisfied customers.

Mr. COY. Absolutely. It is one of our great sources of pride is the ability for a student to lodge a complaint against a school. As I indicated in my oral testimony, what happens is, is in many cases it's a communication problem, it is a problem that is between the school and the student, and we hope that that gets resolved.

But what happens is, is the front end of this tool is automated, the back end is rather ugly, because it is an entirely manual process. We have someone who literally looks at every single complaint and if in fact the complaint is such that it needs to go to the school, the complaint is sent to the school. The school is asked to provide a response. Oftentimes, the school reaches out to the student to talk about this particular issue. There are times where we initiate a risk-based compliance review based upon the information, and some of those complaints are not really valid for the tool.

Most of the complaints that we want to have or the tool is set up for issues and concerns about principles of excellence, you know, illegal or improper recruiting and marketing and those kinds of things. But there are still folks that also, and Rob hates it when I say this, but there are cheeseburger complaints, meaning, you know, the food in the cafeteria is really bad and you guys ought to do something about that. And so we can't do anything with that.

But it is a real success story, because what we do is when we get—and I have seen a number of these responses from the schools, sometimes they are four or five-page letters. They take these things very, very seriously. As a result of that, some of these complaints are also logged on the Consumer Sentinel database and it is available for it to be reviewed by law enforcement agency.

The other thing that we have done to try and be incredibly transparent is we put the complaint system responses on the GI Bill Comparison Tool, so veterans or students can see how many complaints that school has gotten and what are the nature of those complaints.

Ms. RICE. Two other aspects of this system that I would ask you to talk about. The first one is the CareerScope, the Military Skills Translator. They seem like really, really good aspects of the system, but I wonder, can you just tell briefly, obviously talk about the pluses, minuses, and do you have enough people accessing it? Because it seems to me like that is the kind of directed help that veterans need to not spin their wheels in trying to find either educational or employment opportunities.

Mr. COY. The CareerScope Tool we did after a significant amount of market research, and what we found is we had a tool in our own

backyard. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Education—or Employment folks had been using CareerScope for their clients for some time now, so we leveraged that and used that CareerScope. And it is an interesting tool, because it helps veterans measure their interests and aptitudes, what I want to do when I get out or what should I do now that I am out.

In terms of the Skills Translator, that is on the VEC, which is a sort of different tool, but the Skills Translator, we are in the process of updating and, barring any IT concerns or issues, we expect to have that new and improved and very well thought-out Skills Translator before Veterans Day of this year.

Ms. RICE. Thank you.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Mr. Costello, you are now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. COSTELLO. Thank you.

And picking up where Ms. Rice left off with that question and your answer, the Enhanced Skills Translator you are going to make more useful. Can you just describe how it will be more useful?

Mr. COY. The best I can do probably is give you a good example. Eleven Bravo is an occupational code. The current Skills Translator says basically uses their hands and can read English, I think it is something like that. The new Skills Translator takes the research that for example LinkedIn has done and used it in a much more reliable and commercial way. So we think it shows great promise, because one of the bigger problems that many veterans have as they are translating out is, so what are my skills and attributes and what kind of things can I expect to see.

And so we think it is going to be a great enhancement.

Mr. COSTELLO. Do you have a lot of industry participation in that?

Mr. COY. The principal partner we have had in that is LinkedIn, and they have done a lot of market research and had a lot of success in that.

Mr. COSTELLO. But you are ultimately talking about identifying what skills—excuse me—you are ultimately looking for industry to identify what skills they need, so that when veterans go through the Skills Translator process it is leading them to the industries where there is employment opportunity; is that correct?

Mr. COY. Yes. LinkedIn's market research indicates the sort of key words that a lot of industry partners want to see on those particular resumes. It is just a piece of the pie though, because just because you did something in the service doesn't mean you necessarily want to do it in your civilian life. It is why CareerScope is important, it measures your interests and aptitudes. It is why the Skills Translator is important, because it sort of tells you what industry thinks of your skills. And so it goes both ways.

Mr. COSTELLO. I futuristically here, and I am the first person to admit that I am not a tech, you mentioned about the teams that you have and you have folks from Google and Amazon that come for a year or two, VEC Employees, I don't even know what this is, Agile Methodology and Managing the Software Development's Life Cycle, that sounds pretty good. I intuit——

Mr. COY. I thought that sounded pretty good too.

Mr. COSTELLO. There are actually a couple sentences before that that sound pretty good. One of the frustrations I know I have, I think other members, I don't want to speak for them, share it, is when you look at some of the technology that the VA has used in other areas, it is almost like dead technology that is just sort of like limping along, whereas it appears as though with this, with VEC, you have done it in a way that you are constantly going to be able to update it and refine it; is that correct?

Mr. COY. Yes, sir. It is one of the really neat and fun things is that when you work with this digital service folks, they are not—my colleague Steve is going to hit me, but they are not necessarily your stereotypical government employees. These are folks straight in from Google and Amazon.

Mr. COSTELLO. Right.

Mr. COY. And they are in there to make a difference. And I have been in rooms with them where we have had the Comparison Tool up on the screen and we are talking about moving things around or doing this and what if, and every single time it is, absolutely, we can do that. And so it becomes incredibly exciting, because they can do it literally just like that right there on the spot and change the tool.

Mr. COSTELLO. Mr. Hubbard in his testimony laid out some things that should be revised, as well as some questions that I think very logically should be addressed. If you had the opportunity to look at his testimony and where are you in the process—how often are you updating VEC? It seems to me as though you have sort of another VEC 2.0 with what you are going to roll out here with the Enhanced Skills Facilitator, but how often are you revisiting and working out the kinks and making it better?

Mr. COY. The short answer is all day, every day. But the longer answer is, is right now VA is going to roll out Vets.gov, and it's a new veterans-centric Web site. The Comparison Tool and the VEC are two of the superstars that's going to be initiated with that. So they are in the process right now of making the entire VEC more user friendly, just like the Comparison Tool. It is going to have a different look and feel, it is going to have all of the same information, but a different look and feel and a better user experience.

Mr. COSTELLO. Do you think you are headed for much better results in terms of, you know, taking that 23,000 and really increasing the number of users, as well as the user experience? I mean, I hope that is, we all hope that is where we are headed. Do you feel that?

Mr. COY. I not only feel it, I believe it. I think we are going to start seeing some significant changes in the way we do business and some significant user-friendly sort of changes to the VEC as well.

Mr. COSTELLO. Well, that is good to hear. Thank you very much.

Mr. COY. Yes, sir.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Ms. Radewagen, you are now recognized for five minutes.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Coy, how many other veteran job boards like VA For Vets, H2H, VetCentral, or others were replaced by the then new and untested VEC? Wouldn't it have been easier to just use an existing

system instead of creating something not only doesn't seem to work, but no one appears to like?

Mr. COY. I think it would have probably been easier to let some other system exist and not take on that challenge most certainly. We took a look, our consortium—this was not VA, this was our consortium of our Labor partners, our Defense partners, and the other partners that were on that task force that I mentioned. And so the decision was made in a consensus way for some of these other sites, many of which were very, very redundant.

And so those decisions were not made by VA, they were made by the individual services and whoever was in charge of those particular systems.

As I mentioned, we have a site, we VA, it was a VRE site called VetSuccess.gov, and we saw the bones of that and we leveraged that into what is now the VEC.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. Thank you.

I have been told that certain VA contractors are required to log in to VEC each day as a way to increase the number of page views; is this true?

Mr. COY. I have no evidence whatsoever until someone recently mentioned that to me. I asked my IT folks to look into that and there is no evidence of that. But if there is a source and somebody could help me understand better, I would be happy to look into it.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. And actually we have been told that VEC does not work on some Internet Web browsers and that on certain DoD bases they are unable to access the VEC during TAP due to this and other connectivity issues. Can you please comment on this?

Mr. COY. We did have some issues with connectivity and some of the DoD installations. We think we have turned that corner, but there's still probably some sites that we would have a challenge with.

Ms. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, thank you.

I just have one. I want to say, good luck on Veterans Day with the rollout of the one site. Yeah, keep your fingers crossed, right? And I hope it is successful and I do wish the VA well on that.

One of the things that was talked about a little bit today and there was reports of some scam artists getting to some of the people that had signed up for the VEC, and trying to get money out of them. Did you want to comment on that?

Mr. COY. It was an interesting few days, because there was a scam that was perpetuated. The scam basically notified the veteran that says, we found your name on the Veterans' Employment portal—not Veterans' Employment Center, but portal—and we are going to send you a check for a thousand dollars, because we want to hire you. And so we want you to deposit that check as soon as you get it and go out and buy a computer for less than a thousand dollars, and then we want you to take what is left over of that thousand dollars and send it back to us in the way of a money order. And so anybody that not knows these things, they did. And of course when you deposit the check and you go out that afternoon and buy a computer, but then ten days later you find out the check has bounced, you have already sent a money order back to that company, you are out that difference of money.

We did a significant marketing campaign to get that information out to as many veterans as possible, sort of under the rubric of, if it's too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true. But there are a lot of those kinds of scams that are out there all the time and we try and stay ahead of them.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, thank you very much for doing that and for responding to it. These things can happen to anyone at any time.

If you ever feel that you need our backing to suggest a study, and I don't mean on a punitive way towards anything you are doing, but in a positive way to make sure we are protecting our veterans, I would be glad to stand with you on that.

Mr. COY. Yes, sir. Thank you.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you. And I thank the witnesses for your testimony and for answering our questions. I think it is clear that we need to assure that the IT systems need to have the attention from VA senior leaders and that they need to be a priority for the department in general.

I do appreciate the valuable discussion from all of our witnesses here today on how to improve these systems to help our veterans reach maximum economic success, and I look forward to working together to do that.

And I now ask unanimous consent that a statement from the Veterans of Foreign Wars be submitted into the hearing record.

[No response.]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Hearing no objection, so ordered.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Finally, I ask that all members have five legislative days to revise and extend their remarks, and include any extraneous material in the record of today's hearing.

[No response.]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Hearing no objection, so ordered.

And if there is nothing further, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:38 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

STATEMENT OF
DAVY LEGHORN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION DIVISION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
EXAMINING VA'S INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS
THAT PROVIDE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS

NOVEMBER 03, 2015

As we had done many years before with the creation of the original GI Bill during World War II, The American Legion helped usher in a new generation of education opportunities for American veterans in June of 2008, when Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, establishing a new education benefit program under chapter 33 of title 38 United States Code, which VA refers to as the "Post-9/11 GI Bill."

When the Post-9/11 GI Bill became law, VA had just under 13 months to develop a new, complex system to process the newly eligible beneficiaries under the brand new program. Creating new processes to provide timely Post-9/11 GI Bill payments to schools and student veterans was an enormous challenge and the gravity of the task led to early struggles, but the system has continued to make some improvements over time.

Improving the technology used to manage education and employment benefits for veterans is important. It can save waste in the system and make everything run more efficiently to the benefit of the veterans as well as VA. However, we must be sure not to overlook the human factors involved in ensuring the veterans who transition to the civilian world get the tools they need to maximize the education opportunities and succeed in their careers.

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Dale Barnett and the over 2 million members of The American Legion, we thank you and your colleagues for the work you do in support of our service members and veterans as well as their families.

GI Bill Long Term Solution

As part of VA's efforts to improve Post-9/11 GI Bill claims processing and transform VA to a digital operating environment, they implemented a technology upgrade intended to cut in half the time it takes VA to process benefit payments for currently enrolled students. The process, called Long Term Solution (LTS), is an automated, end-to-end claims processing system that utilizes rules-based, industry-standard technologies for the delivery of Post-9/11 GI Bill education

benefits. In theory, it is supposed to effectively take human claims processors out of the equation – using computer systems to process claims.

The calculation of benefits paid under Chapter 33 is a complex process. LTS has over 1,600 calculation rules that support benefits for veterans, servicemembers, and transferees. The system has to recognize and support multiple types of training, including:

- graduate,
- undergraduate,
- non-college degree,
- correspondence,
- apprenticeship, and
- on-the-job training.

Up to six benefits are calculated per term, including: housing, books and supplies, tuition and fees and Yellow Ribbon. LTS also supports the entry of unlimited service periods, enrollment periods, and changes to enrollment periods.

However, VA's IT systems have not yet automated all original and supplemental claims. Due to time limitations and prioritization of effort, VA has focused on automating the supplemental claims, but only about 80 percent of those claims are fully or partially automated at this point. While VA has rules and automation for processing Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims, VA would have to develop these mechanisms for original claims. Eligibility determinations for original Post-9/11 GI Bill claims are very labor-intensive. Currently, LTS is in a sustainment phase with limited development. VA would need development funding to enhance LTS with functionality to process all original and supplemental claims to the maximum extent practicable, with little human intervention.

The American Legion, in testimony before this committee in March of this year, supported legislation that would mandate that they complete, to the maximum extent possible, the transition to a full IT solution (H.R. 475, the *GI Bill Processing Improvement Act of 2015*, similar provisions of which have since been incorporated in H.R. 3016, the *Veterans Employment, Education, and Healthcare Improvement Act*).[1]

GAO report on Post-9/11 GI Bill: Additional Actions Needed to Help Reduce Overpayments and Increase Collections

In addition, an October 21, 2015, Government Accountability Office (GAO) report has highlighted a problem with post-9/11 GI bill overpayments.[2] GAO found that VA had identified $416 million in Post-9/11 GI Bill overpayments in fiscal year 2014, affecting approximately one in four veteran beneficiaries and about 6,000 schools. All but $152 million of the overpayments were recovered, but the report noted that VA was still trying to collect an additional $110 million

[1] March 24th Testimony – Pending Legislation
[2] http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-16-42

of overpayments from prior years. And the potential for even greater overpayments or wasteful spending is considerable in light of the size of the overall program.

Most of the overpayments resulted from changes in veterans' enrollment status, which in fairness is something VA has only limited control over, according to the GAO. In practice, that means that the VA GI bill program provides funding on the strength of veterans' enrollment plans. If a veteran subsequently drops a class or withdraws from school, the original payments suddenly become overpayments.

This GAO report clearly highlights serious shortcomings in the VA's system for monitoring and collecting overpayments and The American Legion urges VA to fully adopt the GAO's recommendations for improving the program, especially by identifying and implementing a cost-effective way to allow Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries to verify their enrollment status each month, and by identifying and implementing other methods of notifying veterans and schools about debts to supplement the agency's mailed notices (e.g., email, eBenefits).

Unfortunately, the current enrollment verification system used for other GI Bill programs is not compatible with the Post-9/11 GI Bill's data systems. VA officials told GAO they would like to require veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill to verify their monthly enrollment but would need to develop a new verification process. The report notes that one option VA has considered is developing a new online system, but VA officials said the agency has not yet developed the system due to budgetary constraints. A VA contractor estimated in 2013 that it would cost approximately $10 million to implement an online verification system, although VA officials were unsure if this estimate is still accurate.

However, "[s]uch an investment would provide substantial long-term savings for VA in comparison with the current system by reducing housing overpayments and also help VA comply with federal requirements to establish practices that ensure funds are safeguarded against waste or loss. For example, VA made almost $111 million in housing overpayments in fiscal year 2013, almost $29 million of which was still uncollected as of November 2014. Although requiring veterans to verify their enrollment would not eliminate all of these overpayments, if the contractor's prior cost estimates are still correct, the new system could still pay for itself in 1 year if it reduced uncollected housing overpayments by just one-third. The potential savings from an enrollment verification system would likely increase in future years as the size of the Post-9/11 GI Bill program continues to grow, creating a long term benefit for VA and taxpayers."[3]

Ultimately, this needs to be a sustainable system. It does not require detailed analysis to realize that if $10 million in investment to infrastructure can ensure that VA does not see $29-111 million wasted due to correctable errors, then more money can be preserved to do what the program is intended to do, provide education to American veterans. The education benefits provided by the GI Bill are too valuable to squander in bureaucratic oversight.

The American Legion, therefore, encourages Congress to authorize and appropriate the necessary resources for these needed IT solutions which would reduce the labor-intensive nature

[3] Ibid. at 22.

of these tasks and reduce the burden for repaying overpayments which falls disproportionately on veterans. Furthermore, these financial complications resulting from these overpayments can devastate a veteran's credit ratings and substantially impact their ability to secure loans for business, or housing. In most cases, through no fault of their own, veterans can expect serious impacts in their living conditions because of bureaucratic errors that are preventable with better automation.

VA's Veterans Employment Center

In March 2007, the President's Commission on Care for Returning Wounded Warriors (Dole/Shalala) was established by Executive Order 13426. The Commission recommended the creation of a Web portal that would provide servicemembers, veterans, their families, and authorized caregivers with a single sign-on, central access point to clinical and benefits information. The eBenefits website is the result of the Commission's recommendation.

VA's new Online Veterans Employment Center (VEC), an application on the eBenefits website, is billed as "the federal government's single authoritative internet tool for connecting transitioning servicemembers, veterans and their families to meaningful career opportunities. The VEC is the first government-wide product that brings together a reputable cadre of public and private employers with real job opportunities, and provides transitioning servicemembers, veterans and their families with the tools to translate their military skills into plain language and build a profile that can be shared – in real time – with employers who have made a public commitment to hire Veterans. In connection with the First Lady and Dr. Biden's Joining Forces initiative, the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Labor, Defense and Education, the Small Business Administration and the Office of Personnel Management, collaborated to design and develop the VEC to incorporate the best features of existing online employment tools."[4]

VA has designated significant resources on a task that is generally the responsibility of the Department of Labor. The American Legion greatly appreciates VA's efforts to create the VEC. When we poll veterans who attend the dozens of hiring events The American Legion facilitates nationally every year, the results show that more attendees recognize the brand 'VA for Vets' and the VEC than they do the previous federal attempt at a one-stop veterans employment portal, 'My next Move.org/for Veterans.' VA is definitely achieving more success with recognition of the resources with this effort.

However, this does not mean that all of the problems have been solved in the process. Users of the application reported they find they have to save information multiple times as portions of their profiles are constantly being jettisoned from their account, sometimes immediately when logging back in and sometimes after periods of non-use. Some veterans report having to re-enter and 'save progress' as much as three times to complete their profiles. However, once the profile is complete and saved, it does make it easier to apply for VA jobs and navigation is simple and straightforward.

[4] https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/jobs

VEC could therefore clearly use some work to improve the early portion of the experience for veterans, so they can more easily take advantage of the latter ease of application functionality.

The concerns do not end there however. VEC has touted itself as a cache of resumes and profiles that helps VA and private sector employers find veterans. To this date, we have never heard of one instance where VA or a private sector employer has reached out to a veteran for an interview after perusing the resumes on VEC. In fact, we've heard from HR representatives from large consulting firms the VEC site was hard to navigate and that it is not easy to find qualified candidates.

Nevertheless, The American Legion believes there is great potential in this one-stop veterans employment platform. Anecdotal success stories or hard data on utilization and onboarding would be valuable advertisements that would, in turn, entice more veterans to sign up and use this job search/resource site. That, coupled with the aforementioned improvements to the interface for new users and for HR teams could make this a successful platform.

Not Losing Sight of the Human Factor

While continued IT improvements with the VEC are encouraged, we should not ignore the VA employment specialist and coordinators that work directly with veterans. The American Legion believes that the best thing we can do to improve the VEC is to build and improve the services around it. VA is the focal point of veterans programs and services. The consolidation of Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) and Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) funding and services under VA's Office of Economic Opportunities simply makes sense. Therefore, we reiterate our support for Chairman Miller's *Jobs for Veterans Act of 2015* (H.R. 2275). Improving the website interface or capabilities is secondary compared to the potential of HVRP and JVSG programs built around this platform. Though there is a place for a veterans office within DOL, The American Legion believes these two programs would be better served if they were consolidated under VA.[5]

Case Management of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program

The American Legion understands that VA has access to a limited amount of money to expend on IT improvements. Most of it is spent by VA to fulfill what many would consider their primary mission in administering healthcare, medical records keeping, and claims. The American Legion certainly recognizes the importance and necessity of improvements to IT infrastructure in those areas.

The American Legion does not oppose VA moving ahead to a paperless case management system for the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E) as they have done for disability claims with the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). However, we hope that problems of underutilization and sluggish response times that have plagued VA's previous attempts to go paperless would not plague any such effort. With the lessons learned in

[5] Resolution No. 13: *Expanding Veterans Employment and Homeless Services within the Department of Veterans Affairs* – OCT 2014

implementing VBMS since 2013, hopefully the same problems will not resurface and result in severe backups in productivity.

The American Legion understands that the rehabilitation caseload has increased dramatically due to better marketing of VR&E services and the influx of service-disabled veterans over the last decade. We believe that the easiest and most effective way of decreasing the caseload assigned to each rehabilitation counselor is by hiring more counselors. We recognize that hiring additional fulltime permanent counselors may not be the most cost-effective option, however, VA needs to consider contracting out for employment and rehabilitation counselors until the caseload can be brought down to a manageable level for the VA counselors.

Software technology offers many shortcuts in automating certain tasks. When utilized wisely it can be a force multiplier, but when it replaces interpersonal transactions it becomes a barrier. In addition to improving IT interfaces with their intended users, VA still needs to invest in face-to-face interactions, because often the veterans that need these programs and services the most do not have access to the internet and technology. They live in rural areas, they lives miles away from Job Centers, VA Regional Offices and Medical Centers and they change addresses often. There is a distinct population of veterans that reside somewhere between joblessness and homelessness that need employment services the most. As we automate more and more programmatic interactions, we may inadvertently be driving this already marginalized population further away.

Conclusion

By improving the operation of the LTS VA can help process the education benefits more efficiently and reduce unnecessary waste that creates debt problems for both the government and veterans working towards their education. More attention to the interface functionality of the VEC can give both veterans and employers better tools to match capable veterans with the jobs they need. We must not forget the importance of the human factor however, and the needed vocational rehabilitation counselors, who can help get veterans on the right track and avoid letting them slip through the cracks.

As always, The American Legion thanks this committee for the opportunity to offer testimony on the position of the over 2 million members of this organization. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Jeff Steele, Assistant Director in The American Legion's Legislative Division at (202) 861-2700, or jsteele@legion.org

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TESTIMONY OF

MR. WILLIAM HUBBARD

VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:

"EXAMINING VA'S INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS THAT PROVIDE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS"

NOVEMBER 3, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on "Examining VA's Information Technology Systems that Provide Economic Opportunities for Veterans." With over 1,200 chapters across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those most directly impacted by this subject this committee addresses.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. With a myriad of programs supporting their success, rigorous research development seeking ways to improve the landscape, and advocacy throughout the nation, we place the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid. As the future leaders of this country, nothing is more paramount than their success in school to prepare them for productive and impactful lives.

In this testimony, we will address the Veterans Employment Center (VEC) platform, and processing delays we saw as student veterans headed to school this fall. We look forward to working with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and this committee on these issues.

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Veterans Employment Center Overview

The VEC is the federal government's most recent response to unemployment among veteran populations. The program is intended as a consolidated and authoritative online source to connect veterans and their families to employers, and is the result of the President's Executive Order published in 2009, "Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government".[1] This tool replaced a variety of other online mechanisms including the widely known "Hero 2 Hired" program, with the focus on creating a single platform for transition veterans.

There are multiple positive aspects of the VEC, which we would like to highlight. We applaud the intent to create a consolidated program. As many of our members have found, the will and interest to support our nation's veterans is widespread. The challenge is often identifying and connecting with the right resources. With a unified tool, the goal of making use of a comprehensive tool becomes more accessible. Also, the demonstration of real and impactful public-private partnerships (PPPs) is worth considering. Of note, the VA has partnered with LinkedIn to make several related benefits available to veterans using the VEC platform. Overall, the potential of the VEC program and platform is one worth pursuing. We hope to see the tool refined and for the VA to consider some of the areas we highlight for improvement below.

While we note the positives of the potential of the VEC, we maintain concerns over several aspects of the program's operation. Based on data from the VA, only 22,500 profiles exist within the platform currently. This represents a very minor percentage of the overall unemployed veteran population, and well under 1%

[1] Executive Order 13518, "Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government", November, 2009, http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2009-11-13/pdf/E9-27441.pdf

of the overall veteran population at large. We hope to see user adoption addressed in the coming months; the number of veteran profiles on the site is the true incentive for employer participation in the platform. Similarly, we believe employer participation is hampered by the platform's interface, which is not as intuitive and user-friendly as we hope it will be in the future.

In addition to user adoption, it is clear that data tracking the outcomes of the VEC are not presently available. Since the tool is meant to connect veterans with employers, we would hope to see VA address the tracking of outcomes related to hires resulting from connections through the platform, and employee retention by the employers. We applaud the high volume of traffic to the site VA has noted, but don't see those visits equating to hiring. Additionally, the commitments by employers are to be praised, but note that these commitments do not always result in actual veteran hires.

Furthermore, discussions with potential site users demonstrated a desire to have a live coordinator or advisor to connect with. Since the platform operates online, the ability to interface with facilitating experts is no longer available, as it was in previous hiring programs. We believe the ability for advisors or coordinators to track and view cases of veterans under their support network would be a critical feature to consider. In one instance, transition coordinators at a Georgia military installation have their transitioning service members include a distinctive phrase on their resumes so they can be found within the system. While we are impressed with this unique work-around, we would hope to see a permanent solution to this issue.

Challenges also exist with the ability to audit the profiles of veterans who join the platform. While the site can be accessed through the eBenefits portal, there are also ways to access the site with no required verification. This ability to access the site denigrates the assurance that profiles on the site are legitimate job-seekers. In other instances, veterans have noted the inability to save their profile until it's fully completed. We believe it would be beneficial to establish an automatically-saving profile to prevent loss of materials. In the process of conducting research with stakeholders, we determined that it might be worthwhile to provide more information on the funding mechanisms powering the platform, as well as the support to the tool. In the process of reviewing the VEC, there were some questions we believe merit further discussion, listed below:

- Do site visit numbers include Transition Assistance Program (TAP)-directed visits? Are "unique visits" unrelated to TAP distinguished somehow?
- How many hires have come as result of VEC?
- What is the median and mean timeframe for veterans to receive employment from sign-up to employment?
- How are job commitments by employers being translated into local jobs for veterans through VEC?
- What kind of auditing is done on employer and participant profiles?
- What is the funding stream for VEC?
- How much money has been spent on VEC?

- What is the projection of spending on VEC?
- What is the long-term plan for VEC?
- Should VEC be housed under the Department of Labor as the subject matter expert? If not, why not?

We are highly appreciative of VA's commitment to supporting veterans in multiple aspects of their lives. The VA has demonstrated the will and commitment we believe is required to serve our veterans properly. We hope to see this will translated into future updates to the VEC, so the intent and mission of the program is fully achieved. We look forward to continuing the discussion with VA and this committee on this program, and working towards its success.

Processing Issues

This fall semester highlighted several challenges that directly impacted student veterans. In early to mid-September, it became increasingly clear that many student veterans were experiencing significant delays in the processing of their GI Bill benefits. We heard comments from student veterans like, "We just cannot figure out why enrollment forms keep getting lost" and, "Unfortunately, it is affecting many veterans who rely on that for rent. These are veterans who were certified before even July." Much speculation among the student veteran population ensued, and we appreciated VA's commitment to responding in a timely manner. Within days of SVA highlighting the issue, VA presented clear and user-friendly information directly to the student population through social media avenues (See annex).

Unfortunately, the hundreds of comments VA received over just a few days after posting the statement made it clear that the delays were causing a significant ripple across campuses nationwide. Part of this backlog of delayed processing could be attributed to miscommunications. One student veteran noted:

> "Before I joined SVA, I came right off deployment and started using what was left of my GI Bill. I enrolled as soon as I could and still had massive delays. I would contact the VA and they said they wouldn't have my certifying info. I'd go back to the registrar's office and they would say they sent it. Then I would go back to the VA and they said no they didn't have it. Come to find out somehow they would mix up my SSN with some other number. Well, the VA didn't enquire if something sent was incorrect and the university VA office would assume what they sent was correct. They weren't communicating at all. Their process in certifying students wasn't helping either."

However, a more systematic issue could be attributed to the delays. Another student shared, "Part of the backlog is due to overtime not being allowed sooner because they were diverting overtime resources to the disability claims process, and then finally allowed overtime later than usual for education claims." This message was consistent with what VA staff discussed with SVA prior to the semester. VA staff specifically requested to know if student veterans within SVA chapters were seeing delays so they could be addressed readily. We are appreciative of VA's responsiveness, and feel that communicating that message earlier might have helped to avoid some confusion.

Ultimately, the core challenge remains VA's reliance on overtime hours for full-time employees during the peak periods of fall and spring enrollment. We agree that hiring seasonal staff to address these spikes would be both uncommon as well as costly. At the core of it, one student veteran highlighted the issue well,

noting, "The biggest issue is managing throughout at both the school and the VA. There are not enough people managing such a manual-labor intensive job, and to do everything required for compliance, it is next to impossible, especially when you have larger populations changing schedules."

Potential Processing Solution

The issues of labor, compliance, and timeliness may all be addressed by a potential solution through one of our mutual partners, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). As a partner of both VA and SVA on the *Million Records Project (MRP)*, NSC demonstrated a high level of professionalism and ability during the MRP, traits which make them an ideal partner in any project. NSC presently works with the Department of Education (ED) on processing and reporting Title IV funds, including Direct Subsidized/Unsubsidized Loans, Direct Graduate PLUS Loans, Direct PLUS Loans, Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG), and Federal Perkins Loans. Their data collection capabilities are not limited to student loans, however.

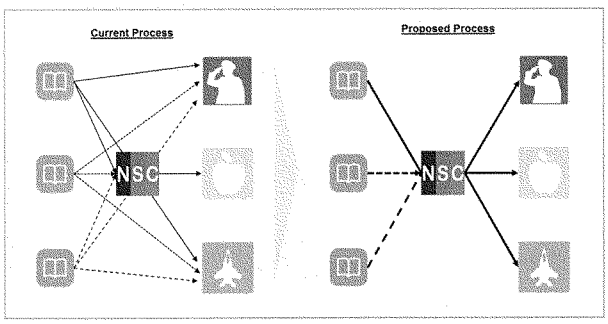
A partnership with NSC would facilitate the data exchange between IHLs and VA for certifications, recertifications, status changes and completion data. In practical terms, the NSC would act as a consolidation warehouse where data could be vetted and instantly sent to VA without requiring any additional steps. As an analogy, consider that when Americans pay their taxes, many choose to pay a tax accountant to prepare the forms, which allows them to avoid mistakes while gaining from the expertise of someone who knows how to ensure compliance. Similarly, NSC would act in the capacity as a tax accountant does, allowing the school to have peace of mind that their data is being properly filed, while giving VA the benefit of having pre-screened and fully-compliant data submissions.

Since VA and ED would be collecting data through a centralized source, the requirement for schools to submit redundant data is negated; most student data is standard, while only a small percentage is unique to any department or agency which is easily accounted for and sorted through NSC. NSC presently has access to the student full enrollment profile, not only students with Title IV loans, for over 97% of all students in higher education.

Under this proposal, VA and taxpayers incur no additional cost since schools select to send the data through NSC, paying for the cost of the service, while VA benefits from streamlined data submissions and research capabilities in conjunction with ED data. The ability to have real time measurement of completions and program efficacy would be a major benefit to VA and the broader research community; this is essential given the lack of available data outside of the *MRP*.

The benefits of this proposal are clear: accelerated data submissions, fewer errors, increased compliance, and advanced research to benefit student veterans. It is our hope that we can work with VA and NSC to bring this concept from possibility to reality. For a clear visual demonstration of what a partnership with VA, ED, and DoD would look like, see Figure 1 below. We believe that a process transformation would enable student veterans to get into the classroom with certification or processing issues presenting fewer challenges.

Figure 1. Process Comparison



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We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this subcommittee, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, SVA has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2015, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

William Hubbard,
Vice President of Government Affairs

Will Hubbard is on the professional staff of Student Veterans of America, currently serving as their Vice President of Government Affairs. His focus is on legislative action and executive branch policy across all issues that impact student veterans in higher education.

Mr. Hubbard is frequently called before congress as a subject matter expert to testify on a variety of issues, and often advises executive officials in the administration on higher education and veterans policy issues.

Previously, he was a National Executive Committee Member of Deloitte's Armed Forces Business Resource Group, and led the successful proposal of several veteran-focused projects while serving in the federal practice as part of Deloitte's Strategy and Operations business line.

Mr. Hubbard entered the Marine Corps in 2006, and initially served with 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines. He later went on to lead Marines with 4th Supply Company at Boling Air Force Base in Washington, DC. Today, he continues to serve in the Marine Corps Reserves based out of MCB Quantico, VA.

He has been a leader with Student Veterans of America at both the chapter and national levels, and has been passionate about veterans health issues since entering the armed services. Mr. Hubbard is a graduate of American University, where he studied International Relations. He currently resides in Arlington, VA with his wife and long-haired dachshund.

STATEMENT OF
DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
MR. CURTIS L. COY
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

November 3, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting us to appear before you today to discuss the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Office of Economic Opportunity information technology (IT) capabilities. I am accompanied today by Mr. Rob Worley, Director of Education Service, Mr. Jack Kammerer, Director of Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service, and Mr. Steven Schliesman, Assistant Deputy Chief Information Officer for VA's Office of Information and Technology (OI&T). VBA's Office of Economic Opportunity has four functional areas: Education (i.e., GI Bill programs), VR&E; Transition, Employment, and Economic Impact (i.e., Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and employment-related issues); and Home Loan Guaranty. It is our understanding that the Committee would like to focus today's discussion on the Education Long-Term Solution (LTS), VR&E IT systems, and the Veterans Employment Center (VEC).

Post-9/11 GI Bill Long-Term Solution (LTS)

In June 2008, Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, which established a new education benefit program under chapter 33 of title 38 United States Code, otherwise known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. VA OI&T contracted with the Department of the Navy's Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command (SPAWAR) to develop a long-term solution for education claims processing -- an end-to-end claims processing solution that utilizes rules-based, industry-standard technologies for the delivery of education benefits. VA has deployed six major releases for LTS, including several releases of functionality to implement changes to the Post-9/11 GI Bill required by Public Law (P.L.) 111-377 (Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010).

On September 24, 2012, end-to-end automation of supplemental claims for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, which are paid to Veterans and schools, was successfully activated in LTS. Since that deployment, over 6,000 claims per day are processed automatically without human intervention. Last fiscal year, 52 percent of all Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims were fully automated. Approximately 85 percent of all Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims are now partially or fully automated. This automation has significantly reduced education claims processing times – from an average of 16.5 days in FY 2012 to 7 days in FY 2015. Processing timeliness for original claims (those establishing initial eligibility) has improved by 12.1 days, from 30.5 days in FY 2012 to 18.4 days in FY 2015. VA has also maintained a payment accuracy rate of 99.4

percent. Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VA has paid benefits to nearly 1.5 million individuals totaling over $56 billion.

Section 702 of P.L. 113-146 (Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014) instructs VA to generally disapprove courses if a public school charges higher tuition rates under the Post-9/11 GI Bill to Veterans who live in the state than it charges its in-state residents. Functionality in VBA systems needs to be modified to ensure only education claims for Section 702-qualifying programs are automatically processed. To meet this need, VA awarded a development contract in September 2015 to enhance LTS and other supporting systems, such as the VA Online Certification of Enrollment system (VAONCE) and Web-Enabled Approval Management System (WEAMS).

Additional LTS functionality needed to further increase efficiency in education claims processing includes: automated certificates of eligibility for original claims; electronically generated letters; expanded automation of supplemental claims; issuance of advance payments; monthly certification of attendance; and improved business analytics for reporting purposes.

Post-9/11 GI Bill Comparison Tool, Feedback Tool, and CareerScope

P.L. 112-249, enacted on January 10, 2013, enhanced and complemented the provisions of Executive Order 13607 (Principles of Excellence) by requiring VA to develop a comprehensive policy to improve outreach and transparency to Veterans and Servicemembers. This law required VA to deploy online tools to make information on institutions of higher learning (IHLs) publicly available. The law also required VA to develop a centralized mechanism for tracking and publishing feedback from students

and State Approving Agencies (SAAs) regarding the quality of instruction at IHLs, IHL recruiting practices, and post-graduation employment placement. Finally, it required VA to perform market surveys to determine the availability of off-the-self online tools that allow Veterans to assess academic readiness and compare education and training opportunities.

VA internally developed and deployed the GI Bill Comparison Tool. Launched on February 4, 2014, the GI Bill Comparison Tool enables prospective students to compare educational institutions using key measures of affordability and value through access to school performance information and consumer protection information, and it helps Veterans become informed postsecondary-education consumers. The GI Bill Comparison Tool is easily accessible through VA's GI Bill website as well as eBenefits. As of October 12, 2015, over 1.2 million unique visitors have accessed the GI Bill Comparison Tool. The latest version of the GI Bill Comparison Tool includes functionality that allows users to search for schools and employers based on state and residence, compare multiple schools side-by-side, and compare the benefits of multiple GI Bill education programs for those who may be entitled to more than one benefit. Additionally, it displays school-level complaint data from the Feedback System and provides information on Section 702 (in-state tuition provision of the Choice Act) school approval information. VA will continue to develop and refine the GI Bill Comparison Tool.

VA also developed and launched the GI Bill Feedback System, a centralized online reporting system that allows Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists, and eligible dependents and survivors to report their experiences with educational

institutions. Depending upon the nature of the feedback, VA may serve as an intermediary between the student and the school to assist in the resolution of the complaint, or VA may launch a targeted risk-based review of the school. Complaints may also be reviewed by state and Federal law-enforcement agencies, including the Department of Justice. VA began accepting complaints through the GI Bill Feedback System when it was launched on January 30, 2014. VA reviews and triages each complaint received, and valid complaints are sent to schools or employers for a response. In March 2014, VA began transmitting the complaints to the centralized Federal Trade Commission's Consumer Sentinel database, where they are accessible by law-enforcement agencies. Functionality has also been added to the GI Bill Comparison Tool to display the school-level complaint data compiled from the GI Bill Feedback System, so that students may view this information before making a choice on a particular school. As of October 12, 2015, there were over 52,000 landing-page views with 4,500 complaints submitted. A specialized team in Education Service has resolved over 3,500 of these complaints.

Finally, as a result of the market surveys, VA deployed an online assessment tool called CareerScope® that allows a Veteran or Servicemember to assess whether he or she is ready to engage in postsecondary education and determine his or her likely vocational aptitude. As of October 13, 2015, over 16,000 Veterans and Servicemembers initiated assessments in CareerScope.

VR&E IT and Business Process Improvements

VR&E is working to prepare for the initial development of the new VR&E case management system, called VRE-CMS. Together with the Veterans Relationship Management (VRM) Program Management Office and VA OI&T, VR&E has refined the functional requirements for VRE-CMS, which will include a planned collaborative user interface in eBenefits and allow VR&E to move toward a more efficient and Veteran-centric paperless service-delivery process. The paperless service-delivery process includes self-service options through eBenefits, phased elimination of paper files, and automated payment processing. A paperless business process will allow VR&E to better support Veterans on their own terms and reduce the administrative burden on VR&E counselors. The intent is to integrate VR&E with other VA business lines and information systems to enhance relationship management, support vocational rehabilitation success, and modernize the employee experience. The total two-year IT development funding for this project is $9.7 million, with $3.8 million in FY 2015 and $5.9 million in FY 2016.

In August 2015, VR&E fully deployed the CWINRS Subsistence Allowance Module (SAM) to all VBA regional offices. The module utilizes the corporate Financial Accounting System (FAS) to make subsistence payments to Veterans and will eliminate VR&E's reliance on the legacy Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) by December 2015. As of October 7, 2015, over 51,200 Veterans have received subsistence payments through SAM, and delivery of payments by the new system is increasing at a rate of over 1,000 Veterans per week.

In collaboration with the Veteran Health Administration (VHA), VR&E expanded VHA Telehealth and CAPRI (Compensation and Pension Records Interchange) technologies to enhance direct Veteran service through online counseling technology and an online medical referral tracking system. The introduction of CAPRI allowed VR&E to transition from a cumbersome paper-based process for medical referrals to an electronic process with the capability to track medical referrals from scheduled appointments through delivery of service by VHA. Since its release in March 2015, VR&E employees have successfully referred over 1,900 Veterans to VHA for medical services.

Tele-counseling uses secure video teleconferencing to enable VR&E counselors to remotely meet with and counsel Veterans receiving VR&E services. The system was released nationally to program participants and VR&E's team of 1,000 vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) in March 2015. Although this is the initial phase, it has significant potential to increase VR&E's responsiveness to Veterans' needs, reduce travel costs and time for Veterans and employees, and improve accessibility to VR&E services. VR&E is also partnering with VHA to provide support on the Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV). This software viewer combines data from VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) health information systems and displays it chronologically on a single screen. The goal is to field JLV software to VRCs nationwide to enable them to better support Veterans with their vocational rehabilitation needs.

Veterans Employment Center

VA, DoD, the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Education, the Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management collaborated

to design, develop, and incorporate the best features of existing online employment tools into the Veterans Employment Center (VEC). The VEC is the Federal government's single internet source for connecting transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families to meaningful career opportunities. With its inception, the VEC consolidated several government sites, bringing together job opportunities and allowing users to build an online profile that can be shared - in real time - with employers, including those who have made a public commitment to hire Veterans.

The VEC's Military Skills Translator, built on DOL's skill translator, aims to allow Servicemembers and Veterans to match their military occupation code and pay grade with associated civilian skills and occupations. The VEC's Profile Builder, based on principles taught in the DOL Employment Workshop for TAP, allows a job seeker to import the results obtained from the military skills translator into an online profile which acts as a virtual resume. To date, employers can access a vault of verified career profiles, leverage advanced search functionality, such as keyword and/or geographic location, to find the right candidates for their organization, and connect with qualified transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their spouses directly.

The VEC's Veterans Job Bank (VJB), fed by jobs listed on the National Labor Exchange, USA Jobs, and employers using job posting schema, allows users to search over 2.2 million jobs from the private sector and Federal, state, and local governments. The VJB's search functionality allows Veterans to narrow their job search with options such as industry, occupation, location, and Federal/non-Federal filters. Job postings that are returned within the VJB link directly to the employer's job listing, allowing any updates to an employer's website to be automatic and routing applicants directly to their

applicant tracking system without developing new hiring processes. Additionally, employers can make public hiring commitments on the VEC. In turn, job seekers can view a searchable list of employers and organizations that have made a commitment to hire or train individuals and then link directly to their websites to get more information, start the conversation, and apply for jobs.

The VEC integrates and promotes VA's public and private partnerships by linking to a broad set of resources, programs, and services offered by VA-partner organizations. Additionally, through VA's partnership with LinkedIn, Veterans and Servicemembers now have the ability to import their LinkedIn profile directly to the VEC with just a few clicks. LinkedIn is also making it easier for Veterans and Servicemembers to connect to employers with a free year of LinkedIn's premium Job Seeker Subscription. VA will continue to explore opportunities to expand such partnerships with the private sector to ensure Veterans and Servicemembers have access to meaningful economic opportunities.

VA took action in June 2015 to revise the TAP curriculum, enhancing coverage of the VEC in VA's Benefits I & II briefings. All VA benefits advisors have received extended training on how to assist transitioning Servicemembers with creating a profile in the VEC. The importance of the VEC in TAP is taught during the DOL Employment Workshop. The workshop's curriculum was revised in January 2015 to include an introduction to the VEC and directions on how to create a profile in the VEC. Any potential future DOL revision would continue to incorporate instruction on the VEC. As of September 15, 2015, the site averages nearly 1.5 million page views by approximately 135,000 users each month. The VEC has become the Federal

government's online tool for Veteran employment, thanks in large part to the support of DoD, DOL, and our public and private partners.

The VEC and the GI Bill Comparison Tool were built using VA in-house digital service resources, which leveraged the latest in open-source web frameworks optimized for sustainable productivity and automated testing to eliminate and prevent bugs and re-work, and used world-class development talent hired from the private industry such as Google and Amazon. Technologically, the VEC employs Agile methodology in managing the software's development life-cycle. However, the VEC and the GI Bill Comparison Tool gain speed and effectiveness through their focused use, simplicity of design, and isolation from sensitive Veteran benefit information.

Conclusion

VBA and OI&T continue to assess IT capabilities in all of VA's business areas. Our goal, as always, is to improve our systems in order to ensure that Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families have every opportunity to attain personal and economic success.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. We would be pleased to answer questions from you or other members of the Subcommittee.

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