

REEXAMINING VA.ORG

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:57 p.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Matt Rosendale (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Rosendale, Self, and Cherfilus-McCormick.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MATTHEW M. ROSENDALE, CHAIRMAN

Mr. ROSENDALE. Good afternoon. The subcommittee will come to order.

This is our second hearing on the VA.gov bugs and the struggles they have created for veterans to access their benefits.

I would like to welcome our witnesses back to the discussion on these issues.

The number of veterans affected now exceeds 120,000.

To recap, about 32,000 veterans submitted their disability compensation claims through the website, but as our witnesses explained in September, the claims were never established in the system that processes them.

This had been happening since 2018.

In addition, roughly 81,000 veteran and family members' requests to add or remove dependents on VA.gov and its predecessor system were not processed, causing them to be overpaid or underpaid.

This has been happening all the way back to 2011.

On top of that, other veterans were unable to access the notice of disagreement form on VA.gov to appeal denials of their claims.

This went on for about 5 weeks before being discovered.

I understand that our witnesses have an update on the number of veterans who encountered that problem.

Mistakes are bound to happen. It is unacceptable that some of these errors persisted for years before anyone discovered them.

In the last hearing I urged our witnesses to be more proactive in contacting the veterans and offering them help, and I would like an update on that.

Many of these veterans and survivors depend on their VA benefits for most or all of their income.

They need to hear from the VA much more quickly.

We all need to be confident that errors in the VA.gov and other systems will never again be allowed to compound undetected and impact so many people.

To that end, I will be introducing the VA Watching Over Electronic Benefits Act.

The VA now has a watchtower to monitor the website, and this legislation will make sure that it performs as intended.

I would now like to turn to another problem that our veterans are facing.

In early November, VA informed the committee that it has been overpaying pensions to at least 9,900 veterans because of inaccurate data from the Social Security Administration and a faulty process for veterans to self-report their income.

This has been going on since 2011, and it may impact as many as 40,000 veterans.

I appreciate our witnesses explaining the situation to the committee staff last week but there are still quite a few outstanding questions.

When did VA leaders first realize that the data problems were creating pension overpayments?

I understand there is a debt collection moratorium, but how has that been communicated to all the veterans, and how exactly does it work?

When are the debts going to be erased?

Why has the VA still not determined the status of the other 30,000 veterans who may be affected?

These technical issues each affected veterans' benefits in different ways.

In each case, we expect the VA to put aside what is convenient for the bureaucracy and move faster.

With that, I yield to Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick for her opening statement. Thank you.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF SHEILA CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK,
RANKING MEMBER**

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you so much to our witnesses for being here today and testifying.

It has now been 2 months since we met to discuss issues with VA.gov. I look forward to today's conversation and hearing from witnesses how VA is progressing in fixing the problem with the Information Technology (IT) systems that allowed veterans to fall through the cracks.

Since the hearing in September, we have learned that VA shut down an online form that veterans use to file pension claims. I have been told that the form had not been updated since 2018 and no longer matched the paper form used by VA today. I have concerns that the form went so long without being updated and I am curious what VA is doing to evaluate other electronic forms that may be out of date.

I look forward to the conversation today. Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick.

I will now introduce the Department of Veterans Affairs witnesses on our first and only panel today.

First, we have Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology, Kurt DelBene. Thank you for coming in again today.

We also have Chief Technology Officer, Charles Worthington. Again, thank you again for coming in.

From the Veterans Benefits Administration we have Mr. Ray Tellez. Good to see you again. Executive Director of the Office of Business Integration.

Joining him is Mr. Paul Shute, the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for the Office of Automated Benefits Delivery. Thank you again.

I ask the witnesses to please stand and raise your right hands.
[Witnesses sworn.]

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you so much. Let the record reflect that all witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Mr. DelBene, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your opening statement on behalf of the panel.

STATEMENT OF KURT DELBENE

Mr. DELBENE. Good afternoon, Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Chertoff-McCormick, and distinguished members of the subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Department of Veterans Affairs VA.gov website.

I am accompanied today by Mr. Paul Shute, the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary Office of Automated Benefits Delivery (VBA); Mr. Raymond Tellez, the Executive Director of the Office of Business Integration at Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA); and Mr. Charles Worthington, Chief Technology Officer in the Office of Information Technology.

VA is committed to providing veterans with a seamless digital experience they have come to expect in their consumer lives, and VA.gov's platform strives to be that digital front door.

Each month, nearly 14,000,000 unique veterans and users access VA.gov to learn about, apply for, and manage their VA benefits and healthcare.

As an update to our September hearing, the department would like to share our progress on the recent VA.gov issues.

With respect to the disability claim submission errors, as you will recall, we previously identified approximately 32,000 claims that were not correctly established due to a technical issue.

Currently, VA has established 25,257 of those disability claims and submitted them, and sent outreach letters to impacted veterans. As of November 28, 89.4 percent of the established disability claims were decided. The remaining identified claims will be established in December of this year.

With respect to the dependency submission claims errors, VA previously identified 45,903 veterans who filed a request to update their dependency status and did not have it successfully processed. VA completed analysis and identified approximately 81,000 veterans who filed and did not have their dependency submissions successfully processed. As of November 28, the VA established 70,406 dependency reviews and has completed 37.5 percent with a

decision notice to veterans. The remaining 10,975 dependency claims are targeted to be established in December.

With respect to the The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act Intent to File Issue (ITF), with record high claim submissions, the backend of VA.gov's system had an abnormal increase in time out errors where VA.gov was unable to process a veteran's intent to file. VA resolved this issue in September and contacted all affected veterans that their ITF was received. The department identified 429 ITF submissions needing establishment and these were processed in September.

Finally, with respect to the Notice of Disagreement Issue, in September, VA identified a technical issue on VA.gov by noting a drop of about 900 appeals from the normal VA.gov submission volume. VA investigated the issue and quickly deployed a fix—3,152 veterans visiting the site may have been impacted by the inability to load the webpage that is part of VA.gov's Notice of Disagreement form. VA will contact the impacted veterans to ensure that they are able to successfully submit their appeal without any impact to their appeal date.

To identify any potential issues with VA.gov, VA's Office of Information Technology implemented a Code Yellow process to ensure more accurate monitoring. Code Yellow includes monitoring the health of the most important applications and features of VA.gov and making these monitors accessible in a single place.

Additionally, Code Yellow ensures a government employee knows about any significant issues within 24 hours. So far, 80 percent of VA.gov's most important features are monitored, and VA will complete automatic monitoring of the top features by the end of Quarter 1 of Fiscal Year 2024.

Finally, unrelated to previous VA.gov issues, I would like to address the recent notifications concerning the VA.gov pension application interactive form being temporarily unavailable from November 8, 2023, to January 31, 2024.

Leveraging PACT Act funding, VA is updating the interactive form so it matches the current paper version of the form. Veterans, their families, and accredited representatives are still able to download the current pension application form and submit it using VA QuickSubmit on AccessVA.

Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. As previously mentioned, VA.gov is the digital front door for veterans, and veterans need to have confidence their benefits and services are available, accurate, and secure.

I look forward to working with the subcommittee to address our greatest priorities and challenges that we face in our digital transformation.

This concludes my testimony, and I look forward to any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KURT DELBENE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much, Mr. DelBene.

The written statement of Mr. DelBene will be entered into the hearing record.

We will now proceed with questioning. I recognize myself for 5 minutes.

I will begin with you, Mr. Tellez.

Mr. Tellez, I would like to return to the 32,000 veterans whose disability compensation claims submitted to VA.gov were not established in the system. Why are you only notifying the veterans as you process their claims? Why have we waited so long to provide the ones who have not been notified with the others with any information whatsoever?

Mr. TELLEZ. Thank you, Congressman, for your question.

I believe we are notifying them at the time of the claim's establishment because that is the time that we are taking an action on their claim. It not only updates the veteran of the action but explains why we are taking that action for them.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Why would we not give information to the veterans whose claims have not been recognized at all and at least let them know that they have not been recognized? There are a lot of veterans out there that are completely oblivious, okay, to the fact that they have not even been recognized. Their claim has not even been recognized yet. Why are we not sending some kind of notification out to all of them?

Mr. TELLEZ. Thank you, Congressman. I will take the action for our communications team to see how we could use social media and other avenues so organizations continue to spread that message on that issue.

Mr. ROSENDALE. All right. They are walking through thinking they have been recognized into the system. Do you see where my concern is? They do not even know that there is a problem.

Mr. TELLEZ. I do. Thank you, Congressman. I would just like to remind folks that if they have a question or concern they can call VBA's National Call Center, 1-800-827-1000, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Eastern Time if they do have questions while we continue to socialize some of the challenges that we have had with the VA.gov.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Well, again, ignorance may be bliss. That is a saying. When you are trying to get a benefit, okay, and apply for it and you have applied for it and you do not know that it has not been recognized by the system then these folks are not even aware that they have a problem. As you give an 800 number out there to folks that are not even aware of the fact that there is a problem, why would they even bother to call? How and when do you intend to notify the remaining veterans and process their claims?

Mr. TELLEZ. Thank you, Congressman.

We have another automated batch process scheduled for this month for the remaining veterans who had submitted claims. We will notify those remaining veterans this month when we put those claims under control in Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS).

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. How do you decide what order and processes, disability compensation claims it is going to be in? Okay? Do we have some kind of a priority checklist from veterans that are

either impacted by income or is it by chronological date or is it by—what matrix are you using to make a determination about when you contact people?

Mr. TELLEZ. Thank you, Congressman. I will ask Mr. Shute if he can respond to that, please.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Very good.

Mr. SHUTE. We do not have a prioritized list in terms of income or other demographic factors. What we did is we looked at the population of veterans who were impacted by the 526 application issue in VA.gov. Which claims we could get established most quickly so we can start working those claims, get those veterans a decision to make them whole. As Ray said, we have about 7,000 veterans left to establish and process their claims but there is no order of prioritization in terms of the factors that you mentioned.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Someone who has a more severe disability who might be more reliant upon that income is not going to get any kind of preferential treatment to someone who might be just literally subsidizing their lifestyle a bit?

Mr. SHUTE. Once the claim is established we continue to follow the protocols that we have for prioritizing claims for certain populations of veterans—terminally ill, homeless, things of that nature. Once the claim is—

Mr. ROSENDALE. I understand once the claims is established. The problem is going out and actually establishing the claims for the people who have tried to. Are you understanding the question I am asking? Okay. They think that they are already in process and they are not. What I am trying to do is determine exactly what criteria are you using to get a hold of these people? If there is not any sense of urgency or priority given to anyone, which it sounds like what you are doing. You are just sort of, as a matter of fact, quite the contrary. You said, in your words, that you are trying to utilize the easiest cases possible to process faster?

Mr. SHUTE. We are working to establish the claims that we can decide as quickly as possible. Those are the claims that get established first. Correct.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Rather than run over we are going to have a couple of rounds here. I am going to go ahead and recognize Representative Cherfilus-McCormick for 5 minutes for questioning.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Under Secretary DelBene, it seems that you have been left holding the bag. Many of these IT issues have gone undiscovered for years through multiple administrations and countless Chief Information Officers (CIOs). You just happen to be there, the one in the seat when we have found them and are left to answer all the hard questions.

I thank you for your efforts to get VA's IT system up to the standard that we expect and that veterans deserve.

I would like to spend my time getting some updates on the issues we discussed in September. At our last hearing on VA.gov, we discussed the approximately 45,000 veterans who attempted to update their beneficiaries' information failed. When did the issue first start and how did we identify it?

Mr. DELBENE. Thank you for your question. Actually, I think I would pass that question to Paul who can answer it more completely.

Mr. SHUTE. We first discovered the issue in August 2021. At that time we found a defect between the integration between our VA.gov and VBMS systems. At that time we had delivered a capability to generate a report any time that issue was encountered. Our Office of Information Technology team could pass a report basically to VBA so that we could manually establish and work those claims.

Now, it was not until January 2023 that we learned from our National Call Center that they were getting an increased volume of calls from veterans who had filed a dependency claim on VA.gov and did not receive a decision. At that point in time we stood up an integrated project team to really delve in and see if there were other issues that we had not accounted for and that is what led to the population of 45,000 veterans that we reported at the last hearing.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Has the number of veterans identified changed since our last hearing? What is the status of those veterans' beneficiaries status that changed?

Mr. SHUTE. As part of the review, we have identified any potentially affected veteran and we have now identified a population of 81,000 veterans who may have been impacted by this issue. Now, we are confident that not all 81,000 were impacted but we want to conduct a review of each and every one of those claims to make sure that we are able to make those veterans whole.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. When do you expect that all the beneficiary status updates will have been completed?

Mr. SHUTE. To date, we have established 70,000 of that 81,000 veteran population and 45 percent of them have been completed so far. We are planning to establish the remaining 11,000 claims later this month.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Okay. Thank you.

Also, during that hearing we discussed the approximately 32,000 veterans who attempted to file for disability compensation were not correctly established. When did this issue first start and when did you identify it?

Mr. SHUTE. We first identified this issue in November 2022. At that time it was impacting around 75,000 claims per week according to our projections. The issue dated back to 2018. To clarify, 75 cases per week is what we are anticipating the impact to be.

That month we determined there were around 32,000 veterans that were impacted by this issue and we began working on a remediation plan.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Has the number of veterans identified changed since our last hearing? What is the status of those veteran claims?

Mr. SHUTE. The number has not changed. To date we have been able to establish 25,000 of those claims and 90 percent of them have been completed. We are planning to establish the remaining 7,000 later this month.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Well, thank you. I yield back.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick.

I will now recognize my good friend from Texas, Representative Self.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

A lot of process as normal we hear in your briefing packets. A lot of process. Who wants to answer this question: What is the financial impact, potential financial impact on the well-being of individual veterans for the disability compensation claims and pension payments errors? Who wants to answer that? What is the potential impact on individual veterans?

Then once we get the individual veterans, what is the estimate? What I am asking is what do you think on each veteran, what is a reasonable guess at how much they owe? Then I want to know what you think the figure is VA wide. Individual veterans and then VA wide, what is your liability?

Mr. TELLEZ. Thank you, Congressman, for your question.

In terms of the first part, the financial impact, I think it is To Be Determined (TBD) because we are still reviewing those claims. One of the things that we are working from is no harm to the veteran. As we are looking at these claims, where there may be a debt created as a result of this system error those are the things that we can mitigate through our normal claims processing. We have got rules and authorities to handle that. Even with the pension overpayment that Congressman Rosendale spoke of earlier we have authorities in there to address that, too, and we are working that internally.

I have to take your questions two and three back because I do not know that we know enough information to be able to answer it here.

Mr. SELF. Let me give you just back of the envelope figures. Okay? There are some variables here. If we use a pension amount of \$2,000, overpayment amount 10 percent, 5 percent, and you work with those figures, you are talking about, depending on whether you are talking about the 10,000 veterans or you are talking about the 40,000 veterans and I have got it, potentially hundreds of millions of dollars that veterans owe the VA. Is that reasonable?

Mr. TELLEZ. Congressman, I am not prepared to address that. We were not prepared to answer the questions on payment. They were not in the invite letter but we are happy to take that question back for you and get you a response or a briefing for you and your staff.

Mr. SELF. Well, I suspect that you need to know that answer because this is a direct liability that the veterans have to the VA when you are addressing how you are going to handle it.

My second question is I still see that you have not contacted some of the veterans depending on the issue here. This is serious business for the individual veterans and I want to know why you have not contacted every single veteran. This is, I think you are using Code Yellow. Why is this not a Code Red, because this direct impacts our veterans. Do you even have a Code Red?

Mr. DELBENE. Actually, I would say with that in respect in particular, if a system is down that is probably the closest thing to a Code Red and our goal is to get that system back up as soon as possible. I triage with the rest of our team every single issue that

happens in the entire VA infrastructure every day at 8 a.m., and we actually measure our time to recovery on our major systems each and every month. We do a monthly operations review to make sure that anything that you would probably consider a code red gets addressed super quickly.

Mr. SELF. I am not really interested in the Code Red. I am talking about the veterans. I am more interested in the individual veterans being contacted that they have a problem.

Mr. DELBENE. I will pass it to Paul and to Ray in a moment, but I think the one thing that is the guiding principle is once we have established for a group that is similar in an issue like that there is a claim that appears to be valid, we establish those as quickly as we can. Once we have established them we, communicate to that veteran. This whole notion that a veteran would go not knowing whether they have a claim outstanding or not, I do not think that is usually the case. The moment we know that there is a class of folks that we should communicate to, we always strive to communicate to them as quickly as we can.

Mr. SELF. Okay. You used the term "as quickly as possible." What is the standard for "quickly as possible"?

Mr. DELBENE. I would think it is situation dependent but let me pass to Ray or to Paul. Do you have any thoughts there?

Mr. SELF. I have a standard in my office. When somebody contacts us I have a standard by which we answer.

Mr. DELBENE. Sure.

Mr. SELF. What is your standard? Once you have identified—because I assume you are identifying new errors all the time. What is your standard for contacting the veteran? I do not want to talk process. I want to talk how you are treating our veterans. What is the standard for "as quickly as possible"? There has got to be a standard here, folks. There has got to be a function.

Mr. SHUTE. I think the standard that we are all working toward now is immediate notification of not only the affected veterans but in key stakeholders and partners like yourself and the Veterans Service Organization (VSO) community.

Mr. SELF. I would like to know what the objective standard is. Mr. Chairman, I am out of time. I yield back.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much.

Quite frankly, we have just heard from you two contradictory statements, Mr. DelBene. That you want to have immediate notification. As soon as you find that there is a problem that you want to make sure that the veterans are notified and we know, and you know, of information for a year's time now where they have not had their information recognized by the Veterans Administration because of failures within the software programs and you have not notified them. How in the world are you going to sit there and say immediate notification when you have got thousands of veterans who have applied for benefits and have not been notified that their form, that their application has not even been recognized by the VA yet? That is not immediate in anybody's book.

Mr. Worthington, let us talk about the notice of disagreement issue, and not the one that I have with you right now.

We have heard several different numbers of veterans impacted who may or may not have been able to appeal denials of their

claims. Now you are telling us it was 3,152. Do you know who these veterans are? Have you determined whether they were able to file notice of disagreement using a different method?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. Thank you for the question.

The notice of disagreement impacted the ability of we believe 3,100 veterans to load the form. We do not know for sure if the veteran would have intended to submit the form or not. This would have appeared to them as just an error loading the webpage. We do have a record, however, of who those individual veterans are, and I believe the board is planning to reach out to those veterans to ensure that they have been able to apply for an appeal if, in fact, that was their intention. If so, to be able to maintain the effective date of the appeal dating back to that error.

Mr. ROSENDALE. When did you discover the problem?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. I believe this was discovered in August of this year and fixed a few days after that.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. We are still trying to notify these veterans.

Mr. Shute, was that immediately, August, they found out, they discovered in August? Would you call that immediate notification of those veterans? Here it is December the—what is today? The 4th. That is not immediate in my book. Okay?

Mr. Worthington, when are you going to contact the veterans who have not filed a notice of disagreement that you have identified that tried to?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. I will have to get back to you with the specific plans. I believe the board and Office of Information Technology (OIT) are working on that for early next year.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Mr. DelBene, I would like to quickly turn to the 56,000 dependent changes that were not processed. I understand this number has risen now to 81,000. How many of these requests have you processed now and how many of these veterans or dependents have already passed away before the results were even processed?

Mr. DELBENE. If I may, I think Mr. Shute is probably the best person to answer that question. It is in his domain.

Mr. SHUTE. Of the 70,000 claims that we have established to date, we have completed 45 percent of those. In terms of the result of the claim decisions, we do not have that information available today but I would be more than happy to provide that to you in the coming days.

Mr. ROSENDALE. What I am trying to discover is obviously, when the claimant has passed away while they were in process, not only did they not get the benefit of this but it certainly complicates the beneficiary thereafter of any benefit that they are going to serve as well.

The long and short of it is—where is my calculator? Okay. We have got 31,500 of the 81,000 that have been processed. That is about what I have got. You have got 70,000 of the 81,000, and you have got 45 percent of the 70,000. 31,500 have been processed. That is a fancy way of saying 31,500. We have still got a lot of people, again, out there that have not been processed, notified.

Mr. Worthington, I have some questions about VA.gov watchtower. If I understand correctly, it focuses on monitoring trans-

action volumes to detect the anomalies. Spikes volume or valleys in the volume. Why not focus on detecting the processing errors themselves?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. Yes, that is a great question. It does include both volume but also error rates and other key factors that would indicate the health of a specific feature. The intention would be to summarize what you are describing.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Now, everyone continues to speak about, again, the anomalies and the peaks and valleys in activity and that is what you are using as the flag, if you will, to identify that may be something is going wrong. Are you telling me the software does have the ability to identify when there is a problem in the information that is either being received or delivered?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. Yes, we are additionally looking at error rates in the transactions. Volume would be one indicator but also error rates and things like latency, how long did the request take, are other factors that are going into the watchtower.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. I am going to yield to Ranking Member Cherrilus-McCormick for additional questions.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My next question is for Mr. DelBene or any one of the witnesses who can answer it.

We saw an article from a Florida man, a veteran, actually, who received a notification that he was in debt to the VA for more than \$100,000 related to the issues with the income verification. Naturally, that created a lot of anxiety with our veterans wondering if they, too, owe money. If they would be in that situation. I wanted to talk to some of the assurances that we may provide for some of our vets who are in this situation or may be later on. Related to the pension program issue, I understand that the VA intends to use all of its authorities available to forgive any debts occurred by veterans; is that correct?

Mr. DELBENE. Let me pass that one to Mr. Shute who is the domain expert there.

Mr. SHUTE. That is correct. We are looking to exercise the authorities available to us under the Cleland-Dole Act which would allow us to prevent debt from occurring in those situations. While we are working to codify that into regulation we have some draft policies in place that are being reviewed by the Secretary right now and those decisions should be coming out soon.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Just to clarify, could you expand on that for some of our veterans who might be watching who might be anxious? A lot of the veterans in my district became anxious. I want to make sure that is clear for them that we have a reassurance.

Mr. SHUTE. Yes. The Cleland-Dole Act I believe in section 252 ensures or prohibits VA from creating a debt for veterans when it is an action that is due on part of the VA and delay in the processing time. That is really the authority that we are using in this situation to not only put those debts on hold while we put that interim policy in place but to ensure that no future debts are a result of issues like this.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. For further clarification, is there a population of veterans that you do not have sufficient authority to forgive?

Mr. SHUTE. Not that I am aware of. However, due to the complexity of some of the policy components I would love to work with you and your staff and make sure that we bring some policy experts from our team who can speak to this topic more intelligently than I can.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Also, I wanted to ask because some people are wondering how does this even occur? How have these veterans acquired such large debts?

Mr. SHUTE. So I think to start it is helpful to understand the program that we are talking about here. So the Veteran Pension Program provides monthly benefits to veterans based on factors like age and disability and also income and net worth. Veterans are asked to self-report the income and net worth as part of their application process and as part of an annual validation. We had computer matching agreements with the Social Security Administration to be able to validate that the self-reported income was correct and the computer matching that was in place in 2011 was sending data that we could not effectively rely on. That is when we moved away from using that computer match and relied exclusively on the self-reported data. Those issues have now been resolved with the computer matching program but for veterans who had self-reported income that was different than the computer match between that period of time, 2011 till the present time, a debt could have occurred in those instances.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. The issue first started in 2011; is that correct?

Mr. SHUTE. That is correct.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. If a vet received a debt letter how should they follow up?

Mr. SHUTE. Right now we put all the debt notification and debt collections on hold while we work to exercise the authorities available to us under the Cleland-Dole Act.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick.

I now recognize Ranking Member, excuse me, Representative Self from Texas.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Do you think that watchtower is quality control (QC)?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. Yes. I would say that we are designing it so that we have more confidence in the specific health of any given feature at any given time because VA.gov is such an expansive product with so many aspects. This would give us a way to know more proactively if there is an issue happening, impacting one of those features.

Mr. SELF. Now, I disagree with you because what you said is you are monitoring the health of your functions. That is what I disagree with because everything we hear again is process here. I hear very little about the veterans. I am talking about the quality of control that should be exercised in the determinations, and we

have had other briefings about the appeals board and all of that. This is my problem. We are talking about AccessVA here. Why can the live forms not keep up with the paper forms? It looks to me like it would be harder to get a new paper form approved than it would be to recode a live form on VA.gov as opposed to AccessVA. Why can they not keep up? Why do you have to take that function down and have people use AccessVA? Can anyone answer that?

Mr. DELBENE. If I may, the first thing I would like to address is I think the difference between what Mr. Worthington, where his head was at and your point around QC is it is a portion of QC. It is a full process from ingestion all the way to processing of those appeals. I think watchtower is QC in that front end.

The other thing that was not mentioned, which I think is really important, is we have changed the error handling so that everything that does not get processed by the actual software goes into the in mail or inbound mail for people to process manually. I think that is that quality control that makes sure everything gets processed.

Then there is a separate question about a discussion about whether the handling of the application once it has actually been submitted is quality controlled and we can have a discussion about that, too. I just wanted to make a distinction there.

In terms of the forms, every time there is a form that is changed, the computer version of it gets onto a feature list that gets prioritized by us and by the VBA to decide what features will be implemented in what order. I think that is a very back and forth process. Lots of debate goes on of what is more important. Adding more capability to VA.gov so that more people can apply online versus changing the particular form. I think in this particular case, VBA had found a way around it so that they could actually still process these forms by reaching out to the veteran and that weighs into that kind of prioritization scheme.

Mr. SELF. Okay. I will not pursue that. Let us talk about your authorities. When you talk about pensions, typically these are low-income and elderly veterans; correct? As I read the authority to delay collection, when I read the authority, the secretary can delay if it is likely to cause repayment of such overpayment makes it more difficult for the individual, likely to cause an unpaid debt to be referred to the Treasury Offset program or not in the best interest of the individual. I think that could cover almost everyone in this program because we are talking about low-income and elderly veterans. Is that a fair statement?

The follow-on question I will give you before you answer, do you simply delay or do you do any expungement?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. Let me pass that one to Mr. Shute to respond.

Mr. SHUTE. Yes. Unfortunately, I am only able to speak to the technical components of that. Again, some of our policy experts who understand the nuances of that law I would love to take some of those questions back and make sure we can get you a thorough response.

Mr. SELF. Okay. Do you do expungement?

Mr. SHUTE. I am not aware of any policies related to expungement.

Mr. SELF. We have got potentially hundreds of millions of dollars that the veterans of this nation owe the VA. Many of them do not know it and you can delay it but not expunge it. That is something we probably ought to make clear to our veterans. If you have gotten one of these letters or if you are going to get one of these letters I think we need to make that clear to our veterans.

With that I yield back.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much.

Mr. Worthington, I am going to get back to the watchtower process. Do you think it would be an unreasonable expectation to prevent the errors in the situations we have been discussing?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. No. I think that is exactly our goal is to reduce the chance of errors like this happening and certainly not for as long as they happened in this case. We view that as unacceptable and this program I think will give us more confidence that that is not occurring as we try to get all of the features monitored.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. If watchtower currently covers about 80 percent of VA.gov's most commonly used features, what are the other features that are not covered?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. Well, we are working our way down the list. As Mr. DelBene mentioned, we are planning to get to 100 percent of those tier one features by the end of this year, by the end of December. We want to get all of the features on VA.gov similarly monitored. I think that will be a work in progress as we continue through the year.

Mr. ROSENDALE. How can we believe that the veteran submissions to those parts of the website are not being lost or delayed?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. I think we want to look exactly into that question. Now that we have the pattern of these initial errors, we are going to be looking at all of the different types to ensure that if we see any similar issues we can fix them as well.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Again, how can we be sure, Mr. DelBene, that that information is not being lost or delayed if it is not being monitored by watchtower?

Mr. DELBENE. I think the important thing is the error handling if something does not get caught has changed so that it always goes into the inbox for somebody to human process. That says, one, we want to monitor how it is doing; but two, we have a failsafe that goes in for manual processing.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Is that happening now?

Mr. DELBENE. We are putting that error handling in place. Yes. Have for at least 80 percent of the case.

Mr. ROSENDALE. It is happening now? You say you are putting it in place.

Mr. DELBENE. Well, it is part of this process of putting the watchtower in place and getting the error handling correct.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Mr. DelBene, do you intend to wrap up your Code Yellow special focus on fixing VA.gov in the next 2 weeks?

Mr. WORTHINGTON. I believe that is our goal is to complete our Code Yellow in the next 2 weeks. Before we would exit the Code Yellow, we would have had to achieve the goal of getting 100 percent of those features fully monitored, and so we will only exit the Code Yellow if that is true but our plan is to do so.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Do you believe that is possible, that this is physically possible, because we are going to be coming back again and bringing these questions up, so.

Mr. WORTHINGTON. Yes, I currently believe we can finish our stated goal of the exit of the Code Yellow for those tier one features by the end of this year.

Mr. DELBENE. I think it is important also, if I may just very quickly, the importance of Code Yellow is we do not actually exit the Code Yellow until the exit criteria are met, which means we will be understating the timeframe as Charles said but—

Mr. ROSENDALE. Sure. I am more concerned about the work being done than what color you call it. Okay?

Mr. DELBENE. Fair enough.

Mr. ROSENDALE. I just want the work to be done. I want you to be truthful when you are here before us that this is realistically how long it is going to take us to accomplish that. I would rather have a little bit of bad news right now knowing that it is going to take a little bit longer and have it be accurate than have you blowing smoke up the rear end of a horse, okay, right now telling us bad information.

Mr. DELBENE. Understood.

Mr. ROSENDALE. That is basically what I am getting at.

Mr. WORTHINGTON. I do want to be clear that we are focusing on those most used features. We still also want to cover all of the features of the website. As we expand the watchtower to include all the features we may find other things. That would be the hope is that we do find them so we can fix them.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Mr. DelBene, I want to turn to the pension application form that was disabled on VA.gov. How long did it go without being updated to reflect the changes to the paper form?

Mr. DELBENE. I believe the current version of the paper form was implemented in 2018. For at least a year thereafter there would have been a policy to allow the old form as well. For at least a year past that. You can say around 2019 it would have still been accepted. From that point forward, when an agent received it and started processing it, they would have to reach out to the veteran to get that additional information.

It is important to stress that at least half of the times when an agent receives one of these pension forms they actually have to go back to the veteran to get more information and this became one of those cases. I do not want to speak for the VBA folks. They can do that as well. They became adept at having the exact information they need reaching out to the veterans to bring that back in to continue the processing.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. I guess really the thing that I am getting at is to make sure why is it that we are putting a different application form online, okay, electronically, and possibly issuing a paper form that does not reflect the same request. If a veteran has in their possession an old form that is one thing but we absolutely should not have a paper form reflective of different requests than the electronic form through the agency.

Mr. DELBENE. I agree. I think this was a case as I tried to explain that the prioritization was such that this did not rise to the top of the list. When we saw it in the summer we said this is caus-

ing more difficulty for veterans. We should fix it now. That is why we chose to pull it down and to actually use PACT Act funding which we are appreciative of to be able to revamp the form.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you.

I recognize Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My question is for Mr. Shute. One of the questions, one of the things that we hope to happen, any implementation of an IT solution is that you could prevent any problems which usually happens after you recognize it, mitigate the situation which I think freezing it so far is a mitigation attempt but also correcting it, correcting that issue. As I mentioned, I really wanted to make our veterans kind of relieve some of that anxiety. Earlier you indicated that the VA froze all the debt generation and collection for the vets who already received a letter. How can they contact the VA to find out the status of their debt?

Mr. SHUTE. All veterans can reach out to us through the National Call Center. The call center agents are equipped with talking points and additional guidance that can help them navigate any questions related to debt.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you.

Then I guess my last comment and question that I would want from you is like a reassurance. You know, usually we try to be, especially on this committee, be bipartisan because our concern is the veterans. I think the reassurance that we are going to do everything we can to make sure that our veterans are not suffering a negative economic impact due to mistakes to implementing our IT system is really what we are trying to draw out of here. That we will do everything in our power to make sure they do not have a negative impact. Could you guys assure us that we are on the same page; that we could do that for our veterans?

Mr. SHUTE. We can definitely assure you of that. You have my word that we, in putting the veteran at the center of everything that we do, are going to make sure that not only we make every single veteran whole who is affected by this issue but any debts that were created as a result of any of these issues will not be incurred for those veterans.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much.

I yield back.

Mr. ROSENDALE. I recognize Representative Self.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I think I know the answers to this but I want to make clear to any veterans that might be watching this, I think I have this right. Prior to June 2022, a 90-year-old veteran who collects a VA pension—this is for you, Mr. Tellez—is responsible for updating VA on his Social Security income every year. If his Social Security payment went up and he did not report it he would automatically have a debt with the VA.

Now, first of all, is that correct?

Mr. TELLEZ. Thank you for your question, Congressman. I am going to have to take that back to our policy folks. I do not want to misspeak on that issue.

Mr. SELF. Okay. Then my follow-up question is, does the annual Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) make up additional income? Is

that what you are counting as additional income? Not a different adjudicated Social Security claim; simply the yearly COLA?

Mr. TELLEZ. Congressman, I will have to take that back to our policy folks and provide you an answer to that which we are happy to do.

Mr. SELF. I would love to see that answer because, I mean, this goes to the nuts and bolts of what we are discussing here. What exactly is a COLA increase? Is it the yearly COLA or is it—our income increase, is it the yearly COLA or is it simply a change in the claim for some reason? It is vitally important.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much, Representative.

Mr. Shute, we have been talking about the veterans pensions and exactly what is going to happen and the process therein. First of all, what exactly was wrong with the Social Security computer matching agreement and what exactly did they fix so that you can rely upon it today?

Mr. SHUTE. From my understanding, the information that was provided as part of that computer match was not providing accurate income data from the Social Security Administration. The teams have been working on that. That has since been corrected but that was the issue.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Just for clarification purposes, when Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick was asking about all of this you made reference to the self-reporting requirements of the veterans and how that was working. I think it should be made pretty clear here, very clear here that the problem was not with the self-reporting of the veterans. The problem was with the reporting that the Social Security Administration was doing with VA.

Mr. SHUTE. The only part that I would like to clarify there is when we identified the discrepancies in the computer match we stopped using it entirely. Once those issues were corrected and we could rely upon the data coming back from the Social Security Administration, that is when the comparison of the self-reported data to the computer match was effectuated, which did result in those debts. It was not until we could accurately rely upon that information that that match occurred.

Mr. ROSENDALE. I understand that but again, I want to make sure that we are clear here that this was not a deficiency by the veterans themselves and their reporting; it was a problem with the software or the reporting that the Social Security Administration was doing with the Veterans Administration.

Mr. SHUTE. I agree. We take full responsibility for the issues with that computer match and that is why we are taking the actions that we are taking right now.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Again, I just wanted to clarify that because as the conversation was taking place it sounded like a lot of the weight of this was being blamed upon the veterans themselves for some kind of inaccuracies and self-reporting, and I wanted to make sure that that was not.

Mr. Shute, exactly what needs to happen in order for Secretary McDonough to erase these debts?

Mr. SHUTE. The Cleland-Dole Act provided us some authorities that we are working to codify into regulation. As we are working

to do that we want to develop this interim policy that will allow us to basically take action before those authorities are codified into regulation. In terms of the specific parameters of how we apply that policy I would like to be able to work with your staff and you, in particular, to provide some more detailed information as I can speak to the technological components of that but not the policy details themselves.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. I would like to also see us work together to get a statement out there so that the veterans who receive these pension payments that we can remove this cloud of anxiety that may be hanging above them where they may or may not know if they are obligated. That is a very, very bad position to place them in and I would like to have language out there that clarifies that.

Mr. DelBene, we just received less than an hour ago a response to Chairman Bost's September 6 letter to Secretary McDonough requesting explanations of the VA.gov problems. It took two hearings by this subcommittee to shake this response loose and that is absolutely unacceptable. I want to ask you about one statement in the letter. It says that the VA chief information officer—that is you—brought on a new senior executive who directly reports to you and will ensure issues related to mishandled claims and veterans unable to access a benefit application are rapidly fixed. The letter makes direct response to them. Okay?

Who is the new senior executive? Is he here today? He or she here today? If not, why?

Mr. DELBENE. Thank you for the question. I actually hold myself responsible for making sure that we make any fixes. I am not sure. I will have to go back on the reference to the actual executive we are speaking of.

Mr. ROSENDALE. I have got a quote here right from the letter from Secretary McDonough. It says, "Recently VA's chief information officer, CIO, brought on a new senior executive who directly reports to him and will ensure issues related to mishandled claims and veterans unable to access a benefit application page are rapidly fixed."

Mr. DELBENE. Let me get back to you on that one.

Mr. ROSENDALE. You do not know who your new senior executive is?

Mr. DELBENE. I know all of my senior executives. I am trying to make sure that I give you the correct information in terms of who we are referencing there.

Mr. ROSENDALE. We will look for that by the end of day today. Okay? Not by next week. If you have got a senior executive that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is saying is responsible for something and that you hired them, we need to know about that.

Mr. DELBENE. Fair enough.

Mr. ROSENDALE. You certainly should know about that.

Mr. DELBENE. We will get back to you today on that.

Mr. ROSENDALE. I defer to Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. I yield my time.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Do you have any closing remarks? I am sorry, Representative Cherfilus-McCormick?

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. I do.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much, Chairman Rosedale.

I appreciate the testimony and answers from all our witnesses this afternoon. I recognize that no IT solution is perfect and they are constantly evolving and changing and that evolution introduces risk. VA has a lot of work to do to resolve these IT issues and to make sure the fallout is managed for the veterans impacted. Specifically, that veterans do not suffer any negative impacts. We will continue to monitor this situation until it is resolved.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much, Representative Cherfilus-McCormick.

I want to thank our witnesses for returning this afternoon to update the committee and the public on these issues that are so important for veterans and their livelihoods all around the country. Please remember these hearings are not just for the people in this room. Tens of thousands of people are watching on the internet and on C-SPAN. Veterans expect that whenever the VA gives them a piece of technology to use it is going to work. It is supposed to improve their lives. When it does not work, veterans and their family members should be confident that the VA will take responsibility for the consequences. I appreciate our witnesses explaining what they have done and plan to do to make these benefits right. I still question why no action was taken for 5 years, for 10 years, or even 12 years after the technical glitches began. I hope no more shoes will drop and there will be no more need for another hearing. As I said in September, regardless of what happens, our focus on making the veterans whole will continue. They cannot be left waiting and wondering until the VA gets around to helping them.

With that I ask unanimous consent that all members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material.

Without objection, so ordered. The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:54 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENT OF WITNESS

Prepared Statement of Kurt DelBene

Good afternoon, Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) VA.gov website. I am accompanied today by Mr. Paul Shute, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary, Automated Benefits Delivery, Veterans Benefits Administration, Mr. Raymond Tellez, Executive Director, Office of Business Integration, Veterans Benefits Administration, and Mr. Charles Worthington, VA's Chief Technology Officer, Office of Information and Technology.

VA is committed to providing Veterans with a seamless digital experience and the VA.gov platform strives to provide that digital front door. Nearly 14 million Veterans and others access VA.gov for information and resources each month. VA.gov provides Veterans with an online platform to learn about, apply for, and manage their VA benefits and healthcare. As an update to our September hearing, the Department would like to share our progress on the recent VA.gov issues.

REMEDICATION

Disability Compensation Claim Submission Errors: Earlier this year, we identified approximately 32,000 claims that were not correctly established due to a technological issue. Since our last update to the Committee, VA has established 25,257 disability claim submissions through a series of automated claims establishments along with correspondence to each impacted Veteran. VA is reviewing the record of every affected Veteran to ensure no claimant has been negatively impacted by this system failure. To provide full transparency, even if the review does not result in a change to benefit entitlement, claimants will receive notice when the review is complete, citing the considered documents and evidence. For all affected living and deceased Veterans, the date of claim will reflect the date of the earliest failed submission. As of November 28, 2023, 89.4 percent of the 25,257 established disability claims have been decided. In order to prevent similar issues in the future, VA established a backup procedure in January 2023, and further refined procedures for claims submissions that encounter this error to be routed as a package, with all documents submitted by the claimant, to VA's centralized mail portal for processing. VA will capture any claim that failed submission and route for processing in a timely manner. The remaining identified claims are expected to be batch-established in December 2023.

Dependency Submission Claim Errors: In August 2023, VA identified 45,903 Veterans who had filed a request to update their dependency status online and did not have those claims successfully processed. In October 2023, VA completed analysis of all electronic dependency submissions since 2011 and identified over 81,000 Veterans who filed a request to update their dependency status online and did not have those submissions successfully processed (an update to the 45,903 Veterans provided above). VA is reviewing all affected dependency claims submissions to ensure no claimant has been negatively impacted by this error in VA.gov. This includes a review for a potential overpayment to the claimant and mitigation of debts attributed to the failed submission. As of November 28, 2023, VA has established 70,406 dependency reviews and has completed 37.5 percent dependency reviews, providing decision notice to the Veteran. Approximately 10,000 dependency claims are targeted for a December 2023 batch claims establishment. Moving forward, all dependency claims submissions that encounter an error will be routed to VA's centralized mail portal for processing to capture any future claims that may fail.

PACT Act Intent to File (ITF) Issue: 38 C.F.R. § 3.114 incentivizes claimants to file their claim or ITF as soon as possible after enactment of a law or policy establishing eligibility for benefits by providing for the maximum retroactive benefit available. If a claim or ITF is received within one year from the effective date of an enacted law or change in the way VA addresses an issue, benefits may be authorized from the effective date of the law or VA issue change. Most Veterans and sur-

vivors who applied for benefits or who submitted an ITF by August 14, 2023, if granted, would have their benefits backdated to August 10, 2022. Due to the record-high PACT Act claims submissions leading up to the August 2023 submission deadline, the backend VA.gov system experienced an abnormal increase in “timeout” errors indicating VA.gov was unable to process the Veterans’ Intents to File (ITF) and prevented some Veterans from completing a disability claim application. In response to this error, VA published a notice in the Federal Register recognizing VA.gov submissions received through August 14, 2023, as received by VA on August 8, 2023, preserving the most favorable effective date for the claim. Additionally, VA temporarily enhanced the call center Interactive Voice Response to prioritize ITF calls from Veterans during business hours. This enhancement also allowed Veterans afterhours access to provide personal identifiable information, enabling VA to call them back to complete the ITF process. The VA.gov technology issue was resolved in September 2023. VA contacted all affected users by email to assure them their ITF was received in VA’s Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). VA identified 429 Intent to File submissions needing establishment, which were batch-processed in September 2023.

Notice of Disagreement Issue: In September 2023, VA identified a technical issue on VA.gov by noting a drop of about 900 appeals from the normal VA.gov submission volume. VA investigated the issue and quickly deployed a fix. It was determined that about 3,152 Veterans visiting the site may have been impacted by the inability to load a webpage that’s part of the VA.gov Notice Of Disagreement form. VA will contact the impacted Veterans to ensure they were able to successfully submit their appeal without any impact to their appeal date.

REVIEWS AND IMPROVEMENTS

As this Subcommittee is aware, IT solutions are constantly evolving and changing, and software issues can arise. The Department acknowledges, however, the unacceptable time it took to proactively identify these issues with VA.gov. VA is taking all necessary steps to prevent similar issues in the future, and, if issues do arise, to identify and fix those issues quickly. We are also conducting a full review of all VA.gov processing systems to ensure we have comprehensive error handling in place.

From a technical perspective, VA’s Office of Information and Technology (OIT) has implemented a “Code Yellow” process to ensure that we can more accurately observe and monitor potential issues in VA.gov. The goals of Code Yellow include monitoring the health of the most important applications and features on VA.gov and making these monitors accessible in one place. Additionally, Code Yellow ensures a government employee is aware of any significant issue within 24 hours of detection.

So far, this effort has led to 56 automatic monitors being consolidated onto a unified “watch tower,” where the health of VA.gov can be discerned in a single place. So far, 80 percent of VA.gov’s most important features are represented on this watch tower, and VA expects to complete automatic monitors on the remaining top features by the end of Quarter 1 in Fiscal Year 2024. OIT has also established standard operating procedures that ensure alerts on the watch tower are triaged as they happen.

In addition, VA is investing in modernizing our claims and appeals processing infrastructure to ensure a seamless, error-free experience for Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors on VA.gov. Even as we work to incorporate monitoring, the root causes of these issues stem from many different failure points in VA’s legacy infrastructure. Using funding from the Toxic Exposures Fund, OIT is continuing to modernize and de-layer this infrastructure, which will reduce the number of failure points and make the remaining ones more fault tolerant. VA will resolve these issues, prevent them from happening in the future, address them more quickly when needed and most importantly, make sure that all impacted Veterans get the benefits and services that they deserve as quickly as possible.

ONGOING MODERNIZATION

Finally, while not directly related to previous VA.gov issues, I would like to take this opportunity to address the recent notification concerning the VA.gov pension application interactive online form (VA Form 21P-527EZ) being temporarily unavailable from November 8, 2023, through January 31, 2024. Leveraging PACT Act funding, VA is updating the interactive form to ensure it matches the current paper version of the form. The current interactive form did not match the paper form, so based on end user feedback we decided to temporarily disable the interactive form until it has been updated to avoid unnecessary confusion or processing delays. Veterans, their families, and accredited representatives who attempt to apply online are now redirected to download the current form and submit a completed application

using VA QuickSubmit, AccessVA's online alternative to fax or mail documents to the centralized mail portal. All Veterans with a pension application in progress via the discontinued application will automatically have an Intent to File (ITF) saved to their record to preserve the earliest possible effective date.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Rosendale, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. As previously mentioned, VA.gov is the digital front door, and Veterans need to have confidence and trust their benefits and services are available, accurate, and secure. I look forward to continuing working with this Subcommittee to address our greatest priorities and the challenges we face in our digital transformation. This concludes my testimony, and I look forward to answering your questions.

