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EXAMINING ONGOING FOREVER GI BILL IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

JOINT HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

AND THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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EXAMINING ONGOING FOREVER GI BILL IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

Thursday, May 9, 2019

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

The Subcommittees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:05 a.m., in Room 210, House Visitors Center, Hon. Mike Levin presiding.

Present: Representatives Lee, Brownley, Rice, Lamb, Brindisi, Cunningham, Luria, Pappas, Bilirakis, Banks, Roe, Bergman, Barr, Meuser, Watkins, and Roy.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Mr. LEVIN. Good morning. I call this hearing to order. I want to thank everyone for joining us today for this joint hearing between the Economic Opportunity and Technology Modernization Subcommittees.

Today, we will be reviewing the VA's implementation of the Colmery Act, also known as the Forever GI Bill. It has been almost 2 years since Congress passed the Forever GI Bill into law. Questions remain about the Department's implementation, particularly, of sections 107 and 501, which change the allowance for housing benefits veterans would receive.

VA contracted with Booz Allen to make essential, major modifications to its information technology systems that process education claims and payments; however, in July 2018, with just one month to go, it became clear that the August 1st deadline would not be met. In the fall 2018 semester, student veterans faced long delays in payments, with some news reports stating that several student veterans were getting evicted from their living situations because of the delays. Clearly, these modifications have not gone smoothly.

In November 2018, the VA announced a reset of its implementation efforts indicating that implementation would occur by December 1st, 2019, for the spring 2020 semester. That led to the VA signing a new contract earlier this year with Accenture, since which time we have closely tracked implementation, as we continue to do today.

In this committee's previous hearings regarding the President's budget requests and our field hearing in San Diego, we examined shortfalls in the Forever GI Bill execution. Repeatedly, we have asked VA officials if the resources they are allocating today and are requesting in the future are sufficient to deliver our Nation's veterans the benefits they have earned.

Both Ranking Member Bilirakis and I have expressed doubts that the Department will be ready by its new deadline. While we have received promises of confidence from the VA, it is this committee's duty to exercise oversight authority over the law's implementation. That brings us to today's hearing and our witnesses, and I thank you all for being here.

We are fortunate to have experts with the VA, with the VA Office of the Inspector General, and The MITRE Corporation. The inspector general conducted its own assessment of the Forever GI Bill and implementation, as well as requesting that MITRE conduct an independent technical assessment. The IG's findings were stark.

The VA lacked an accountable leader who could oversee project delivery and I quote, "Resulting in unclear communication of implementation progress and inadequately defined expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the various VA business lines and contractors involved."

Our opportunity here today is to see where things stand and to learn from failures of the past. I look forward to hearing the testimony from our witnesses to determine where we should be focusing our efforts, and with that, I now recognize Technology Modernization Subcommittee chair, Lee, for her opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SUSIE LEE, CHAIRWOMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Chairman Levin.

I am pleased that we could hold this joint hearing today, ensuring that student veterans get the benefits they have earned and that the Department of Veterans Affairs has the systems capable of delivering these benefits is at the heart of both of our Subcommittees' work. The Subcommittee that I chair, the Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, has a broad mandate to look at the systems, big and small, and to conduct oversight on how the VA is trying to modernize these systems.

One question I have is, what does the universe of legacy systems look like? I want to try to get a handle on that answer today.

I am also very concerned about the VA's ability to successfully move from legacy to modern systems. This is not just because the VA faces challenges like every Federal agency with keeping up with the pace of technology and prioritizing programs and budgets; it is because the VA seems to manage to get in its own way time and time again. Leadership vacuums, mismanagement, and an overreliance on contractors makes it hard to succeed.

It is good to have lessons learned, but unfortunately you had to fail to get here. Management has to lead, but in the case of the Forever GI Bill implementation, management was absent; no one was in charge. A lack of accountability, a lack of governance, it is not just a Veterans Benefits Administration issue, it is a whole of VA issue. I am troubled by governance issue in IT implementation across the department. It is especially concerning in one of VA's biggest IT investments, the electronic health record modernization. We have been asking repeatedly for VA and the Department of Defense to provide information about their governance proposal for months, but all we hear is crickets; meanwhile, the program con-

tinues to move further down the track and millions of dollars are being spent.

Building a house on a shaky foundation has real risks and a lack of governance is going to be a problem down the line. I hope the rest of the VA leadership will look at what happened with the Forever GI Bill and see an opportunity to make improvements to the way other IT programs are being implemented and I hope that today's discussion will spur the VA to do more to get a handle on this governance problem before we hear of yet another IT failure at VA.

I am sure at the witness table you all are cognizant of this, but I want to be clear, that IT failures don't happen in a vacuum. These IT failures mean that if veterans don't get their benefits, they get evicted from their home, and have their education disrupted. These failures have real consequences for our veterans.

I thank the witnesses for being here today and I look forward to your testimony.

Thank you, I yield.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Chair Lee.

I now recognize Economic Opportunity Subcommittee Ranking Member Bilirakis for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT GUS M. BILIRAKIS, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMC OPPORTUNITY

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it very much. I am proud to be here today to be part of the Subcommittee's continued review of the implementation of the Forever GI Bill.

The Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity was the only Committee on The Hill to hold any hearings on the implementation of this law last Congress, and I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for continuing to examine this vital program.

As I mentioned at our hearing last week, the failure by the VA to update their IT systems caused massive delays in processing GI Bill claims for thousands of student veterans last fall. For many student veterans, these payments are the only source of income they have while they are in school. To those who have tried to downplay the financial impact and stress these delays placed on these veterans, I ask you to go weeks, if not months, without a paycheck and see how that impacts you.

As our Subcommittee hearing last week, Dr. Lawrence's top deputy, Ms. Devlin, testified that she was completely confident that VA has turned the corner and would meet their new self-imposed deadline to fully implement sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill by no later than December 1st, 2019. While I certainly want to believe that the IT modification will be ready, I know Mr. Banks has some specific thoughts and questions on the system itself. I wouldn't be doing my job if I wasn't just a bit skeptical of this promise by the VA; after all, last year, these same types of assurances had been given to this Subcommittee time and time again.

Now, I don't begrudge the VA staff working on this problem. I know many of them are the most dedicated employees in the department, but I do hope that our witnesses will testify about the lessons they have learned and that they are ready to show us why the results will be different this year.

Today, I am also looking forward to hearing from our witnesses about what their plan will be on when and how to make students whole, who were underpaid since August 1st, 2018, set forth in the law. I agree with Dr. Lawrence's intention to ensure these retroactive payments don't impact the processing of current housing payments, but students should expect to be paid as soon as possible, not just when it is convenient for the VA and the schools.

I also look forward to hearing from VA's witnesses about their plan for communicating how these IT modifications and implementation of the law will impact students in schools. Despite VA's best intentions last fall, many students were left unprepared for the delays and still do not understand how the changes will impact them and their monthly budgets of.

Finally, I look forward to hearing from Assistant Secretary Gfrerer about what investments have and will be made to upgrade aging IT systems for GI Bill processing. Many of the delays last fall can also be linked to an ancient IT system not being able to communicate with one another due to bandwidth or other issues.

Mr. Chairman, the delays last fall were certainly not the first time the VA has failed to provide GI Bill payments on time, but we must do everything we can to ensure that such delays never happen again. Our student veterans deserve better.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

Finally, I recognize Technology Modernization Subcommittee Ranking Member, Banks, for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF JIM BANKS, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

Mr. BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The VA's struggle to implement the Forever GI Bill is not primarily an IT story. This is a story about student veterans pursuing their educations, paying their bills, and living their lives. I know that is not lost on anyone in this room and my colleagues have described this eloquently already.

But nonetheless, it is important to say before anything else because IT problems in an organization as large as the VA have real world consequences. These particular IT struggles with LTS, VA–ONCE, WEAMS, and other systems concern me not because they are unusual, but because they are so ordinary. This disaster happened with two sections of the Forever GI Bill, but it could have been any VA program.

What were the risk factors? Antiquated legacy systems, complicated interdependencies between the systems, uncertain requirements, many data feeds from different databases. That could describe nearly every situation our Subcommittee has ever examined.

Going forward, I think VA has to approach every project with the assumption that it is high-risk. Any IT system on a decades-old platform that has not had a major modification in recent memory is going to be fragile. When you try to integrate it with something new, it is probably going to break.

Let's go in with some of those assumptions. Let's do the IT assessment at the very beginning when VA is figuring out its business requirements that the IT systems are supposed to support. I

hope those can be lessons learned, but right now, VA is facing another end-of-year deadline to modify LTS to accommodate the housing-allowance changes.

We have the benefit of a year of trial and error, as well as MITRE's independent technical assessment and the inspector general's report. We have Under Secretary Lawrence as the single accountable official. We have a streamlined team of VBA and OIT professionals, and we have the attention and support of the highest levels of the department, and that is all very good, but we also have all the same legacy IT systems with the same complicated interdependencies.

VA still has no end-to-end software testing process, test data, or common platform to test the new code against the various systems before putting it into production. The contractor is going to write all the code in increments according to the agile methodology.

That is good, but the testing environment will not be in place, even under the best-case scenario until the very end, and that is bad. Even though the code will have been written in increments, it will have to be tested all at once and then put into production quickly. There is no reason to doubt that will happen, but it will be just in the nick of time.

In other words, VA has some of the ingredients and is trying to get the remaining ingredients, but most of them are not in the sequence the recipe actually calls for. I believe the level of scrutiny this Committee has devoted to the Forever GI Bill is absolutely warranted, given the importance of the law and its impact on student veterans' lives. And I believe the level of priority that the VA has given to this issue is, in part, the result of that scrutiny. Our esteemed witness panel here today is evidence of that.

We have the benefit of hindsight and some of the best minds at work from industry and government. Let's make this time different.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

Now, I would like to turn to our witnesses. Appearing before us today is Dr. Paul Lawrence, Under Secretary for benefits, at the Department of Veterans Affairs, who is accompanied by Ms. Charmain Bogue, acting executive director of education services, at the Veterans Benefits Administration; Mr. James Gfrerer, assistant secretary for the VA Office of Information and Technology; and Mr. Robert Orifici, information technology specialist for architecture strategy, and design, at the VA Office of Information and Technology. We also have Mr. Michael Missal, inspector general of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Mr. Jay Schnitzer, vice president and chief technology officer, of The MITRE Corporation.

Thank you all for joining us. As you know, you will each have 5 minutes, but your full statements will be added to the record.

Under Secretary Lawrence, you are now recognized to present your statement.

STATEMENT OF PAUL R. LAWRENCE

Mr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, and good morning, Chairs Levin, Lee, Ranking Members Bilirakis and Banks, and Members of the Subcommittee. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you

today to discuss the positive progress VA is making on implementation of their Forever GI Bill.

On November 28th, 2018, VA announced key changes in the implementation of sections 107 and 501. Because of the information technology difficulties VA experienced with implementing these sections, Secretary Wilkie announced a reset of VA's implementation efforts to give the Department time, contracting support, and necessary resources to develop the capabilities to process enrollments, in accordance with the law, but December 2019.

Considering the IT challenges we faced in late summer, we did not update the monthly housing rates in August, as would normally occur. Within two weeks of the secretary's announcement, we took swift action and updated the 2018 and 2019 academic year monthly housing rates for fall 2018. By the end of January, we processed over 450,000 corrections. As a result of this accelerated and aggressive timeline, over 322,000 individuals received additional funds they were owed.

I am also pleased to report that our pending education claims went from a high of 200,000 claims in September of 2018 to the lowest it has been in months at under 65,000 claims on April 22nd, 2019. Our pending inventory is slightly above 67,000 claims as of May 8th and our average current days to complete is 25 days for original claims and 13 days for supplemental claims. We are on track to meet or exceed our fiscal year targets of 28 and 14 days for processing original and supplemental claims, respectively.

In early fall, VA engaged MITRE to perform an independent technical assessment of the capabilities necessary to meet these requirements. MITRE provided 20 recommendations intended to help us successfully implement the Forever GI Bill. We have completed 10 of the 20 recommendations as of April 30th, 2019. An additional 9 recommendations will be completed by June 30th and the remaining recommendations will be completed on September 30th. The approximate cost to conduct the ITA was $232,000.

In December, VA, again contracted with MITRE to support and address the recommendations set forth in the ITA as they pertained to the Colmery Act program integration office. The value of this one-year contract is approximately $5.2 million. In preparation for the arrival of the software development systems integration vendor, we established the PIO as the formal entity within the department with assigned or aligned government leaders, staff, federally funded research and development center support, and contract support.

This governance structure, which is supported by The MITRE Corporation is to serve as a decision authority for the definition and enforcement of norms for executing program activities and approval or disapproval of life cycle processes, control gates, activities, funding, acquisition, resources, and the systems required to achieve successful implementation. MITRE also coordinates functional, technical, and programmatic activities, capturing associated risk with these activities, and developing mitigation plans and strategies to ensure we are on schedule to meet the December 2019 implementation date.

On February 15, 2019, we awarded a contract to Accenture Federal Services to provide systems integration to coordinate planning,

development, and integrated testing of all systems associated with Colmery Act implementation. The approximate value of that contract for fiscal year 2019 is $14 million. The scope of their contract includes development of new software, interface with legacy systems, system architecture, and testing.

Accenture and VA started working on implementation efforts the same day the new contract was awarded. Accenture has already analyzed the code delivered by Booz Allen Hamilton against the section 107 and 501 requirements, concluding it will not be utilized as a starting point for Accenture's own development efforts due to definition changes under these sections.

Accenture, however, will evaluate the available code delivered by Booz to determine if any portions of it can be reused within Accenture's own development under a support contract.

VA has made great progress in setting course for successful implementation of the Colmery Act while reducing the claims workload and improving timeliness to ensure our student veterans are paid without delay. Last year, the regional processing offices experienced significant latency issues that impacted operations, so we increased bandwidth at all three RPOs.

The increased bandwidth at Muskogee RPO resulted in an increased capacity by nearly 50 percent. To further address this latency issue at Muskogee, we replaced over 500 user workstations to resolve issues with outdated network cards. In addition, the benefits delivery network system performance was improved by deploying a patch to 1,887 workstations.

We continue to work closely and collaborate with OIT on technology improvements that support our field stations and our staff processing education claims.

We also increased our efforts to communicate and disseminate information widely. In this regard, we have undertaken numerous initiatives to better serve and inform our stakeholders, including emailing updates to approximately 700,000 veterans throughout December. We have also held a dozen roundtables and webinars for veterans and schools throughout December and January, reaching combined audiences in the thousands.

We have begun holding more roundtables with schools, veteran service organizations, state-approving agencies, and other stakeholders to keep our partners aware of developments, solicit suggestions, and help us communicate the upcoming schedule. Each session includes emails afterwards communicating what was done and FAQs.

Finally, from the beginning of this effort and throughout the successful implementation of the Forever GI Bill, we have, and will regularly and transparently, update our congressional partners on our progress and our work. This includes holding monthly briefings with the Oversight Committee, submitting the 90-day report, as required by public law, and continue to be responsive to your questions and ask for information.

We welcome and encourage the additional opportunities to share information with you and your staff and we look forward to maintaining this cadence of communication. Thank you, we look forward to answering your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF PAUL R. LAWRENCE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Under Secretary Lawrence.

Inspector General Missal, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF THE MICHAEL J. MISSAL

Mr. MISSAL. Mr. Chairman, Madam Chair, Ranking Member Bilirakis, Ranking Member Banks, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Office of Inspector General's recent issued statement: Forever GI Bill Implementation Challenges. My statement will focus on the information we collected to respond to concerns from members of Congress and the public about the implementation of the Forever GI Bill requirements.

Last fall, VBA acknowledged implementation challenges with sections 107 and 501 with the Forever GI Bill relating to the housing allowance. These two sections fundamentally redesign how VBA pays monthly housing allowance to veterans using the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program. These adjustments include a change in the base for the calculation of monthly housing stipends to the location of the campus where the student attends most classes, instead of the location of the main campus of the institution.

VA's failure to properly implement these requirements led to the delivery of inaccurate or delayed housing stipend payments to eligible GI Bill recipients. The OIG examined VA's early implementation actions and the impediments to meeting Forever GI Bill implementation mandates. The OIG found that VBA's implementation of the payment of the housing allowances under the Forever GI Bill was hampered by the same two underlying issues that have negatively affected VA's implementation of other new policies and initiatives: lack of functionality and inadequate program leadership.

Specifically, the OIG found that VBA failed to modify its IT systems by the required implementation date to make accurate housing-allowance payments. Additionally, VA lacked a single accountable official to oversee the project, which resulted in unclear communications to VA stakeholders of implementation progress and inadequately defined expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the various VA business lines and contractors involved.

The OIG found that approximately 10 months passed from the time the Forever GI Bill became law to when VA received the initial software-development release and began testing the system modifications to VA's long-term solutions application in order to address sections 107 and 501. Once VA began testing the software-development release, it identified defects that required the development of additional versions availed to yes.

Based on interviews we conducted, the OIG team learned that when user testing occurred, the test failed scenarios that VBA did not account for when developing the business requirements. The OIG found that VA's program offices held different expectations from one another as to what they considered complete and accurate business requirements.

In addition, VA's Office of Information and Technology and VBA Education Service has divergent opinions of a deployable solution. Without an accountable official, these differing opinions and expec-

tations were not mitigated or resolved and became significant impediments to a successful and timely implementation of the Forever GI Bill requirements. The OIG has continually identified systemic problems that VBA needs to address when implementing new initiatives and policies. These include a lack of IT system functionality, poor planning and communications, and inadequate program leadership. These same systemic problems were significant factors in the delays and disruption VA experienced while attempting to implement the housing allowance requirements in the Forever GI Bill.

The OIG will continue to monitor VA's implementation actions and is reviewing the plan provided to Congress under the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act.

Mr. Chairman, Madam Chair, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL MISSAL APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you Inspector General Missal.

Mr. Schnitzer, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JAY SCHNITZER

Dr. SCHNITZER. Good morning, Chairman Levin, Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Members Bilirakis and Banks, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on matters relating to the implementation of sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act, also known as the Forever GI Bill. MITRE very much appreciates the opportunity to share our insight from our work on this critical program.

My name is Jay Schnitzer. I am a vice president and the chief technology officer with The MITRE Corporation. I would like to make a brief statement and submit my full remarks for the record.

MITRE is 501(c)(3), not-for-profit corporation. We are chartered to operate in the public interests, which includes operating federally funded research and development centers, FFRDCs, on behalf of Federal agency sponsors. We currently operate seven FFRDCs sponsored by a variety of Federal agencies.

The Department of Veterans Affairs cosponsors one of these FFRDCs, the MITRE-operated Center for Enterprise Modernization. From our experience, I think it is important to stress to the Committee right up front that the kinds of issues VA experienced in implementing the Colmery Act last year are common to agencies attempting to execute highly complex, integrated-mission requirements and to modernize their systems and processes to address new needs.

MITRE's involvement with the Colmery Act began on September 28th of last year when we were engaged by the Office of Information and Technology, OIT, to perform an independent technical assessment, ITA, of VA's implementation efforts.

The Colmery Act effort involves the implementation of a major system, a long-term solution—LTS—as well as updates to many other systems involved in administering GI Bill benefits. The focus of the independent assessment was to identify issues related to the

delayed delivery of the LTS and to recommend a resolution to the issues associated with completing and deploying the required system updates.

The MITRE ITA team identified four systemic findings that were preventing rapid integrated capability delivery under the strategy then in place: First, technical and business leaders were not fully empowered to address issues, due to a lack of clear authority, priorities, and goals; second, work priorities, resources, and authorities for execution were not aligned for delivery; three, operations and processes within and across the Veterans Benefits Administration and OIT were not focused on the Colmery Act functionality; and fourth, data and tools were not integrated across LTS and the legacy systems.

To address these findings, these systemic findings, we proposed 20 recommendations which VA fully accepted. As a result, the following major changes have been implemented: VA appointed the Under Secretary for benefits, USB, as the overall accountable business leader, aided by the chief information officer; VA chartered and established a new program governance team reporting to the USB, with business owner and OIT leadership; VA created a new program integration office accountable to the program governance team and responsible for definition, coordination, and management of functional, technical, and programmatic activities across VA; and VA selected an end-to-end systems integrator to coordinate planning, development, and integrated testing of all systems associated. As is typical for any complex integration effort, the program is not completely without risk, given the many systems and organizational components involved and the many interdependencies.

But VA now has in place an integrated program team that is deliberately managing to that risk by identifying the critical path activities and the decisions needed to succeed and the contingencies necessary to mitigate the risk and they are acting proactively.

In closing, I would like to note that of MITRE's roughly 8,500 personnel, some 30 percent are veterans. There are few duties that our employees consider more noble and consequential than honoring, through our support for VA, the service and sacrifice of our Nation's men and women in uniform.

On behalf of the entire MITRE team, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to come before you today, and I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAY SCHNITZER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Schnitzer. I will now recognize myself for 5 minutes to begin the question portion of this hearing.

Dr. Lawrence, you and other officials have testified while VA will not seek reimbursement for veterans who overpaid because of the implementation issues, you will retroactively correct underpayments. What are the current efforts to understand how many veterans were underpaid and by how much and when is VA going to be able to make them whole?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes, sir, that's correct. We are in the process of implementing the solution that will go into places on December 1st. When we have done that, we will have a better estimate for who

exactly we have to make whole and what that number is. Right now, we are developing—and I believe we shared this in the briefings we offered to your staff—the plan to do that. Our intention is to do it, as exactly as members have spoken already, as soon as possible.

We appreciate the situations veterans are in. We want to do sort of a couple of things simultaneously; one, get the system in place and do it right; two, get the spring going; and, three, get everybody reimbursed the way you described. We will have a plan in detail as this comes about and we will brief your staff and you on it when we finalize it. It will include communication and clarity so there are no surprises. It will be intentional, and it will be the subject of our webinars and our communication with everybody.

And we will need to do this because we will need the schools to provide us information. We will need a lot of things going in the right direction, but we appreciate the situation and want to make sure it is done exactly the way I described.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Under Secretary Lawrence. You know, I wanted to reaffirm that while the tone of these hearings sometimes can get contentious, it is our intent to work in a collaborative fashion with the VA and partner and serving our veterans.

The lack of clear and forthcoming communication from the VA, though, seems to indicate that the relationship may be somewhat strained. My understanding is it took a lot of cajoling for VA to provide documents related to the new Accenture contract and although VA did finally provide those, it did so 3 days before this hearing.

So, I wanted to ask you, sir, how can Congress better partner with the VA to ensure success and what specific steps will the VA take to be more clear and forthcoming with Congress?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. And we appreciate that and notice the tone in this conversation, too. And, you know, to quote somebody famous, we feel your pain, because this is the situation, we are all in. Most of us are veterans up here. We understand this, and ironically, the person who leads the MITRE team that works with us day-to-day used the GI Bill and he has very torn by that.

I think the example of providing the contract to you—I looked into this one—is not representative of the communication we are having with you. I am not an acquisition person or a lawyer, sir, so I don't understand the complexities. It frustrated me, too, when I heard about that, because it was our intention. We knew going into the reset we would have to be the most transparent we have ever been and then some to re-win your level of confidence with us.

And so, the briefings, the communication, that is our intention. Again, I think that was an exception, and to the extent I wish I were responsible, I would apologize for it, but I don't quite understand where that is. But we will try to do everything we can, so you know about it and answer your questions so that you feel informed.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

You may be aware, we had the principal deputy Under Secretary testify before the Subcommittee, Ms. Devlin, and she said with 100 percent certainty—so, we actually asked her on a scale, I think we asked her on a scale of 1 to 10, she said 10 out of 10, certainty that this issue was going to be resolved, that the IT-related issues, the

correct payment of benefits, the, you know, correct zip codes for our veterans, et cetera, that would all be fixed by the end of the year. Again, she said 10 out of 10.

Do you share that opinion?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Absolutely.

Mr. LEVIN. That is good—10 out of 10?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Ten out of ten.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. I wanted to turn to the Accenture contract. VA has spoken of the requirement that Accenture produce a fully operational system. In some terms, it makes it seem like all the risk is on Accenture. From a contractual standpoint it may be, but ensuring that student veterans receive the benefits they deserve require that VA also be completely invested in the development, testing, evaluation, and operation of the system.

Dr. Lawrence, how are you ensuring that this contract goes well and what, if anything, are you doing differently than the previous contract?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. Well, several different things, but let me answer your first question—first part of your question first, which is the monitoring of the contract. So, we work closely with our acquisition folks who run the acquisition and to include monitoring the contracts. So, they are very kept abreast of the activities they are required to do.

The contract was actually led by our colleagues in OIT. The integration of this team, together, they watch and do regular reviews, as well, as we do regular reviews as a broad team in terms of the activity, the schedule, the scope, and the like. We have not forgotten the lessons from the fall where, you know, perhaps our inability to aggressively monitor the contract came back and caused us problems. So, we certainly don't want that to happen again.

More broadly, though, your question about what is different—and I know this came up in a couple of the statements already—I would point to three things that are different than the past. One was, as everyone has pointed out, the lack of an accountable official. So, now, we have a single accountable official, a role that I asked the secretary to appoint.

But there are two other things that are less subtle that I want to draw your attention to. The first one, related to the first point was, the accountable official enables crisp governance—timely decisions, resolution of conflict, realignment of things that are unaligned.

The second was hiring MITRE to be the program integrator. This is, if you will, a super program manager to keep everybody on track and dispute decisions where technical experts are, perhaps, in conflict. MITRE's expertise as an FFRDC enables them to bring vast knowledge of how other government programs work, as well as technical expertise to this role. This is a big difference.

And, finally, a hiring a world-class systems integrator and software development firm, what were learned last time was it was a systems integration discussion. The last statement by Congressman Banks about the different systems is exactly what we are talking about, which is why a systems integrator was needed.

So, those three things give us a level of confidence that we better understand the problem and our approach to it is on track.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. I have plenty more questions, but so do my colleagues. I want to be respectful of them as well, so I would now like to recognize my friend, the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Bilirakis, for 5 minutes.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

Dr. Lawrence, one of the most comment complaints we received last fall was that the VA was not appropriately communicating with the schools and students regarding payment delays. We also received complaints from schools over the last of communication on how to expedite hardship claims for student veterans who relied heavily for these payments to survive.

What lessons have you learned about communicating and you can give me your opinion on what I just said, too, but what lessons have you learned about communicating with students and how do you plan to remain in touch with veterans whose monthly housing allowance will draw up when payments are corrected to follow the law on January 1st, 2020?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. A lot of lessons, quite frankly. The pain you experienced was the pain we felt, too, of people communicating with us and explaining the financial hardship situations they were in. We took a lot of steps to communicate the numbers to call. We had regular phone calls with the VSOs. But in many cases, it fell short, as you pointed out.

We intend to do more of that. Just so you know, part of what I did last fall was I held a student roundtable at Texas A & M, talked with students directly. I will go to Pittsburgh and do the same thing at a community college in a couple of weeks to better under that.

But we intend to do more. We intend it to be redundant and a lot. But not only with the students, with the schools, we understand their situation and we know what we are going to do come December and beyond, is going to put requirements on them to provide us information all the way back to August of last year. So, we know we are going to have to communicate. We have enlisted the VSOs. We have enlisted everybody to try to let them understand where this will be and how it will play out for them, how they can communicate situations that may cause difficulties in their life and what we can do to expedite it.

We want to make sure that as we do the reset, everybody understands their role and they should have none of these problems. Now, that being said, yes, will somebody not get the memo, not get the email. I can't guarantee it. I will probably enlist the help of you and your staff. I know people have been good about communicating to us through that—look in on this and do some of these things.

So, we will try as hard as we can possibly imagine to use the multiple forms of media, the multiple channels available to us to let everybody know the situations they are in and what they need to do.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. And then you need to communicate with the members of Congress, as well, so we can get the word out.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Oh, yes, please.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. It is very important for—

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes, thank you. We will do a lot of that.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. Dr. Lawrence, again, in the contract documents recently provided to the committee, Booz Allen Hamilton submitted a response to VA's request for information associated with IT reset. In this response, they indicated they could complete the IT modifications for sections 107 and 501 by July 1st, 2019. They also indicated that VA's changes regarding schools' zip codes would—and I quote, "Not have the intended impact of simplifying the implementation and that they believe those rules had already been coded into LTS."

What is your view of Booz Allen Hamilton's assertions?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I am unfamiliar with the document that you are referring to and would very much appreciate a chance to look at it in some detail to deal with it in detail. But I will tell you it was a thoughtful analysis that went into the decision to reset and the approach for it.

We had concluded that we needed, as I said a second ago, a systems integrator to solve the problem of all the different things and the software development, as just witnessed by what we talked about. I repeatedly appeared before the Committee and in Members' offices explaining we did not understand what date we would ever be able to complete the software.

Repeatedly we came up short. The contractor was unable to identify how we would ever get this resolved and I was, quite frankly, embarrassed to sit in front of you in November of this Committee of last year and not be able to provide a date when it would be done. We were approaching the problem in the wrong way and we needed a reset, which is what we did, and we needed better expertise to help us, different expertise to help us with The MITRE Corporation and with the world-class systems integrator.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. All right. Very good.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. I would like to now recognize Chairwoman Lee for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the chair of Technology Modernization, I am looking at the implementation of IT systems across the VA; most notably, the largest implementation, the electronic health record modernization.

As I said in my opening, lack of governance is a common problem and I see stove piping happening where OIT has a piece and the VHA has a piece, yet, the program office is supposed to be the middleman between the two. But this isn't solving the problems longstanding at the VA like the technical debt, the outdated infrastructure, or change management among clinicians. There is also stove piping in the case of the Forever GI Bill implementation where both IT and VBA had a role, but no one seemed to be in charge.

Mr. Gfrerer, have the problems with implementation of the Forever GI Bill caused the VA to reevaluate its approach to system implementation?

Mr. GFRERER. Chairwoman, I will speak for myself and say that those experiences absolutely have informed the process. As we look at the lessons learned around Colmery, I can tell you I was just talking with my head of development and operations today and with Rob Orifici, our program manager, and he said we are absolutely pulling those lessons learned from how this team is working

together across VBA with the systems integrator, with MITRE, and with the vendor, with Accenture, and there are a lot of good lessons learned and shared. And going forward, we look to port those across to the other programs that you referenced.

Ms. LEE. That is good to hear. Thank you.

MITRE has made some recommendations regarding how program management should be structured, and I want to understand those recommendations a little bit better and how the VA is responding to them.

Dr. Schnitzer, you recommended that the VA establish this Colmery Act champion to serve as a chartered and empowered business leader across the VBA and OIT. What type of leader should fill this role?

Dr. SCHNITZER. Thank you for the question, Madam Chairwoman. I think the type of leader is somebody who accepts that responsibility and has the authority within the organization to work across all of the different components and be effective. The Under Secretary is a perfect example of such an individual.

Ms. LEE. Thank you.

Dr. Lawrence, you have designated a champion?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I am that person, ma'am.

Ms. LEE. You are?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. LEE. Okay. Do you believe—Dr. Schnitzer, you also recommended creating an end-to-end chief system integrator. What is the value of that role?

Dr. SCHNITZER. So, the integration part of the project addresses the problems that have been stated previously, which is working on one piece of software in isolation without understanding all the connections to it both, inputs and outputs, and the mutual dependencies won't solve the problem. So, having the contractor now as a systems integrator who is looking at all of that in a cross- functional way is essential for success, and that is a key difference for the program today, as opposed to prior to the recent.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. You also have a recommendation to create a lightweight governance counsel. I am a little—I would just like some clarification about "lightweight" and, also, can you explain how it should operate.

Dr. SCHNITZER. So, lightweight just refers to the minimum number of people on it that are necessary to get the job done so that it is not overly bureaucratic and so that scheduling meetings doesn't get overly complicated because you are trying to bring in too many people into each meeting.

And then the effectiveness is measured on how fast can issues that arise, as Dr. Lawrence mentioned, how fast can they be adjudicated and move on. And I would say that from our perspective, what we have seen in the past few months is that issues that previously could take weeks or even months are now being adjudicated and dealt with effectively in days and sometimes hours, and that is exactly the outcome desired.

Ms. LEE. Great. Thank you.

And I yield my time. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

I now recognize Mr. Meuser for 5 minutes.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to all of you. It is nice to see all of you again and, certainly, thank you for your service. I do have some experiences in implementation of informational technology systems, as well as with Accenture. I served as revenue secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue and we had an over-one-hundred-million-dollar contract with Accenture, so I have some experiences there, and I wanted to ask you about that contract some.

Is the contract based upon Accenture gets paid for the work accomplished, for the work that is performed, Dr. Lawrence?

Mr. LAWRENCE. So, by that, are you asking is it a time-and-materials contract?

Mr. MEUSER. Yeah, for accomplishing certain goals and implementation of the—and the integration that takes place, do they then get paid upon it being completed?

Mr. LAWRENCE. It is a fixed-price contract, so let's establish that part.

Mr. MEUSER. Okay.

Mr. LAWRENCE. And I am not exactly certain—again, I am not versed in the details of how they get paid—

Mr. MEUSER. All right.

Mr. LAWRENCE. —so, I am not—do you know, Rob?

Mr. ORIFICI. It is a firm fixed-price contract and it is outcome-based. So, they will be paid based off of their performance to meet the goals set forth to establish functionality to implement Colmery sections 107 and 501 for the—

Mr. MEUSER. Okay. Great. And have they set such timelines for you?

Mr. ORIFICI. We set up the initial timelines in terms of our goals in reaching December 1st, 2019. They have provided plans and they have provided their increments in order to arrive at the dates and give us adequate time to have the solution in place.

Mr. MEUSER. How have they done so far?

Mr. ORIFICI. They have been doing very well so far and they have been—brought the correct people to provide us with the solution needed.

Mr. MEUSER. And that was my next question. The best thing that they provide is their human resources and they can give you an ample amount. They can give you a higher amount, so as we are assured that we hit the deadlines or they can lag behind, which causes delays.

Where would you say you are as far as their human resources allocation?

Mr. ORIFICI. Thank you for that question. In terms of their resource's allocation, they have quickly brought, I would say, very senior people to bear on this effort. From day one, as soon as the contract was signed, they had resources onboard and were meeting with us to arrive towards a plan for getting us to a solution and they have surged very quickly, and we have been onboarding very fast in terms of having the right people to bear.

They have also brought people with former knowledge of the solution into play, and so we are looking very good in terms of their human resources allocation.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Sir, and if I might add, I meet weekly with the managing director from Accenture who worries about this contract and the broad VA portfolio. I have access to the chief operating officer of their Federal practice who gave me his card and phone number. I can call whenever if those things are not—I am attuned to your concerns on that.

Mr. MEUSER. Great, yes. I did have a very successful relationship with them. I will also add, though, the proverbial, squeaky wheel gets the grease, and I would also suggest don't hesitate to go to the top. I mean, this is obviously a high priority for them and a high priority for our government and our country.

Mr. MISSAL. Congressman, I can assure you Dr. Lawrence and I both were on the commercial side. We know those levers to press.

Mr. MEUSER. All right.

Mr. MISSAL. I wanted to reassure you on that.

Mr. MEUSER. Very good. And in my remaining time, Dr. Lawrence, Secretary Lawrence, the MITRE findings here, you mentioned about the accountability, so that is terrific. And these are not atypical findings, I wouldn't say, and they are also curable. So, secondly, where he mentioned the respective pieces were not—we are working independently, not working together, would you say that is something that you feel confident in bringing together?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes, absolutely. I mean, part of the conversation setting up the PIO was having an integrated team, standalone entity in our organization, enlisting the resources from OIT who are dedicated to working on this—not drawn in different directions—focused on this. We have 21 FTEs from OIT who work with us on this. It is clear focus about what they are doing. Other assignments have been reduced or eliminated and this is what we are working on.

From VBA, from the benefits, we have 10 people. This is their full-time job. This is what we do. So, it is a very clear focus. It is an integrated team. We spend a lot of time working together. We are in the VBA headquarters building. This is what they are doing.

Mr. MEUSER. Yes, so, all involved need to feel ownership, equal ownership, absolutely. That is very good to hear.

And, Chairman, I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Meuser.

I now recognize Mr. Pappas. He has stepping out. It is your turn.

Mr. PAPPAS. I will yield my time, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Terrific. Thank you, Mr. Pappas.

I will now recognize Ranking Member Banks for 5 minutes.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Schnitzer, I am very concerned about the VA's inability to test the software code that its contractors produce against all of the relevant IT systems. Of MITRE's 20 recommendations, the very last one that VA expects to implement is establishing common development and testing environments.

Do you agree with that under ideal conditions that this would be one of the first steps completed?

Dr. SCHNITZER. So, under ideal conditions, it could be one of the first steps completed. On the other hand, we live in the real world where some things depend on sequences and you can't change that, and this is one of those. So, there is no practical or physical way

to change the sequence presented before us today. So, it has to be number 20, and we have to do the best we can with that.

However, it can be mitigated. So, you are absolutely right, the integrated test doesn't occur until the very end, but individual tests along the way in other environments are occurring all the time, and that reduces the risk of the final test.

Mr. BANKS. Do you agree with that?

Dr. SCHNITZER. Agree with which?

Mr. BANKS. And how important is that—do you agree with what the gentleman just said and how important is that testing. I believe they call it regression testing.

Dr. SCHNITZER. Do I agree that—

Mr. BANKS. No, I am asking Mr. Missal.

Dr. SCHNITZER. Oh, I'm sorry.

Mr. MISSAL. We agree that the testing MITRE did is very, very important. We did not get into the technical side of this, given that MITRE had already done that. But we have seen similar issues with the testing in other systems that we looked and other reports that we have done, including one on VBMS and some other systems.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Congressman, if I might, one of the other challenges—

Mr. BANKS. I have got a lot of ground to cover. At some point, I will get to you, I promise.

But Dr. Schnitzer, MITRE performed a review of Booz Allen Hamilton's software code and found it to be generally high quality. Is that an accurate characterization?

Dr. SCHNITZER. Yes, it is.

Mr. BANKS. Okay. In our last Forever GI Bill hearing in November, the Booz Allen Hamilton witness insisted his company had delivered good software code based on VA's requirements. VA announced its intention to replace Booz Allen in less than a month later.

Given the fact that VA still does not have pre- production testing environments, can anyone say for sure whether Booz Allen's code would have worked, Doctor?

Dr. SCHNITZER. We have fairly good evidence that it would not have because of the lack of integration. So, even though it was good code, in the functional environment, it would not have succeeded, and we are very confident of that.

Mr. BANKS. Have you shared that evidence with the committee?

Dr. SCHNITZER. We have shared it with VA.

Mr. BANKS. But not with the committee? We request that you would share that with us, as well.

Dr. SCHNITZER. Okay.

Mr. BANKS. Okay. Mr. Gfrerer, Accenture is supposed to determine what of Booz Allen's software code it should reuse. How will they accomplish that and when?

Mr. GFRERER. Congressman, they have access to the code, as you have kind of established already. As was mentioned previously, the contract vehicle is on a firm, fixed price, and so there is ever incentive to use existing code where it would be supported.

So, that code is the property of the Government. Accenture has access to it. As they find that there is value in it, they may use it.

One of the challenges around that, though, is the user requirements and, you know, eliciting the right user requirements, which I believe in MITRE's ITA, they found as one of the problem areas. And so, it is really hard to reuse substantial amounts of code when they may have been coded for different user requirements.

Mr. BANKS. Okay. Under Secretary Lawrence, I believe VA learned lessons from last year and I think you now fully understand the task in front of you, but the situation is not any more favorable, in fact, it seems almost exactly the same and you have less time than what you had before.

Would you agree that if VA is able to implement MITRE's 10 remaining recommendations by the deadlines that you set, that that would give you just enough time to test Accenture's code, correct any problems, and implement the remainder of the law with minimal schedule cushion?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Generally, but I would push back on your word "just," sir. I think the answer that you have gotten before about how we are going to test en route is not just, but I think your point is a good one. The timeline is short, and we need to make sure that when we go into operation, it is tested and ready to go.

Mr. BANKS. Okay. Mr. Chairman, I yield back, and I reserve my following questions for the second round.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Banks.

I would now like to recognize Ms. Luria for 5 minutes.

Ms. LURIA. Thank you, and thank you for taking the time to update us on this today.

I want to follow up on Chairman Levin's question, because I am a little bit confused after that question. I recall that in November, Secretary Wilkie said that, "Once the VA is in a position to process education claims in accordance with the new law, each and every beneficiary will receive retroactively the exact benefits to which they are entitled under that law." So, you have echoed that, that they will be getting appropriate benefits. If they were overpaid, you won't be recouping the amount.

But what I gathered from Chairman Levin's question and your response is that there's really not a system that you are tracking. Do you fully understand the scope of it? Do you have a system to track the differential between what the students received and what they should have received and the amount that they are entitled to receive under the GI Bill? Do you know the total price tag of that, how many students it is, and who they are?

Ms. BOGUE. Thank you. So, that is a two-part question. So, first, there is section 501 of the law, which is dealing with the DoD rates, the cap rates. Once we flip the switch on December 1st, we will be able to know automatically how many students are impacted from an overpayment standpoint.

But for the second part of that, for the section 107 piece, as it relates to the monthly housing allowance of where the student spends the majority of their time, that will be dependent on the schools resubmitting enrollment documents. It won't be until all schools have recertified students back to August 1st of 2018, that

we will really know or realize the overpayments and underpayment situations associated with that.

Right now, we have asked schools to track students from August 1st of 2018 to tell us exactly who may be in the position of not attending the majority of their classes at the main location, and when it comes time, we will allow them to recertify those students after December 1st. But the first phase is—

Ms. LURIA. Really, December 1st is when you need the schools to give you data. So, December 1st is not when veterans, when our constituents can expect to actually have this fixed if they go online?

Ms. BOGUE. So, what will happen on December 1st when we flip the switch, two things will happen. The first piece will be the DoD rates will kick in; that will be the first piece. All spring 2020 terms will be made whole from that perspective. So, any enrollment that comes in for spring 2020, we process in accordance with the section 107 and 501 rules. The piece that we still need to work on, in coordination with schools, will be the piece of going back to correct records from August 1st of 2018 up to December 1st of 2019.

Ms. LURIA. Okay. So, just to summarize all of that, you don't actually know the scope of the problem yet?

Ms. BOGUE. We have a sense of the scope of the problem. We are actually working with schools right now. I will say that we are actually working with the top 10 largest GI Bill beneficiary schools to figure out how many records will they have to go back and correct come December 1st.

Ms. LURIA. Okay. Thank you.

Ms. BOGUE. So, we are building a plan right now.

Ms. LURIA. Okay. I don't want to repeat myself a third time, but you really don't have any idea of how many students this has affected at this point in time after the discussions we have had on this? But you are fully confident that by December 1st, that you are going to have it fixed?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I think you uncharitably described our situation in your first part of your question. We understand the number of students. We understand where they were enrolled. We understand what the consequences are. We just can't give you an exact number yet because we have to do the math and have to have the system set up.

We know exactly what is going to happen and when that happens, and Charmain tried to explain that. We will do the recomputations. We will go back and adjudicate and communicate as soon as we can. That is our intention to do that. We don't have the precise number right now because the different variables will have to be nailed down.

Ms. LURIA. And so, will that require interaction by a person, by a staff member of the VA with each student individually? And if so, do you have adequate staff to address that?

Ms. BOGUE. So, there is multiple parts. One, we will have to have interaction with the schools in order to recertify. Also, we will need to work with students to make sure they are educated about exactly what their benefits will look like, come spring 2020.

So, we know the schools are the front lines, so we are actually working with schools on a communications toolkit so that way, they

can be able to educate students about the exact calculations of what they should expect to receive when spring 2020 rolls around.

Ms. LURIA. Okay. Thank you.

I yield the remainder of my time.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Ms. Luria.

I now recognize Mr. Watkins for 5 minutes.

Mr. WATKINS. Thank you. The President's budget for fiscal year 2020 anticipates a drop in the number of direct employees processing education claims, but you are expecting—the budget also predicts an increase in the number of calls and claims. So, how will this $6.1 million decrease in the education services' account affect VA's ability to ensure timely response and payment to veterans?

Ms. BOGUE. So, there is no impact in terms of processing claims right now when it comes to our President's budget. I will say what we are looking at right now is the impacts of going back to correct all records for section 107, in particular, and the workload associated with that. And we are working with leadership in terms of what additional resources, if any, will be needed when it comes time to go back and correct records.

Mr. WATKINS. Thank you.

I yield back my time.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

I would now like to recognize Mr. Lamb for 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMB. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Under Secretary Lawrence or Ms. Bogue, whoever wants to answer this, I just want to confirm. I think this is clear, but if someone in my state of Pennsylvania is enrolled in Penn State, and let's just assume for the purposes of this question that the main campus at State College probably has higher allowances than Penn State Beaver, which is a satellite campus in my district. If they have been going to Penn State Beaver, but getting the State College rate in 2018 and 2019 before December 1st, are they going to be hit up for an overpayment when December 1st happens?

Ms. BOGUE. No, they will not. Anyone who, once we roll out the system, any overpayments will be written off by VA, because it is not the fault of the student.

Mr. LAMB. Thank you. I just wanted to make sure of that.

Do they know that? Has that been communicated to students?

Ms. BOGUE. We have direct communication in terms of, we have done email campaigns to students to let them know that when the time comes for December 1st, they will not be responsible for any overpayments associated with sections 107 and 501. And also when we flip the switch on December 1st and we start sending out letters to students about their new payments, we will have information in that particular letter that will state that they are not responsible for the overpayments as well.

Mr. LAMB. Thank you. That is very useful.

I think one of the things that, at least we heard the most about in my office when this happened last year, was, I mean, people were frustrated by the glitch, but they were even more frustrated, I think, by the lack of communication. Can you spell out for us maybe a little bit more concrete steps that you have taken to address that part of it.

Because, unfortunately, dealing with technology, this probably won't be the last time this happens in some way, so how has the VA addressed the ability to communicate in these unexpected situations?

Ms. BOGUE. Thank you for that question. So, I will state that we have done several things since the past fall. And one thing is we have done, like I said, email campaigns to students, but also we have set up veteran webinars for students, as well, so that way they can join in and we can talk about what is coming down the pike, and we will continue that dialogue.

Also, we understand schools are the front lines, so we are trying to make sure that schools have the necessary information to educate students earlier in the process versus waiting until after December 1st for students to figure out what is going to happen in the spring.

So, we are trying different modes in terms of communication with students between the email campaign, between the letters that we send out, as well as the veteran webinars, as well as social media to educate students about the changes that are coming down the pike.

The other piece that I would add is that we have the GI Bill comparison tool. That tool is a very useful tool. It actually displays schools, VA-approved schools on that tool and it actually has a GI Bill calculator on that tool. Students can actually enter in the location, the actual locations of the campus they are attending, and they will actually see the rate that they would receive in the spring of 2020 now.

Mr. LAMB. Excellent. Thank you for that.

And I know Dr. Lawrence, you mentioned that you are doing some traveling to try to get the word out, too. I am thrilled to hear that you are coming to Pittsburgh. So, please let our office know if we can be of assistance in attracting folks there.

I also just wanted to remind you that at our last hearing together, we had talked a little bit about training for claims adjudicators on the appeals modernization and my office sent you a letter on April 12th, so just coming up on a month ago with some pretty specific questions about the AMA implementation training and how it affected our claims adjudicators back home. So, I just wanted to remind you of that, and we will be expecting a response when you can provide one.

Mr. LAWRENCE. I appreciate that. And just so you know, I went back and talked to the RO leader in Pittsburgh about your exchange that we had and the information around the training. So, I will look in onto the letter, too.

Mr. LAMB. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Lamb.

I now recognize Mr. Bergman for 5 minutes.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thanks to all of you for being here.

We know that what you deal with is not just simple math or easy. There is a lot of everything from changing technology to bureaucratic tools that are in place that may or may not be as effi-

cient as we would like them to be when we are making our decisions.

Dr. Lawrence or Mr. Gfrerer, I have a question about the Accenture contract documents that VA provided to the committee. Four companies provided—they submitted proposals. Accenture's proposal was initially rated "susceptible to being made acceptable." VA allowed all four companies to revise their proposals to correct any weaknesses and shortcomings in those proposals and each of the companies did.

In the second round evaluation, Accenture's rating went up to "outstanding" while no other company's rating changed. VA awarded the contract to Accenture, despite it proposing the highest price, which was a jump up from the original pricing; in fact, two of the companies pretty much stayed at the same pricing. One of the other companies bumped up a little bit, but Accenture had the largest increase. But anyway, Accenture, despite it proposing the highest price and having the worst past-performance rating was awarded the contract.

Can you offer any explanation as to exactly what happened there with Accenture being the only one to make the big jump when I am guessing all four of the companies had the opportunity to upgrade their proposals?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. Mr. Gfrerer and I served as technical advisors to the evaluation process. We were in no decision-making role; merely, to be informed. We had two interactions with the acquisition-decision authority, if you will—the group who was running the process you just described.

The first interaction was when they shared with us the scores for four companies, four entities—these were blacked out—we knew them as A, B, C, D, and they revealed the scoring, which as you indicated, that some were at a certain level—some we are at a certain level. Their recommendation to us was that we engage in a round of questions and answers with everybody to provide them a chance to fix the proposal shortcomings they had. It was a recommendation to us. They said, this is what we would normally do, and do you have any questions? It was not a decision for us to make. It was simply a recommendation of what they were going to do in the next step, and they informed us.

They said it will take some more time, but this is what we would normally do in an acquisition of this thing. So, we said, sure. We don't have a decision. We understand. We appreciate you telling us what it will do for the timeline we are under if we do that.

What is likely to happen, we asked: Some will improve; some will not; some will change their price. Exactly what you described happened.

Mr. BERGMAN. Uniquely, the—and I don't know what the relative norm here is—but let's say in this case, okay, there could be an increase in price, but over 10 percent? What kind of things change in that upgraded proposal, again, that made them stand out as outstanding?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Sure.

Mr. BERGMAN. It is just interesting.

Mr. LAWRENCE. So, I understand your question. Neither Mr. Gfrerer nor I will be able to answer that. We were not privy to the information. We were privy to the scores at the end. I can't recall—

Mr. BERGMAN. So, should we either convene a hearing for the folks who made the decision or how do we find out? Again, my Marine Corps background, military background as a commander tends to—I look into the decision-making process to make sure that we are using criteria across the board that does not either, accidentally or on purpose, play any type of what could potentially be construed as favoritism.

Mr. LAWRENCE. No, I don't think that existed in this process. What the criteria was, and it was stated in the request for information, as well as the request for proposal, it heavily weighted the technical solution. So, at the end of the question-and-answer period, the total compilation of the score of the winner, in this case, Accenture, was greater than the scores of the other.

I forget the details exactly—but perhaps this is in the documents that you have—their technical part of their score had increased so much more that it offset, I believe, their lower past-performance score that you made reference to. The net of it was, using the criteria the acquisition people ran, their score was greater than the others, hence the award.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Thank you.

And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Bergman.

I would now like to recognize the Ranking Member of the Veterans Affairs Committee, Dr. Roe, for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Last—first of all, I would like to thank the panel for being here and, Dr. Lawrence, thank you for the work on the board. I think the appeals modernization is going pretty well from what I hear, and the way I can figure that out is if I don't hear anything, that is probably a good thing.

So, last August, I was up in Springfield, Illinois, with Congressman Davis and we were rolling out the GI Bill and we had a group of educators around and at that point in time, we thought that it was going to be able to roll out and all the glitches at the—and we know the history of that—and, obviously, it didn't.

And I met with the VBA team and the OIT team, along with you in my office on the 13th of September of last year, and where you thought the system would be ready to go in a matter of weeks and—that was your conclusion at that point. I guess your team had told you that in a few weeks you thought that would be up and running.

But that is correct, I think, isn't it?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I think at that time you were frustrated with me because I said I didn't know, but I might know in a few weeks.

Mr. ROE. Okay. Well, let me ask—anyway, so we are on the same page there.

The VA commissioned MITRE to do the independent technical assessment on the 28th of September. Did you think that you had a serious problem when you met with me or not and did something happen in between that two weeks that made you realize that?

Mr. LAWRENCE. I think part of what we experienced was a sense of not knowing the scope of the problem and, hence, the desire to have MITRE bring expertise to better understand it. I know it is always frustrating to sit in front of folks doing oversight wanting to know exactly what is going to—and not know. Getting MITRE involved was to better appreciate the situation so that we could describe to you some facts, rather than some unknowns and senses.

Mr. ROE. I think at the end of the day—and we are obviously in an important year, because we understand that the target date of full implementation is 1 December of this year. That is only 7 months away.

What will be a good milestone to indicate that we are going to meet that deadline? Because I think there are a lot of people when young men and women enroll in college for the fall semester, obviously, they are still enrolling under the old system. So, when they start the spring of 2020, can we same with some surety now? We are not that far away.

Ms. BOGUE. So, we actually have two releases. So, we have built one, and we are working towards build one right now, for the solution that is supposed to be put in place for December. Testing for that first build will be completed in the June timeframe.

Then, there will be a second build. After the second build, we will test a little bit—finish testing in the October timeframe and then we will have a good sense early October, whether that is ready for prime time for December 1st.

We wanted to make sure that we built in enough cushion so that way, one, we can start really pushing out communications to students after the 1st of October and then, two, so that we could train schools on the new process for certification.

Mr. ROE. So, next month, there is one build out that will be done and then in October, there will be a build?

Mr. Chairman, if we could, I would love to have the Subcommittee follow up on that, because we certainly don't want a January 15th, when most of the young folks go back to school, hiccup, and it is not working. If we could have another hearing or something, I would really appreciate it.

And Dr. Lawrence, can you provide us an update on the VTEC and TEC program?

Ms. BOGUE. So, thank you for that question. So, we are happy to report that early February, we actually went live with our VET TEC Web site, as well as our training provider application. Since that time, we have had over 30 training providers come in and apply for that program.

We have approved 4 programs to date and the other 4—we have denied another 4 programs. The reason for those denials are usually because they don't meet the 2-year requirement to have a program in existence for two years.

The other piece of that, the other applications that are remaining applications, they are in the works. They have submitted an application, but it was an incomplete application, so we are trying to work with those training providers to finalize that other piece.

Then, a couple of weeks ago, about 3 weeks ago, we actually did a soft launch of the veteran application. From that soft launch, we had 300 veterans apply. We worked out some kinks on the applica-

tion. We did a live launch, actually, last week on the veteran application, and since going with the live launch last week, we actually had over 1,100 veterans apply for that program. So, that is where we are right now with VET TEC.

Mr. ROE. So, it is moving pretty rapidly then?

Ms. BOGUE. It has moved pretty rapidly, yes.

Mr. ROE. Eleven hundred applications for how many slots?

Ms. BOGUE. So, we don't know exact slots. We know the dollars that are allocated per year, and based off the dollars allocated per year, we are estimating, based off the cost of some of these programs, somewhere between 800 to 1,100 veterans could potentially participate in this program per year.

Mr. ROE. So, literally, we have already had—I will yield back in a second—we actually had more people apply than we have money to provide for the slots?

Ms. BOGUE. Potentially.

Mr. ROE. Potentially, okay.

Ms. BOGUE. Potentially. One thing we noticed that some of those folks who actually applied for the program, their particular program that they applied for is not approved, so we are reaching out back to those training providers to state, Hey, this veteran is actually interested in participating in your program under VET TEC, so we would love for you guys to come in and be a training provider under the VET TEC program and to tell them through the application process.

Mr. ROE. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Dr. Roe. And I would be happy to discuss and accommodate that request. I think it is a good idea to do another hearing and we can have our Committee staff work with your staff to make that happen.

We do have time for a few more questions if that is all right with your witnesses. I know a few of us have a few more questions.

Under secretary—and I would like to recognize myself first for 5 minutes—Under Secretary Lawrence, I wanted to go back to your answer to Ms. Luria, where I think if I heard right, you said that you knew how many veterans were impacted by some of the IT issues, but you wouldn't specify how many. You wouldn't give us a number. I was wondering if you could help us square your statement.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Sure. I think what I took away from the intent of her question was a sense of us not knowing exactly. So, what I tried to clarify is we do know the universe of veterans. We do know what happened. We do know what we intend to do.

The precision around it, we still have to work out, as Charmain was trying to explain. First, we roll into effect December 1st, then we get the schools to do the information. So, I just wanted to make sure we were communicating exactly what we are doing, because I want to leave the impression that we have a plan to have a plan. We intend to brief you on it. We intend to describe it and we intend to communicate with the students so they understand exactly how it is going to be paid to them or written off. So, I just wanted to make sure that we are clear on that.

Mr. LEVIN. But you don't know how many, specifically? You know the overall universe, obviously, but you don't know how many specifically were underpaid?

Mr. LAWRENCE. That's correct. That is where when we have the things on December 1st going, then we will know.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. Regarding the Accenture contract, what specific milestones have you set for them and how are you going to assess whether those milestones are met?

Mr. ORIFICI. Sir, thank you for that question. Our initial milestones, as Charmain stated earlier, we have broken their deliverable into two separate builds. The first one, which we are starting testing in June, and so, we will be doing testing around that, and we will evaluate that, based off the testing results from that release.

The second part of that build is slated for October 1st, or the first week in October, and we are looking at starting testing in September and we will then evaluate those test results against the requirements of the contract and then we will work with them to determine whether they have completely fulfilled those requirements.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

Mr. Missal, and, Dr. Schnitzer, I wanted to turn to you. As you both know, the Forever GI Bill became public law August 2017. Directed VA to implement the provisions by August 2018. VA was aware of the bill and its provisions prior to its passage. It had nearly a full year after passage to provide updates, request clarifications, extensions, and ultimately implement those provisions. Few of those things happened, however, and those that did were long after the VA repeatedly missed deadlines, as had been promised.

Mr. Missal and Dr. Schnitzer, to both of you, in the future, what should be some appropriate milestones for VA to check in with Congress and report progress on their projects so that this doesn't happen again?

Mr. MISSAL. I don't think there can be enough communications to make sure that expectations are met. In our issue statement, what we did is we put together a chronology of events and one of the things that we identified, there didn't seem to be the sense of urgency to get the project off the ground. It took many months before they really got to the point where they are doing the kind of work that you would expect early on.

And I think what we have seen in other situations, the communication and the expectation of when they can get something done is sometimes not realistic. And I think in all these situations, lessons should be learned, and hopefully going forward, it will be better.

Mr. LEVIN. Any follow-up on that?

Dr. SCHNITZER. Yes, sir. Thank you for the question. I would agree with that, but I would add, also, that I think it is important to pay attention to the critical path of one of these complicated projects and identify all the items that are in the critical path to success, know what that is up front, have that broadly communicated, have the right governance, and then have a systems-integrated approach to it, rather than silos.

Mr. LEVIN. And my last question for the inspector general, during the opening statements, there were a couple of comments that sort of downplayed this, made it sound like, Well, you know, these are big things to implement. These things happen, kind of a normal course, ordinary course.

Do you agree with those characterizations?

Mr. MISSAL. We agree that any time they are doing a system implementation, particularly on something as significant as this, they need to make sure that they are properly planning, they have the resources, they have the expertise, significantly, that they communicate. Because one of the concerns that we have is when you bring in a number of different organizations involved that may not have worked together well, you are naturally going to have communication issues. You have to make sure everybody is on the same page.

What we found here is that they were essentially talking different languages, because you had OIT, you had VBA, you had a contractor, and they weren't all on the same page. So, in all of the system integration they are doing—and VA has a number of significant systems that they are involved in—you need to have all of those going forward.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. I appreciate that.

And I would now like to recognize Mr. Banks for another 5 minutes.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Schnitzer, your independent technical assessment highlighted the inherent difficulties of VA's IT system environment, the constant changing requirements, and lack of organization. In your opinion, could any contractor have succeeded in implementing sections 107 and 501 last year?

Dr. SCHNITZER. So, the short answer is I don't know, and I have no way of knowing, because we weren't involved at that point and don't have all the evidence from that period of time. But I will say that in general, if the requirements are understood to be merely writing code and not doing a systems-integration approach to a problem like this, then nobody will succeed. And that is the shared lesson that I think we need to bring forward, not just for this program, but for all existing and future programs at VA.

Mr. BANKS. Mr. Missal, do you have any follow-on advice on that?

Mr. MISSAL. I think it, again, goes back to trying to be realistic about when you think you can really deliver something, and that, again, dealing with it with a sense of urgency right up front, making sure that you have the right expertise, and if there are doubts, making sure those doubts are expressed so that you don't have a situation where there is a surprise at the end.

Mr. BANKS. Okay. Mr. Gfrerer, did the U.S. Digital Service or VA Digital Service conduct any analysis of the Forever GI Bill implementation and for so, when did this happen and was there a report submitted?

Mr. GFRERER. Congressman, I am not aware of any Digital Service interaction to the type that you specify. I would have to—given that it was likely if it occurred it was before my arrival 4 months ago; I would have to defer to my business partners if they have any knowledge of that.

Mr. LAWRENCE. I don't know of any.

Ms. BOGUE. No, we don't. There was not one done by Digital Service.

Mr. BANKS. Great. That is all I have. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

I now recognize Chairwoman Lee for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEE. Dr. Lawrence, I would like to ask you just a few questions about the Accenture contract. First of all, under the contract, Accenture is required to provide bi- weekly reports to the VA. Can this Committee receive those reports?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. LEE. Okay. Can we receive any already-produced, as well as into the future?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Yes.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. Secondly, the contract language states that the base period of the contract is February 2019 to February 2020 and there is a one-year option from February 2020 to February 2021; however, the contract also states that the ultimate completion date is May 4th, 2021.

How do these dates track with the VA's statement that the system is the going to be operational and then what activities are contemplated during those optional periods?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Sure. The system will be operational refers to December 1st of 2019. So, that is the first year covered by this. The two-year contract had sort of the following vision: first year, get Colmery 107, 501 going; second year, modernize some of the systems problems you have heard described. Theoretically, the vision was you would now be familiar with what is going on, some of the piece parts, and that we could have a different approach, much more of a world-class financial institution, and that is what will take place in the second year.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. Mr. Gfrerer, I am just sort of coming at this looking at, first of all, I can tell by the men and women you have here, and knowing there are many men and women in the VA who are working very hard trying to make sure we are delivering these benefits to our veterans, and I thank them all for their service. I feel like we get caught in this hamster wheel. We have well-intending Congresspeople like ourselves who pass legislation asking for benefits for veterans. You know, we require the VA to implement it resulting in legacy systems, one placed on top of the other. So, while you are trying to still implement a legacy system from before, we layer something in on top of you. So, certainly, I can understand the problems that we encounter.

One question I have is, does OIT have an inventory of all the legacy systems?

Mr. GFRERER. Yes, Congresswoman, we do.

Ms. LEE. Would you be able to provide us with a list of them, their function, and who in the VA is responsible for them?

Mr. GFRERER. Yes.

Ms. LEE. Okay. Great. Thank you very much.

And I yield my time.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Chairwoman Lee.

I now recognize our Ranking Member, Dr. Roe for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just a couple of very quick questions. We know the target date is 1 December of this year, and maybe you answered the question, but what would be a good milestone so that we know that you are going to make that deadline? Is that the October standup? Is that when we are really going to know, just a month before?

Ms. BOGUE. The October deadline is when we will know if we are ready for deployment for December 1st.

Mr. ROE. And if we are not ready, then what happens in January of 2020?

Mr. LAWRENCE. So, if we are not ready, well, first, we will be communicating with you directly. As you know, we brief your team monthly on what is going on, and we have very sensitive to this issue, so certainly there would be no surprise. If we are not ready, we are going to have a plan to be ready, but at a minimum, students will continue to be paid under the rates we are using now so that he we don't have the problem that we had in the fall of 2018. So, everyone will be continued to be paid. We will get the system ready, and then we will go back.

Mr. ROE. And they will still hold harmless, still?

Mr. LAWRENCE. Absolutely.

Mr. ROE. Okay. One other quick question and I will be done, and this is for Dr. Lawrence, if I can find it here. Here we go. Outside of the IT modifications, what do you see as the biggest challenge that could impact full implementation by 1 December?

Mr. LAWRENCE. This is probably unfair, because I don't mean it to sound like—our interactions with the schools and the veterans is very, very important, so we depend on the schools to get us information. So, we don't want veterans calling up and saying, I haven't been paid, and come to find out that the schools didn't send us the right thing. That would be unfortunate. So, we are trying real hard to make sure that all the people who are involved in the process of getting students enrolled and paid are dealt with and we are communicating.

That is our issue, to communicate, teach, train, and inform, but that is what we worry about, that if that doesn't happen at the end, all the things we will have done successfully and right, won't have happened and nobody will know that unless they get paid.

Mr. ROE. You know, I know the veteran won't. They have got a payment at the end of the month. They have got a light bill or, you know, their rent is done or whatever. So, they are very much needing that money. The colleges get paid on time. They have a little more cushion, obviously, to take the student, whereas, it is more acute for the student who has a bill at the end of the month.

So, are they pushing you, the colleges pushing you to get their money? Are they not getting it on time or are they getting it on time? I don't know.

Ms. BOGUE. So, there is no impact to the tuition-and-fee piece of this. They are receiving their funds on time for the colleges.

I will say the important piece with the schools is basically making sure that we have accounted for all branch and satellite locations so that way, when it is time to flip the switch, that we are able to quickly pay students. So, we are working closely with schools right now to make sure that we are accounting for all of

their locations where a student could potentially be residing at and taking the majority of their courses so that we can pay them on time when it comes December 1st.

Mr. ROE. And just out of curiosity, how many schools are you all dealing with? How many separate institutions are you all having to deal with?

Ms. BOGUE. There are over 14,000 VA-approved schools.

Mr. ROE. Fourteen thousand?

Ms. BOGUE. Correct.

Mr. ROE. Wow. Okay. Thank you I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

If there are no further questions, we can begin to bring this hearing to a close. I want to thank Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Members Bilirakis and Banks, and of course Dr. Roe, our Subcommittee Members, and our expert witnesses who joined us today to testify.

While things haven't gone smoothly with the Forever GI Bill implementation, it is important to remember that we all share the same goal, as has been said many times, and that is to provide veterans with the benefits that they have earned. That is why we are here.

One of the things that we learned is that in the last 18 months of implementation, that we have to take control of this process, define targets along the way to prevent the same mishaps from happening again. I am encouraged to the extent that I have heard that that is occurring.

I am also encouraged to hear the Under Secretary reiterate the comments of Ms. Devlin that you are 100 percent certain, 10 out of 10, that these issues will be rectified by the end of the year. We will be following up to make sure that that is the case.

I welcome Dr. Roe's suggestion of another hearing on this matter and we will be following up, if we believe that to be appropriate.

And my staff, along with the committee, will be reviewing the Accenture contract, which I have heard is quite voluminous, several thousands of pages, and will undoubtedly have more questions as we read that contract and as our staff digs into this for you, our witnesses.

So, I hope that the Department, along with the inspector general and MITRE will remain responsive to us and available to us and I am very grateful for that.

With that, I will say that all members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and to include additional materials.

Again, I thank everyone for coming, and, without objection, the Subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:38 a.m., the Subcommittees were adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statement of Dr. Paul R. Lawrence

Good afternoon Chairman Levin, Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Members Bilirakis and Banks, and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the status of VA's implementation of the provisions in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (Colmery Act) or, as it is more commonly referred to, the Forever GI Bill. My testimony will address the re-setting implementation of sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill; the establishment of a program integration office; and contractor support in the areas of program integration, systems implementation, software development, and communication efforts. Accompanying me today are James Gfrerer, Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology and Chief Information Officer; Charmain Bogue, Acting Executive Director of Education Service, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA); and Rob Orifici, Information Technology (IT) Specialist, Office of Information and Technology (OIT).

Forever GI Bill "Reset"

On November 28, 2018, VA announced key changes in the implementation of sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act. These sections dealt primarily with the calculation and processing of housing payments under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Because of the information technology difficulties VA experienced with implementing sections 107 and 501, Secretary Wilkie announced a reset of VA's implementation efforts, to give the Department the time, contracting support, and resources necessary to develop the capability to process enrollments, in accordance with the law, by December 2019.

In the interim, VA will pay monthly housing allowance rates for the Post-9/11

GI Bill at the current academic year uncapped Department of Defense (DoD) Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) rates. For many students, this DoD BAH rate will be equal to or higher than the rate they are due under law. VA will also retroactively correct any underpayments resulting from sections 107 and 501 implementation problems. If a student was overpaid due to the change in law or because of VA's challenges in implementing the law, VA will notify impacted students individually with the amount VA intends to waive. Concurrently, VA will review the debt to ensure it was incurred solely based on implementation of sections 107 and 501. Upon confirmation, VA will notify the student of the completed waiver. In this process, VA does not require anything additional from the impacted student. . For the 2018 academic year and Fall 2019, VA will continue to pay housing allowances based on the location of a school's main or branch campus, rather than the physical location where a student attends the majority of classes. This interim policy will terminate by December 1, 2019, upon implementation of a fully developed IT solution for sections 107 and 501 of the law.

The Secretary took three actions to ensure the successful implementation of these two provisions of the Forever GI Bill. First, he appointed me as the single person responsible and accountable for overseeing implementation of the Colmery Act. Second, he directed VA's Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction to provide acquisition support in the areas of contracting, program integration, systems implementation, and software development. Third, he directed OIT, and any other offices required to support this effort, to ensure that adequate staffing, funding, and/or other necessary resources are provided.

Independent Technical Assessment

In November 2018, OIT chartered MITRE to perform an Independent Technical Assessment (ITA) of the capabilities necessary to meet the requirements of the Colmery Act. The ITA focused on identifying issues related to the delayed delivery

of updates of the Long-Term Solution (LTS) information system and recommending resolution to the issues associated with completing and deploying the required system updates. MITRE provided 20 recommendations intended to help OIT ensure that adjustments to LTS are successfully tested and deployed in the near future. VA completed 10 of the 20 recommendations prior to April 30, 2019. For example, VA identified and designated a Colmery Act Champion and established an End-to-End Chief Systems Integrator. These defined leadership positions provide more effective collaboration and integration efforts within and across VBA and OIT to support Colmery Act systems and processes, which increases the probability of successfully developing and deploying Colmery Act systems that meet cost, schedule, and performance requirements and constraints. VA also established an end-to-end requirements process, and requirements lead, for the Colmery Act that encompasses requirements for all systems involved in processing education claims. An additional 9 recommendations will be completed by June 30, 2019, and the remaining recommendation, which requires VA to establish common development and test environments and processes, will be completed by September 30, 2019. The approximate cost to conduct the Forever GI Bill ITA was $232,000. This effort included data collection (e.g., interviews of stakeholders and contractors); document reviews, assessment, recommendations, status briefings to the VA final report, accompanying briefing; and post report questions and answers (Q&A) with VA.

While MITRE fulfilled its initial contractual obligation by delivering the ITA on November 30, 2018, OIT has contracted MITRE to fulfill the recommendations set forth in the ITA as they pertain to the Colmery Act Program Integration Office (PIO). The value of the MITRE contract, Colmery Act PIO, to address the recommendations from the FGIB ITA is $5.2 million.

Program Integration Office

In preparation for the arrival of the Software Development and Systems Integration vendor, VA formally established the PIO as a formal entity within the Department with assigned and/or aligned Government leaders, staff, Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) support, and contract support. The PIO also completed the refinement and finalization of a comprehensive set of the user stories capturing the business requirements for sections 107 and 501, developed a draft integrated master schedule, is managing a program risk register, and has rebooted the configuration control process.

The PIO is led by the Assistant Director, Modernization and Process Improvement, Office of Business Process Integration. The Colmery Program Executive Officer, Education Service, and the Program Manager, Education, Claims Processing, Integration, and Consolidation (ECPIC), OIT are part of the PIO leadership team. The Colmery Program Executive Officer serves as the Product Owner for the Colmery Act "solution" and the Program Manager, ECPIC serves in the capacity of the IT Portfolio Director and the receiving organization representative, per the Veteran-focused Integration Process in use for OIT projects. The Colmery Program Executive Officer and the Program Manager, ECPIC will act together to define and approve the requirements for the Colmery solution, define the Minimum Viable Product required to meet program objectives, and accept the resulting solution.

In addition, VA established a program governance structure, which is supported by the MITRE Corporation, to serve as the decision authority for definition and enforcement of norms for executing program activities, and approval or disapproval of lifecycle processes, control gates, activities, funding, acquisitions, resources, and systems required to achieve successful implementation. MITRE also coordinates functional, technical, and programmatic activities, capturing associated risks with these activities, and developing mitigation plans and strategies to ensure VA is on schedule to meet the December 1, 2019, implementation date. This includes making recommendations on these activities and maintaining governance structures along with a change control board to allow for informed and structured decision-making.

Contract Support

VA paid approximately $3.9 million to Booz Allen Hamilton under a prior support contract in the second quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 for their efforts toward implementing sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act. Booz Allen Hamilton also received additional funding for other work efforts associated with implementing section 112 of the Colmery Act, which removes the time limitation for the use of entitlement for certain individuals under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Direct support costs for section 112 amounted to approximately $648,000, while indirect costs in support of other activities totaled approximately $6.5 million.

Booz Allen Hamilton's support efforts resulted in the development and delivery of software to enhance the LTS to meet VA's initial definitions of sections 107 and 501.

On February 15, 2019, VA awarded a new contract to Accenture Federal Services (AFS) to provide systems integration support to coordinate planning, development, and integrated testing of all systems associated with Colmery Act implementation. The approximate value of AFS' contract is $14 million for FY 2019, based solely on the work related to sections 107 and 501. The scope of AFS' contract includes development of new software, interfaces with legacy systems, systems architecture, and testing. VA awarded this contract in less than 75 days. Representatives from AFS and VA started working on implementation efforts the same day this new support contract was awarded, and contractor onboarding is near completion. AFS analyzed the code delivered by Booz Allen Hamilton against the sections 107 and 501 requirements and concluded it will not be used as a starting point for AFS' own developmental efforts due to definition changes under these sections. AFS, however, will evaluate the available code delivered by Booz Allen Hamilton to determine if any portions of it can be reused within AFS' own development process under its support contract. In addition to work conducted on the Long Term Solution, AFS has also started development and integration efforts on the Web Enabled Approval Management System and VA Online Certification of Enrollment systems which are critical components of the Colmery Implementation, but were not part of the Booze Allen Hamilton scope of work.

Claims Processing

Education claims processing times vary throughout the year due to multiple factors, including fall and spring peak enrollment periods and IT issues that may affect production. For the Fall 2018 term, VA experienced a higher than usual pending inventory count, which resulted in increased processing times. This was caused by the delayed implementation of the IT solution for sections 107 and 501, the fall peak enrollment period, and IT latency issues.

In consideration of the expected deployment of the IT solution for Sections 107 and 501, VA notified schools in early April 2018 to suspend submitting claims where the potential existed that a student was attending classes in multiple locations. This direction was intended to lessen the burden on schools of the requirement to re-submit enrollment certifications for impacted students after the IT deployment. VA communicated that it would continue to accept claims when a student was attending all of their classes at the school's main campus.

On July 17, 2018, VA notified schools that the IT solution was not ready, and advised them to submit all claims for processing. Following the July 17 notice, VA experienced a large increase in submitted claims that would have normally been received and processed over six months.

On September 14, 2018, Education Service reached its highest pending inventory since 2012. I am pleased to report that our pending claims went from a high of 200,000 claims to the lowest it has been in months to under 100,000 claims.

- Pending Claims: As of April 19, 2019, our pending inventory is currently 72,176 claims with an Average Days Pending of 16.4 days for original claims, and 10.1 days for supplemental claims.
- Completed Claims: As shown in the following table, we are currently exceeding both timeliness targets of 28 days for original claims and 14 days for supplemental claims for the month of April.

Average Days to Complete	**April 2019**	**Timeliness Target**
Original Claims	25.2 days	28.0 days
Supplemental Claims	13.9 days	14.0 days

In addition, we updated the monthly housing rates for Fall 2018 and processed over 450,000 corrections by the end of January. We are on track to meet or exceed our fiscal year targets of 28 and 14 days for processing original and supplemental claims, respectively.

On March 11, 2019, Education Service began to centralize Work-Study processing activities to the Muskogee Regional Processing Office (RPO). The decision to cen-

tralize Work-Study processing was made based on the findings of an internal review and an external study of the program. Centralization will improve consistency and timeliness for these claims, provide better customer service experiences for the beneficiary, and reduce administrative costs. This initiative will have an immediate positive impact on participants in the Work-Study program and will have minimal impact to the employees at the Buffalo and St. Louis RPOs who will no longer be processing Work-Study claims.

Muskogee Latency Issue

On November 14, 2018, VA testified at a hearing with this Committee regarding the significant latency issues that impacted operations for weeks during the Fall 2018 term. The impact at the RPOs were so severe that increased bandwidth was deployed initially to Muskogee, and later to the St. Louis and Buffalo RPOs. The increased bandwidth at the Muskogee RPO, by upgrading a circuit, resulted in increased capacity by nearly 50 percent. To further address the latency issue at Muskogee, VA replaced over 500 user workstations to resolve issues with outdated network card drivers. VA also updated application certificates to fix a capture issue associated with The Image Management System. In addition, the Benefits Delivery Network System performance was improved at Muskogee by deploying a patch to 1,887 workstations. The latency issues reported at Muskogee and the other RPOs have been resolved.

Stakeholders

VA has undertaken numerous initiatives to better serve and inform our stakeholders. VA increased efforts to more widely disseminate information, and to improve the quality of information communicated. We have begun holding monthly roundtable discussions with schools, Veterans Service Organizations, State Approving Agencies, and other stakeholders to keep our partners aware of our development progress, implement their suggestions, plan for any concerns they may have, and to help us communicate the upcoming changes. Each session will include different stakeholder representatives (for example, our first session invited the top 25 GI Bill schools). All stakeholders will receive follow up emails with notes and Q&As.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

Michael J. Missal

Mr. Chairman, Madam Chair, Ranking Member Bilirakis, Ranking Member Banks, and members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Office of Inspector General's (OIG's) recent Issue Statement, Forever GI Bill: Early Implementation Challenges.[1] My statement will focus on the information collected to respond to concerns from members of Congress and the public about the implementation of the Forever GI Bill requirements. It underscores the challenges VA continues to face in developing the information technology (IT) systems needed to effectively carry out its mission.

The OIG conducts oversight of VA programs and operations through independent audits, inspections, reviews, and investigations. Our oversight of the programs and operations of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has identified a lack of effective program leadership and inadequate IT functionality as two recurring themes.[2] These deficiencies have negatively affected current programs and the implementation of new policies and initiatives, resulting in the inefficient delivery of services and inaccurate benefits provided to veterans. The OIG reported that these same issues negatively impacted VA's efforts to implement the Forever GI Bill requirements.

BACKGROUND

VBA is responsible for delivering approximately $100 billion in federally authorized benefits and services-including education benefits-to eligible veterans, their dependents, and survivors. The Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance

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[1] Forever GI Bill: Early Implementation Challenges, March 20, 2019.

[2] Other themes include deficient control activities and failures to plan for the unintended impact of the national work queue. See the Inspector General's statement from the November 29, 2018, hearing before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, at https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/statements/VAOIG-statement-20181129-missal.pdf

Act of 2017 (Public Law 115–48), also known as the Forever GI Bill, became law on August 17, 2017, and expanded education benefits for veterans, servicemembers, families, and survivors. Among the Act's provisions is elimination of the deadline to use benefits within 15 years for certain beneficiaries, and changes to the formula for providing a monthly housing allowance.

In November 2018, VBA acknowledged implementation challenges with two key requirements of the Forever GI Bill related to the housing allowance (sections 107 and 501). The effective date of section 501 was January 1, 2018, while the effective date for section 107 was August 1, 2018. These two sections fundamentally redesign how VBA pays monthly housing allowances to veterans using the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program, including changing the base for the calculation of monthly housing stipends to the location of the campus where the student attends most classes, instead of the location of the main campus of the institution. VA's failure to properly implement these requirements led to the delivery of inaccurate and/or delayed housing stipend payments to eligible GI Bill recipients.

During the fall of 2018, the OIG received multiple congressional requests to review VA's actions to implement the housing allowance provisions and to investigate allegations that VA planned to withhold retroactive payments for missed or underpaid monthly housing stipends for students under the Forever GI Bill. In response to these congressional requests, an OIG team began reviewing VA's implementation of the Forever GI Bill requirements. During this review, Congress passed the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act (Public Law 115–422, January 3, 2019) mandating that VA report to Congress within 90 days on its plan to fully implement sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill.

FOREVER GI BILL ISSUE STATEMENT

Given the seriousness of concerns raised in congressional requests and the impact of delayed or incorrect payments on veterans, the OIG examined VA's early implementation actions and the impediments to meeting Forever GI Bill implementation mandates. The review team created a timeline of significant events, which is attached as an appendix to this statement.

The OIG found that VBA's implementation of the payment of the housing allowances under the Forever GI Bill was hampered by the same underlying issues that have negatively affected VBA's implementation of other new policies and initiatives-lack of IT system functionality and inadequate program leadership. Specifically, the OIG found that VBA failed to modify its IT systems by the required implementation date to make accurate housing allowance payments. Additionally, VA lacked a single accountable official to oversee the project, which resulted in unclear communications to VA stakeholders of implementation progress and inadequately defined expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the various VA business lines and contractors involved.

System Modifications

The OIG found that approximately 10 months passed from the time the Forever GI Bill became law to when VA received the initial software development release and began testing the system modifications to VA's Long Term Solution (LTS) application in order to address sections 107 and 501.[3] LTS is an IT application for automated processing of Chapter 33, Post-9/11 Educational Assistance claims and is used to establish eligibility, determine payments, or disallow claims.[4] Once VA began testing the software development release, it identified defects that required the development of additional versions of LTS. Based on interviews, the OIG team learned that when user testing occurred, the tests failed scenarios that VBA did not account for when developing the business requirements.

VA also learned of changes needed to the VA ONline Certification of Enrollment program, a VA system that feeds necessary data to LTS. VA eventually paused testing on LTS software for sections 107 and 501 in August 2018 and reexamined the requirements. Subsequently, VA provided several new LTS testing scenario updates to Booz Allen Hamilton, the contractor tasked with modifying LTS.

Lack of a Single Accountable Official

The parties involved in the implementation were primarily the VA Office of Information and Technology, VBA Education Service, VBA Office of Business Process Integration, Booz Allen Hamilton, and various VA leaders. Throughout planning and early implementation efforts, VA did not have a single accountable official to oversee

[3] VA had to implement section 107 by August 1, 2018.

[4] Chapter 33 of Title 38 of the United States Code provides the framework for Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.

the project and coordinate the roles and responsibilities of the many VA program offices and contractors involved.

The OIG found that VA's program offices held different expectations from one another as to what they considered complete and accurate business requirements. In addition, VA's Office of Information and Technology and VBA Education Service had divergent opinions of a deployable solution. Without an accountable official, these differing opinions and expectations were not mitigated or resolved and became significant impediments to a successful and timely implementation of the Forever GI Bill requirements.

In November 2018, Secretary Wilkie named Dr. Paul Lawrence, Under Secretary for Benefits, as the official responsible for implementing the Forever GI Bill.

MITRE Technical Assessment

As part of this review, the OIG considered the results of an independent technical assessment conducted by The MITRE Corporation. VA tasked The MITRE Corporation with performing an assessment to identify issues related to the delayed delivery of LTS and to recommend a resolution. The resulting report, dated November 30, 2018, included 22 findings and 20 recommendations to VA to help ensure that LTS is successfully tested and deployed. The findings and recommendations focused on issues of leadership and governance, the technical environment, processes, requirements management, personnel authority and responsibilities, and software code evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The OIG has continually identified systemic problems that VBA needs to address when implementing new initiatives and policies, including a lack of IT system functionality, poor planning, and inadequate program leadership. These same systemic problems were a significant factor in the delays and disruptions VA has experienced while implementing the housing allowances requirements in the Forever GI Bill. The OIG will continue to monitor VA's implementation actions and will review the plan provided to Congress under the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act.

Mr. Chairman, Madam Chair, and members of the Subcommittees, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Appendix

The timeline below represents activities that occurred from the enactment of the Forever GI Bill in August 2017 to January 2019, as reported to the OIG team by VA and Booz Allen Hamilton personnel. According to the Forever GI Bill, the effective date of section 501 was January 1, 2018, and the effective date for section 107 was August 1, 2018.

High-Level Timeline of Events

August through November 2017

- VBA Education Service established a Program Executive Office to monitor and coordinate all Forever GI Bill implementation activities.
- VA conducted internal analyses and found that 22 of 34 sections needed IT solutions at an estimate of $70 million, and that, without IT changes, VA would need almost 1,000 new employees, including more than 800 solely for implementing the requirements of sections 107 and 501.
- VA's Office of Information and Technology committed to providing a solution to sections 107 and 501, and decided to partially redirect an already awarded contract with Booz Allen Hamilton to conduct some of the work.
- VBA Education Service staff began identifying requirements for VA's LTS application with Booz Allen Hamilton.

December 2017 through May 2018

- From December 2017 through April 2018, requirements elaboration, software development, testing, and deployment to address the requirements of section 112 of the Forever GI Bill were also carried out.
- Business requirements were loaded into an application used to manage and track changes, and the process of clarifying the requirements for sections 107 and 501 was started.
- The previously awarded contract with Booz Allen Hamilton was amended to include work on sections 107 and 501. Booz Allen Hamilton started onboarding teams to address these sections.

- According to Booz Allen Hamilton, its teams were fully staffed for sections 107 and 501 work by March 2018.
- Booz Allen Hamilton started software development on sections 107 and 501, although requirements generation and clarification were ongoing.
- VA learned of changes needed to the VA–ONCE program, a VA system that provides necessary data to LTS.

June through October 2018

- Booz Allen Hamilton delivered the initial LTS release to address sections 107 and 501 to VA for testing. As testing continued to identify defects, additional versions of LTS were developed.
- New VA–ONCE requirements to provide data to LTS were identified.
- VA paused testing on LTS software for sections 107 and 501 in August 2018 and reexamined the requirements.
- VA provided several LTS testing scenario updates to Booz Allen Hamilton.
- Software testing continued. Booz Allen Hamilton and VA's Office of Information and Technology determined that the VA–ONCE system did not have the requirements needed to provide the necessary data to LTS.[5]

November 2018

- Booz Allen Hamilton provided the most current version of LTS to VA. VA assessed whether to deploy this version.
- VA announced that, effective December 1, 2018, VBA "will reset its implementation efforts for sections 107 and 501 of the law to give the department the time, contracting support and resources necessary to develop the capability to process Spring 2020 enrollments in accordance with the law by December 1, 2019. This includes soliciting bids from contractors for support in the areas of program integration, systems implementation, and software development.. Also, for the current academic year (2018–2019), VBA will pay housing allowances based on the location of a school's main campus, rather than the physical location of the student."[6]
- VA released another statement clarifying that "once VA is in a position to process education claims in accordance with the new law-each and every beneficiary will receive retroactively the exact benefits to which they are entitled under that law."[7]

As of January 2019

- VA issued a Request for Information for a contractor to provide a fully functional and operational solution that fully implements the Forever GI Bill, to include all software and software development, integration, testing, maintenance, and training. VA was in the process of developing a Request for Proposal.

Jay Schnitzer, M.D., Ph.D.

Chairman Levin, Chairman Lee, Ranking Members Bilirakis and Banks, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees on Economic Opportunity and Technology Modernization, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on matters relating to the implementation of Sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act, also known as the Forever GI Bill (FGIB). These provisions impact all Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries in receipt of a Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA), as they changed the way the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must pay MHA. The law amended the location basis for the MHA and aligned MHA payments with the Department of Defense's basic housing allowance (BAH) rates. As you know, implementation of this legislation is a critically important issue for untold numbers of Veterans. MITRE very much appreciates the opportunity to share our insight from our work on this critical program.

MITRE is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation. We are chartered to operate in the public interest, which includes operating federally-funded research and development centers, or FFRDCs, on behalf of Federal agency sponsors. We currently operate seven FFRDCs sponsored by a variety of Federal sponsors including the Department of Veterans Affairs, which is a co-sponsor of MITRE's Center for Enterprise Mod-

[5] As of November 2018, the anticipated completion date for updates to VA–ONCE was estimated to be March 2019 or later.

[6] https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/54520/post-9–11-gi-bill-housing-payment-rates-update/

[7] https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5154

ernization (CEM). Our Center for Enterprise Modernization was established in 1998 by the Department of Treasury's Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and we have been proud to support many modernization efforts under that FFRDC, including aspects of the VA's modernization efforts. The other primary sponsors for which MITRE operates FFRDCs include the Department of Defense; the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services at the Department of Health and Human Services; the National Institute of Standards and Technology; the Federal Aviation Administration; the Department of Homeland Security; and the U.S. Courts - the latter being the only non-Executive Branch entity that has created an FFRDC to date.

I mention these other sponsors because operating seven FFRDCs for this wide range of agencies gives MITRE a truly unique vantage point with regard to the execution of critical programs and modernization challenges facing the Federal government. It also greatly informs the advice we are able to provide to those whom we assist.

Given this context, I think it's important to stress to the Committee right up front that the kinds of issues the VA experienced in executing Sections 107 and 501 of the Colmery Act last year are not unique to the VA. Indeed, they are challenges we have seen repeatedly across the government as agencies struggle to execute highly complex, integrated mission requirements and modernize their systems and processes to address new mission needs.

MITRE's involvement with the Colmery Act began on September 28 of last year, when we were engaged by the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) to perform an Independent Technical Assessment (ITA) of the VA's implementation of Sections 107 and 501 of the FGIB. As noted above, these provisions made significant changes to Veterans' education benefits by enhancing and expanding these benefits for Veterans, servicemembers, families, and survivors. The set of systems and processes involved in administering GI Bill benefits, then and now, include a major system referred to as the Long-Term Solution, or LTS. At the time MITRE was asked to conduct the ITA, LTS and other legacy GI Benefits systems were being updated to provide the functionality, processes, and datasets required to deliver the expanded benefits required by the Colmery Act. However, the deployment of the requisite Colmery Act capability originally expected to occur by July 2018 was repeatedly delayed.

The focus of the independent assessment requested by OIT was to identify issues related to the delayed delivery of LTS and to recommend a resolution to the issues associated with completing and deploying the required system updates. OIT and MITRE jointly developed a Terms of Reference document to scope the work. Subsequently, MITRE was contractually tasked to explore the following five assessment areas:

1.Leadership and Governance;

2.Technical Environment;

3.Process;

4.Requirements Management; and

5.Personnel Authorities and Responsibilities.

During the course of the ITA's execution, a sixth topic of concern, Software Code Evaluation, was added to the scope.

The ITA team received and reviewed approximately 50 documents related to the implementation of functionality supporting the Colmery Act. It conducted site visits and interviews with the development contractor and multiple OIT and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) leaders and managers. The ITA team also performed a rapid software code evaluation of the latest LTS code base.

After documenting observations from the interviews, site visits, software code evaluation, and document reviews, the ITA team concluded that the previous strategy for implementing the Colmery Act, consisting of a distributed model with many leaders across multiple organizations in charge of specific operational and oversight activities, with little or no semblance of a tightly-coupled, integrated approach, was not conducive to success. Analysis of the observations resulted in the development of 22 findings and 20 recommendations, contained in our technical report.

The ITA team's review of the observations, findings, and recommendations across the assessment areas - informed by industry benchmarks and best practices, insight from subject matter experts, and experience with large-scale software intensive systems - enabled it to identify four systemic findings that were preventing rapid integrated capability delivery under the strategy then in place:

1.Technical and business leaders were not fully empowered to address issues related to the Colmery Act due to a lack of clear authority, priorities, and goals;

2.Work priorities, resources, and authorities for execution were not aligned for the delivery of Colmery Act functionality;

3.Operations and processes within and across VBA and OIT were not focused on the Colmery Act functionality, impeding the information flow to leaders; and

4.Data and tools were not integrated across LTS and the legacy systems, impeding delivery of the Colmery Act functionality.

The ITA team's recommendations spanned all five assessment areas, as well as the software code evaluation. Many, but not all, of the ITA recommendations directly aligned to and addressed one or more of the four systemic findings highlighted above.

As noted, several key findings related not to technical considerations, but rather to the assignment of responsibilities and questions of alignment centered around governance, authorities, priorities, and goals. Among other things, the ITA identified the need to establish:

- A single cross-organizational business leader and champion for the overall effort;
- New program governance structures, including a new Light Governance Council to serve as the decision authority for definition and enforcement of norms for executing program activities, as well as the approval or disapproval of lifecycle processes, control gates, activities, funding, acquisitions, resources and systems required to achieve successful implementation;
- A new Program Integration Office, accountable for definition, coordination, and management of functional, technical, and programmatic activities across the VA; and
- An end-to-end systems integrator, to coordinate planning, development, and integrated testing of all systems associated with implementation of FGIB, including new software development, interfaces with legacy systems, systems architecture, and testing.

I am pleased to inform you that these recommendations and others were fully accepted by the VA leadership soon after our ITA was completed and briefed to senior leaders in December. The restructuring recommendations oriented around program oversight and management have been implemented, and several of the technical recommendations have been, as well. As you know, the Under Secretary for Benefits was appointed to oversee overall implementation of the effort, aided by the Chief Information Officer and supported by a Light Governance Council, referred to as Program Governance, led by two Co-Chairs, representing the interests of the business and the technical communities respectively. The Under Secretary is actively leading a very focused and fully integrated effort to address the remaining ITA recommendations, which are currently in the process of being implemented along a determined timeline with final delivery by December 2019.

Reporting to the Under Secretary for Benefits, Program Governance, led by the Director, Education Service and the Education Product Line Manager for the Office of Information and Technology, provides technical and operational leadership, direction and broad guidance to the Colmery program, and foster an environment where decisions can be made that ensure the program meets objectives.

And reporting to Program Governance is a new Program Integration Office (PIO), led by key leaders from the Education Service, Office of Business Process Integration and OIT, who are responsible for definition, coordination, and management of functional, technical, and programmatic activities. MITRE is embedded within the Program Integration Office.

This leadership team has been both highly integrated and extremely proactive. As is typical for any integration effort, the program is not completely without risk - given the many systems and organizational components involved, there are multiple interdependencies - but the VA now has in place an integrated program team that is deliberately managing to that risk by identifying the critical path activities and decisions needed to succeed and contingencies to mitigate the risk.

MITRE remains committed to the success of this initiative in partnership with the VA leadership and the selected systems integrator. We anticipate providing independent, conflict-free strategic advice and guidance to the Program Integration Office through final delivery. Our involvement thus extends to a broad range of activities that includes program and technical strategy, systems engineering, requirements engineering, test and evaluation engineering, acquisition, and cost estimating in support of the planning, implementation, and deployment. I should note that it

is MITRE's intention to phase out its involvement in the Department's program integration function following delivery of the Colmery Act solution, but our goal is to assist the VA in establishing an organic capability to perform this integration function on its own in the future. We view the model set forth by the ITA, which identified systemic findings that have been addressed by the VA, systems integrator, and contract team in this instance, is a model that is exportable to other complex integration and modernization efforts in the VA's current and future portfolio of programs and projects, and the VA leadership has expressed its intention to adopt this approach going forward.

In closing, let me just note that of MITRE's roughly 8,500 personnel, some 30 percent are Veterans. There are few duties that our employees consider more noble and consequential than honoring, through our support for the VA, the service and sacrifice of our Nation's men and women in uniform. On behalf of the entire MITRE team, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to come before you today, and I look forward to your questions.

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

VETERANS EDUCATION SUCCESS (VES)

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Veterans Education Success (VES) is a non-profit organization with a mission to advance higher education success for veterans, servicemembers, and military families, and to protect the integrity and promise of the GI Bill and other Federal education programs.

In addition to research, providing free case work to students having trouble with GI Bill or impacted by predatory schools, and elevating the voices of students to share with policy makers both their positive and negative experiences in higher education, we are focused on addressing ways to increase the continued academic success of military-connected students in their pursuit of their academic goals.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective on the continued efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to implement the Harry W. Colmery Educational assistance act of 2017 (Public Law 115–48) also known as the Forever GI Bill (FGIB).

Since the significant challenges faced by VA during its attempted implementation of sections 107 and 501 of the FGIB during the Fall 2018 semester, we have seen continued efforts and commitment by VA to institute a smoother implementation moving forward. While we remain hopeful, we believe continued oversight by Congress is of the utmost importance.

Recommendations Moving Forward

As such, Veterans Education Success makes the following recommendations:

1.Continued Communication - We appreciate the work VA has done to communicate with key-stakeholders and hope they continue to:

a.Communicate Proactively - Proactive communication to key stakeholders, to include students, institutions of higher learning, and military and veteran service organizations, is beneficial as we work to support students who might be impacted by any potential delays or challenges with implementation.

b.Communicate Transparently - Should there be signs that implementation is not going as expected and as promised by VA to this Committee, we ask that VA share this information so that necessary precautions can be taken by those groups helping students and so students can plan accordingly. This includes giving accurate deadlines for implementation, even if they are not what we want to hear. Transparency will make it easier to proactively address potential challenges.

2.General Recommendations

a.Continued Engagement of Key Stakeholders - Among other things, VBA has been hosting monthly meetings with military and veteran groups to provide updates on the implementation process. We expect this to continue.

b.Clear and Defined Timeline on When Students Will be Made Whole and What That Process Will Look Like - From what has been communicated to us during external stakeholder meetings with VBA, they have yet to identify a timeline for how and when students will be made whole for payments made for Monthly Housing Allowances (MHA) from August 2018 - December 2019. Much of this had to do with

the delayed implementation of the contract with Accenture, the new IT contractor. While we appreciate the cautious steps being taken to roll this out in a way that will not have the same challenges VA had in the Fall of 2018, it is paramount that VBA do it without delay for students, especially for those graduating this month, to be able to know when and how much money they will be receiving.

c.Enforce Mandatory Overtime When Needed-VA needs all hands on deck to ensure students receive their MHA in a timely manner and endure no more hardships.

d.Promptly and Thoroughly Address a Lagging IT Infrastructure - There is clearly a significant issue with the existing education IT systems. They are failing. Addressing this issue is mandatory.

We ask that members of Congress and VA continue to make it a priority to address these issues in a timely and efficient manner. While $30 million was allocated for an upgraded IT system, it is not clear that this amount of money will suffice for the upgrade.

We also ask the Secretary of Veterans Affairs ensures this money is used specifically for what it is intended to do, build and enhance a new IT system. The current outdated system is failing and has had too many patches added to it to try and fix it. Like a boat, there can only be so many patches before it risks sinking. This IT system has now negatively impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of veterans and their families and must be addressed.

e.Conduct Study on Feasibility on Batch Payments - Unlike VA, the Department of Education (ED) processes batch payments to schools prior to the semester starting based on the enrollment of past years. This process has been effective for both schools and ED, and we believe there might be lessons learned for VA on ways to more effectively process education benefit payments. In theory, this process could alleviate the work of VA on the front end, so they can focus on processing the MHA for students. While we understand there are many variables between how VA processes payments and how ED processes payments, we believe there might be potential for better streamlining the current system at VA. Additionally, it would protect students from being dropped from classes, charged late fees, and/or being prohibited from registering for class for the following semester.

f.Provide Students Accurate Benefits Information - Create a document, similar to a check stub, that students can use to show landlords and other loan guarantors. This stub will confirm the amount of money they will be receiving each month in their MHA and will help them in securing housing, utilities, etc.

g.Oversee the Continued Implementation of the VetTec Provision - As a pilot program, this provision could provide potential for some students to get high quality credentials in technology. To provide a strong return on investment for both the tax payer and the students, it is imperative that oversight of these companies meet the Congressional intent of the law, i.e. provide training that leads to strong employment outcomes and incorporates substantive education for students who are attending these programs.

We encourage VA to work with ED to get information and guidance on topics such as “regular and substantive interaction” for distance education and “job placement” standards they use to ensure quality education. Additionally, we recommend that the 85/15 rule apply for all four years the program is offered and not just for the first year. This rule was implemented to protect student veterans from being preyed upon for their education benefits and has proven to be a reliable accountability metric.

h.Make Economic Opportunity a priority - The military and veteran service community continues to stay committed to seeing the office of Economic Opportunity become a priority within VA. The challenges VA faced implementing the Forever GI Bill is a vital example for why the community continues to advocate for a fourth administration. How the Forever GI Bill is implemented moving forward will either reinforce to the community why this change is needed or demonstrate to the community the Office of Economic Opportunity is indeed housed in the appropriate area within VA.

We appreciate the work VA has done to address these concerns and hope these recommendations can provide helpful guidance moving forward. Those who served our country and are using their hard-earned benefits to attend school and ensure their civilian economic success deserve to pursue their education with the peace of mind they will receive their education benefits in a timely fashion.

We also appreciate the amount of time, effort, and attention the Committee has dedicated to providing oversight of the implementation of the Forever GI Bill.

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