



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

PROVIDED TO THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

HEARING ON

**"PACT ACT IMPLEMENTATION: MODERNIZING VA DISABILITY CLAIMS THROUGH EFFECTIVE
TECHNOLOGY"**

JULY 13, 2026

Chairman Barrett, Ranking Member Budzinski, and members of the Subcommittee:

The American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) and its National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC) appreciate the opportunity to submit a statement for the record for today's hearing titled "PACT Act Implementation: Modernizing VA Disability Claims Through Effective Technology." On behalf of the 320,000 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees AFGE represents, approximately a third of whom are veterans themselves, including approximately 50 percent of frontline workers at the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), it is a privilege to offer AFGE's view on the current state of the technology utilized during the claims process and its ability to allow VBA employees to meet veterans' needs. AFGE will highlight current problems related to technology used at VBA to process claims, problems with how automation is used to process claims, and the problems with training on this technology, and make recommendations that would enable VBA claims processors to better serve veterans.

Veterans Benefits Management System

The Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) is the core technology used by VBA claims processors to develop and rate claims. This system was designed to aggregate all the records and documents used to advance claims, digitize these documents, centralize systems, and allow claims to advance more efficiently from filing to decision. This would theoretically congregate all the disparate technologies that VA employees need to determine a veteran's benefits.

However, while VBMS has certainly sped up the claims process, frontline claims processors still face challenges with the technology, and have recommendations to improve VBMS, as well as VBA's management of it.

Improvements to the System

As a technology, VBMS is often updated to improve the system. Unfortunately, this is not always done comprehensively and creates other ancillary problems. As a result, to achieve the needed results in VBMS to properly advance a claim, claims processors must often use “workarounds” in the system to avoid problems that software updates create. One claims processor mentioned that for certain types of claims, there are ten workarounds that need to be used within VBMS to process a single claim. This is difficult to master, particularly for newer employees, and requires time that could have instead been used to process more claims had the updates been done correctly and with the input of frontline employees using VBMS.

Furthermore, there are other software systems that claims processors must access to obtain documentation that is outside of VBMS. This is time-consuming for employees and demonstrates clear ways to improve VBMS. In particular, claims processors cite both the Defense Personnel Records Information System (DPRIS) and the Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV) as systems often needed to retrieve documents that must be accessed separately from VBMS. Integrating access to these systems through VBMS would better enable employees to process claims and serve veterans.

Additionally, a chief concern among VBA employees is the consistently inconsistent granting of “Excluded Time” by VBA managers. “Excluded Time” is supposed to alter or reduce an employee’s daily quota to account for VBMS or other systems being down during an employee’s duty time. For example, using basic numbers for simplicity, if an employee had an eight claim per day quota, and worked an eight-hour day, that would be one claim per hour. If VBMS crashed and was unavailable for employees for one hour, preventing them from processing claims, the employee should be assigned other tasks for that hour including training,

and their quota for that day should be reduced accordingly by one claim to seven claims.

Unfortunately, while these numbers were hypothetical, the problems are real. Claims processors report being kicked out of VBMS multiple times in the same day because of errors, seriously infringing on their ability to do their job, meet their quotas, and serve veterans. While the concept of Excluded Time is straightforward, it is not granted uniformly through VBA, and claims processors are frustrated by being punished for technological failures beyond their control.

Automation

VBA is using automation to pre-screen private medical records. Currently, private medical records are subject to automated review before they are reviewed by human claims processors. This means that a significant number of private records take between 15 to 30 days to get reviewed by technology, prior to claims processors having the opportunity to see the data. Unfortunately, in those several weeks, automated technology results in errors in reading that data. These mistakes include 1) making errors in the contentions that veterans are claiming, 2) giving information related to contentions the veteran is not claiming, and 3) declaring that certain claims are ready to rate when they are not, among others. This requires significant human review by claims processors, and it would have been more efficient for the employee and affected veteran if claims processors directly entered the information from reading the veteran's claim without the intervening automation.

As more automation and artificial intelligence programs are explored by VBA, AFGE urges that technology is used to supplement and not supplant the VBA workforce, and that technology is fully vetted with input from frontline employees and their exclusive representatives before it is put into use affecting veterans' claims.

Training

As AFGE has testified previously to the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) Subcommittee, there are problems regarding the training of claims processors at VBA. This includes training employees in using VBMS.

Currently, VBA uses Virtual In-Person (VIP) and Classroom Training to train claims processors. The Instructor-led Web Training (IWT) and classroom training, specifically for Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs), are structured to provide too much information too soon and only require the trainee to listen. This training does not test how well these trainees have grasped what was taught. As a result, when trainees complete this new training, they are unable to apply learned concepts correctly. One of the most critical flaws of IWT is its lack of hands-on experience with the actual tools that claims processors will use in their jobs to process claims. In particular, trainees who are not already working for VBA do not have access to VBMS-Core until after IWT. Even in training, there is no VBMS Core Demo for them to practice reviewing claims in IWT. Instead, IWT only provides e-cases in PDF format. Only after weeks of IWT are new claims processors allowed to see what the e-folder looks like in the interface they will have to use.

IWT also fails to teach claims processors how to perform basic critical functions, such as uploading VA Medical Center records that are either identified by a veteran on the application or found through the Compensation and Pension Record Interchange (CAPRI) Enterprise Search. These records, if relevant to a decision, must be uploaded into VBMS. This is a common everyday function for RVSRs.

To improve IWT and make it more useful and comprehensive for new employees, employees in IWT training must have access to VBMS-Core and review claims in the system

instead of looking at PDFs. Additionally, IWT or a class preceding IWT must prepare trainees to review claims in VBMS-Core for more hands-on experience.

Conclusion

AFGE thanks the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record for today's hearing.

AFGE stands ready to work with the subcommittee and VBA to address problems and better allow VBA employees to perform their duties and better serve veterans.