

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 29, 2024

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We are concerned that the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) management of the travel claims reimbursement process continues to negatively impact veterans. By deactivating the successful VetLink kiosks at most facilities in favor of the Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS), which is still not functioning properly, VA has deprived veterans all over the country of a reliable, easily accessible method for submitting their travel reimbursement claims. As a result, veterans continue to face large backlogs in having their claims approved. Moreover, veterans are becoming discouraged with the process as a whole, and replacing the VetLink kiosks with the subpar web-based system may be causing veterans to miss out on their travel reimbursements.

On June 11, 2024, the Subcommittee on Technology Modernization held an oversight hearing that examined BTSSS, VA's web-based system which largely replaced the VetLink kiosks and VistA travel reimbursement module in a poorly communicated and executed 2020 rollout.¹ BTSSS was supposed to streamline and automate the travel claims reimbursement process for veterans attending distant medical appointments, but the Subcommittee learned that BTSSS is not even close to meeting its functionality goals and has cost VA substantially more money than initially planned. To this day, most veterans find BTSSS confusing and inaccessible, in large part due to the lack of communication and training prior to implementing the system.²

The initial contract for BTSSS was awarded in 2016 for roughly \$11 million. Through fiscal year 2024, VA will have spent nearly \$39 million on this system. On top of that, in 2021, VA was forced to hire 148 new full-time employees, to the tune of \$9.5 million a year in salaries, to manually process claims submitted through BTSSS due to the system's struggles to auto-adjudicate them. Altogether, it appears that the BTSSS implementation has cost VA at least six-times more than originally planned, and veterans are still reeling with an unreliable system.

¹ VA Office of Inspector General: [*Goals Not Met for Implementation of the Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System*](#) (May 31, 2023).

² Testimony, John Retzer, Disabled American Veterans, Hearing, House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, 118th Congress, *The VA Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System: Mission Accomplished?* (Jun. 11, 2024).

After four years, BTSSS is still only automating 52 percent of the claims it receives, compared to the goal of 90 percent. Even after removing the VetLink kiosks from all but 39 medical centers, veterans are still only submitting 45 percent of claims through BTSSS and prefer the more reliable and user-friendly kiosk process. Despite the 148 supplemental staff who manually process claims that BTSSS fails to auto-adjudicate, it is our understanding that several medical centers still have backlogs of over 10,000 unprocessed travel reimbursement claims. Continued failure to make timely reimbursements risks undermining veterans' confidence and dissuading them from seeking care.

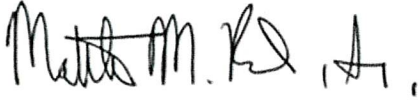
Finally, we understand that the few VA medical centers that retained the VetLink kiosks, which veterans continue to trust and rely on, are now at risk of losing them because of recently announced VA Office of Information and Technology (OIT) security requirements. We believe VA should absolutely ensure that all its systems meet appropriate security standards, but this problem must be addressed without further undermining the kiosks. We urge you to engage with veterans, veteran service organizations, and other stakeholders before making any additional changes to the travel claims reimbursement process.

In light of these concerns, we ask that you answer the following questions no later than **September 27, 2024**.

1. What is the current backlog of travel reimbursement claims, by age and by VISN and medical center?
2. How is VA communicating changes to BTSSS and the travel claims reimbursement process as a whole with veterans?
3. As VA plans to transition BTSSS into the VA.gov platform over the next 18 months, what steps is VA taking to mitigate the risks of building BTSSS into a website that has had numerous functionality issues related to underlying systems over the past several years?
4. Is BTSSS's rule-based design capable of fully auto-adjudicating 90 percent of travel reimbursement claims? If so, when does VA plan on reaching this threshold? If not, what is VA's plan to continue processing travel reimbursement claims at an acceptable rate despite BTSSS's functionality falling short of expectations?
5. What are OIT's security concerns with the VetLink kiosks? What is OIT's deadline for medical centers to address the security concerns and how was that deadline determined? If a solution has been identified to address the security concerns, please describe it.
6. How is OIT coordinating with the Veterans Health Administration to ensure that any deadlines for security updates to the VetLink kiosks are being done in a way that mitigates the impact on veterans?

Thank you for your attention to this matter which directly impacts veterans in our districts and across the country.

Sincerely,



MATTHEW M. ROSENDALE, SR.
Chairman
Subcommittee on Technology Modernization



MARIANNETTE MILLER-MEEKS
Member of Congress



ELI CRANE
Member of Congress



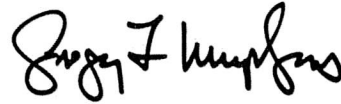
GUY RESCHENTHALER
Member of Congress



DANIEL WEBSTER
Member of Congress



MORGAN LUTTRELL
Member of Congress



GREGORY F. MURPHY, M.D.
Member of Congress



DERRICK VAN ORDEN
Member of Congress



HARRIETT HAGEMAN
Member of Congress



GUS M. BILIRAKIS
Member of Congress



AUGUST PFLUGER
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick, Ranking Member