

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 6, 2022

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

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We are writing to you concerning the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) intent to sunset the VA-ONCE system, prior to the planned deployment of the new Enrollment Manager for the Digital G.I. Bill program. The misalignment of sun setting one program, prior to the implementation of this new program, poses a substantial potential negative impact on schools and student veterans at the start of the new semester. The new Enrollment Manager system will be a significant achievement, but its timing is risky, has not been justified, and is not veteran centric.

VA-ONCE and other legacy enrollment systems have burdened School Certifying Officials (SCOs), student veterans and their eligible dependents for years with time-consuming manual inputs and slow information sharing. We have heard their concerns, and this was one reason why Congress authorized initial funding for VA to develop the Digital G.I. Bill system in the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (P.L. 116-136)*.

We are deeply concerned that, as part of this new system roll-out, we have been told there will be over a week of transition during January when the SCOs will have to migrate to the new Enrollment Manager, and VA-ONCE will be shut down. We have heard complaints from SCOs that forcing this transition through at the beginning of the spring semester, risks creating unnecessary havoc and uncertainty. According to VA's own communications and outreach, VA-ONCE is scheduled to sunset January 13, 2023, yet the new Enrollment Manager is not scheduled to be completed until the end of January 2023. This would create a gap in services and place placing an unnecessary and avoidable strain on SCOs, and could halt veterans from securing their monthly housing allowance.

Despite our Committees expressing such concern, the Department seems to have overlooked the significance of the date of new system implementation, when planning the Digital G.I. Bill program's schedule, and it appears to be understating its potential impact on student veterans. Uprooting the entire system that interfaces with colleges and universities during the start of the spring semester, is needlessly disruptive and we question why this decision was made.

While we applaud your staff's efforts to prepare SCOs for the adjustment through a communications campaign and an Enrollment Manager workshop on November 15th, we are concerned that this event may have done more harm than good. During this workshop, VA's training staff confused attendees, who numbered as many as 10,000 virtually and in-person, by stating the transition to the new Enrollment Manager would be delayed and would not impact the start of the second semester. Also, during Committee staff's oversight visit to the National Education Call Center in Muskogee, Oklahoma in October, it was apparent that call center employees were not aware of this planned change and are ill-prepared for the influx of calls from veterans and SCOs that should be expected if this system transition goes poorly.

It is important to note that Committee staff has raised these concerns to senior VA officials, repeatedly. There has been no adequate explanation as to why this transition must be done at this time, and not several weeks later when the burden on SCOs would be more manageable. Only vague excuses were given about scheduling dependencies, unknown new costs within the impending Digital G.I. Bill program, and an end of fiscal year goal to retire the Benefits Delivery Network (BDN). While we certainly agree that it is critical to finally retire this legacy system, as it was created before most current G.I. Bill users were even born, we fail to see why a slight delay of a few weeks is not possible. We also fail to understand why the Department is choosing the timely implementation of the system over the inevitable hardship this untimely transition will cause not only on the Department and schools, but more importantly, veterans and their dependents.

We note, this is at least VA's third attempt to retire BDN and make major changes to the system that processes G.I. Bill claims, since the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill went into effect on August 1, 2009. The first attempt in 2009, a partnership with the Navy, ended with very little to show for the millions of dollars spent on the "Long Term Solution" that still relied on the BDN for payments.¹ The latest attempt to retire the BDN and upgrade other systems, in 2018, also cost VA and taxpayers millions of dollars and created confusion among the schools, delayed enrollments, and generated hardships for thousands of veterans who did not receive timely housing payments.² These past failures illustrate the need to balance the benefits of modernizing education systems, with the operational impacts of such changes, and we question whether VA has learned these lessons. We remain extremely concerned that the Department has not thoroughly examined the costs of delaying the new Enrollment Manager system and considered the possible difficulties that hundreds of thousands of student veterans and their dependents will endure at the start of the new semester, should there be delays in processing their benefits.

To enable us to better understand VA's rationale, please provide to answers to the following questions by close of business on December 16, 2022:

1. Why has the Department rejected delaying the start of the transition from VA-ONCE to the Enrollment Manger until later in the spring semester?
2. What steps has VA taken to support SCOs and ensure a smooth transition?
3. Who in the Department approved the final Digital G.I. Bill schedule, including retiring the BDN by the end of the 2023 fiscal year and transitioning from VA-ONCE to the Enrollment Manager in January 2023?

¹ Hearing of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity "[Review of the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center Atlantic and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Interagency Agreement.](#)" September 10, 2009.

²² <https://www.military.com/paycheck-chronicles/2018/10/10/va-acknowledges-delays-gi-bill-payments.html>

4. What plans do you have to ensure that schools and training providers are aware of these coming changes?
5. Have you solicited feedback from schools and training providers to ensure they are able to complete this transition without significant impact on service to students?
6. Schools have raised concerns about the requirements to provide the SCOs personally identifiable information to use the new Enrollment Manager. Is there a plan to allow SCOs access to this system without providing this information to VA?
7. Has the Department explored the possibility of delaying the retirement of the BDN? If not, why not?
8. If the Department continues down the current path, what training has been provided to employees of the Education Call Center to properly respond to calls from schools and GI Bill beneficiaries, in the event of processing delays or system issues?

We thank you for your assistance in this matter, and we know you join us in ensuring that student veterans receive the education benefits they earned through their service in a timely manner. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Mike Bost
Ranking Member
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs