18F

VA OCTO + 18F
Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System

Path Analysis

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Team

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1. Introduction

The Veteran Administration's (VA) Office of the Chief Technology Officer (VA OCTO) engaged the General Services Administration's 18F department to conduct a 12 week Path Analysis (PA) of the VA's Beneficiary Travel Self Service System (BTSSS). The objectives of this project are to evaluate and discover ongoing issues of the application reported by the end users, i.e. Veterans and their caregivers. The 18F team conducted interviews with these groups: Veterans, travel office staff members who perform manual adjudication of Veteran claims, vendors who code and maintain the application, and the business management and Office of Information Technology (OIT) team who operate and maintain BTSSS.

Under Title 38, United States Code, the VA has the authority to reimburse eligible beneficiaries for miles traveled for the purpose of examination, treatment, or care[1]. The cost of the Beneficiary Travel (BT) program grew substantially in recent years, estimated to be approximately $1B in FY 2020 ($907.2 million in FY 2016[2]) . Having an user friendly, intuitive, accurate, and efficient solution is paramount to the success of the beneficiary travel reimbursement program.

With qualitative data synthesized from the interviews, we aimed to identify the current user and staff pain points, inefficiencies, and inconsistencies, and propose opportunities, prioritized recommendation, and actionable next steps.

We analyzed the current state of the online beneficiary travel experience holistically, including the following perspectives (Figure 1):

- User needs
- Business needs
- Organization and culture within the VA
- Development processes
- Technology, infrastructure, and architecture

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[1] https://www.va.gov/health-care/get-reimbursed-for-travel-pay/#types-of-reimbursement-va-bene
[2] https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-15-00022-139.pdf
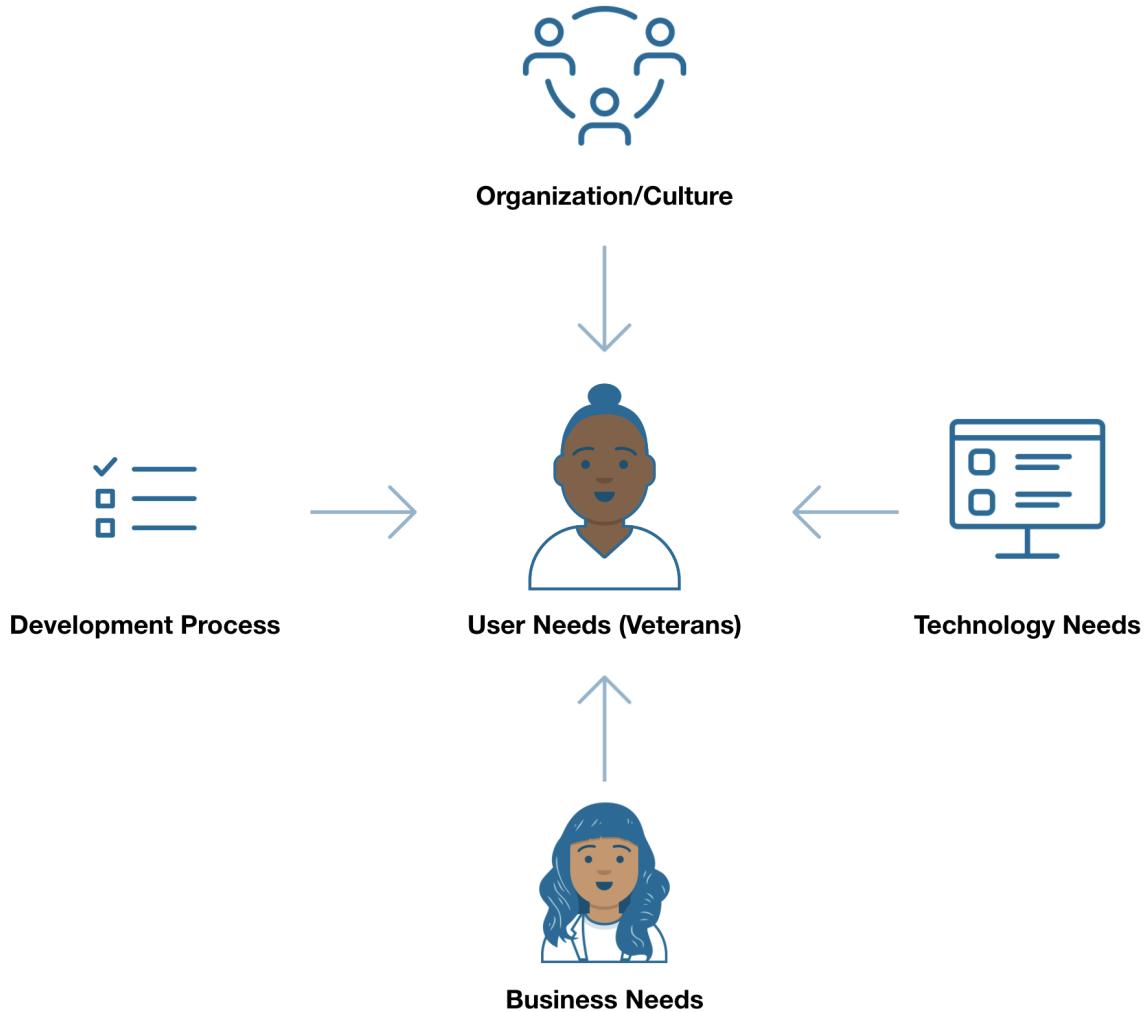
Figure 1: Holistic view of the beneficiary travel experience

Given the short time span of this Path Analysis, we did not conduct in-depth analysis of the BTSSS source code. We also had limited access to the business owners of BTSSS, making it challenging to understand the original business case and motivation for developing BTSSS. However, we will provide some short term goals and long term visions the VA OCTO can implement in order to help the end user, Veterans.

In addition, our recommendations align with OIT's Mission and Visions, and OCTO's role in VA digital ecosystem.

- Mission: Collaborate with our business partners to create the best experience for all Veterans.
- Vision: Become a world-class organization that provides a seamless, unified Veteran experience through state-of-the-art technology.

And OCTO's role:

- Identify and fill gaps in the VA's ability to use design and technology to deliver positive outcomes and Veterans.
- Lead and coordinate cross-cutting digital transformation efforts across the VA.
- Test, validate and introduce innovative technologies and processes to the VA.
- Establish overall technical architecture, design pattern and tool sets.

Ultimately, we (both 18F and VA team) aim to serve Veterans' interests, highlighted by VA Secretary Denis McDonough:

> *Our mission, as the Department of Veterans Affairs, is to care for those 'who shall have borne the battle' and for their families, caregivers and survivors. Our core values focus our minds on our mission of caring and thereby guide our actions toward service to others.*

During the course of this PA, we met many great folks (many of whom are Veterans themselves) across the VA. They are hardworking, talented, and dedicated to serving Veterans and meeting their needs.

Everyone was also open and willing to share feedback and information with our team. We appreciate all of the help we received!

2. Research methods

As part of this path analysis, the 18F team:

1. Conducted desk research
   a. Analyzed system/design/workflow documents on max.gov
   b. Read through the VA's Design System documentation

2. Explored VA.gov ecosystem
   a. The history and context behind travel kiosks, and why they were removed
   b. Demoed VA Health & Benefits App
   c. Demoed VA Online Scheduling (VAOS)
   d. Demoed the Check-in App
3. Interviewed stakeholders throughout the VA
   a. Veterans using the BT program
   b. Travel office supervisors and staff
   c. Members of the VA OCTO involved in the project
   d. Key members of the BTSSS team, including:
      i. Representatives from Booz Allen Hamilton (BAH) (the technology contractor)
      ii. Microsoft (the platform provider)
      iii. The VA VEIS API[3] team
      iv. Chester Peyton, who is the product manager that manages the BAH team
      v. Daryl Richardson, a VA management analyst involved in the BTSSS development lifecycle
4. Conducted a heuristic evaluation of the existing BTSSS software
5. Explored potential future design concepts for more tightly integrating the beneficiary travel system into existing VA websites and apps.

User interviews

We spoke with Veterans and travel clerks to learn about their experience using BTSSS to request and process travel reimbursement claims, respectively. Our primary research goal was to identify the blockers between Veterans placing a travel claim and receiving their reimbursement. We focused on:

- Identifying the largest pain points and delays within the reimbursement process for both Veterans and VA staff.

- Discovering and articulating the most common reasons reimbursement claims need manual review, and what blockers are preventing more claims from being

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[3] https://developer.va.gov/

automatically approved.

- Evaluating the BTSSS user flows for general usability improvements.

Users were interviewed via video calls with an 18F facilitator and notetaker, following interview guides written for each audience. **These interview guides will be included with the final deliverables for this project, and can be a template for future user interviews.**

We also conducted focused technical research interviews with the BTSSS contract team and the VA product and business staff, to understand more about the underlying architecture and ways teams work together.

Participants included

- 10 veterans who had experience with BTSSS, recruited by Perigean contract
- 5 travel clerks from 4 VA Medical Centers (VAMC)
- 8 stakeholders from 5 offices in/associated with the VA

Note: we were only able to speak to one person from Veterans Health Administration (VHA). As such, we have limited insight into their needs, such as policy implications, Congressional reporting requirements, and pain points. Future work with travel reimbursement should continue to involve and collaborate with business owners from VHA.

3. The current state
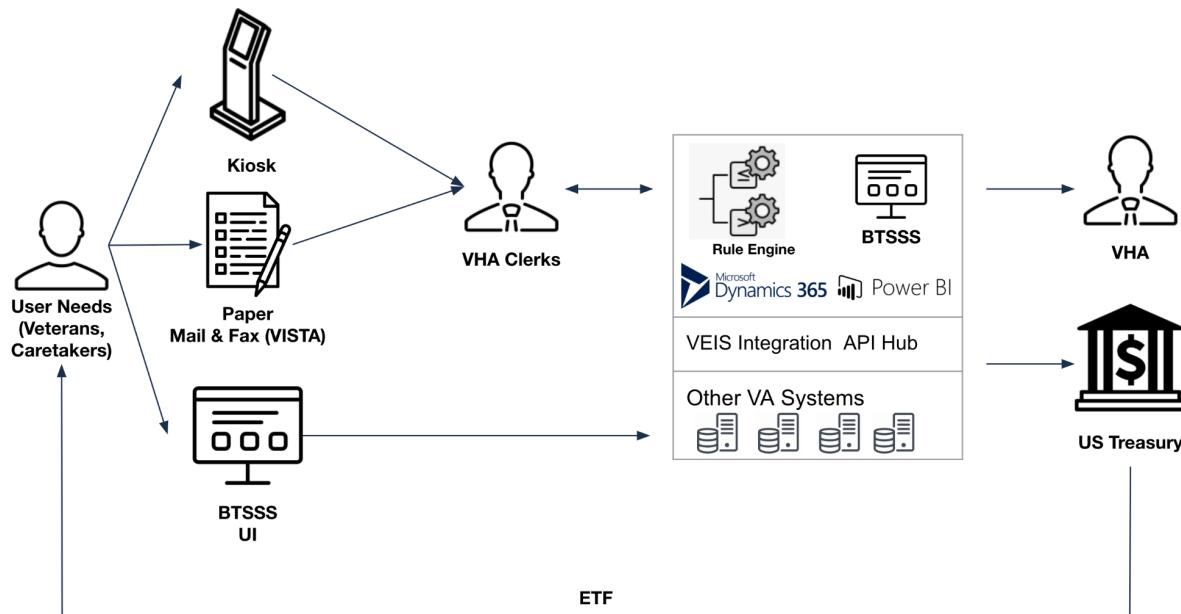
Figure 2: Current workflow of travel expense claims

As of May 2022 there are three main ways a Veteran (or their caretaker) can claim travel expenses (Figure 2):

1. File online using BTSSS.
2. Fill in a paper form and submit either in-person, by fax, or by mail.
3. On-site kiosks, which are currently being phased out of VAMCs and will be entirely eliminated by September of 2022.

History + organizational context

A 2017 report by the VA Office of Inspector General 2017[4], stated that:

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[4] *VHA Audit of Alleged Beneficiary Travel Processing Irregularities at the VA Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona*

- "We identified eight beneficiaries who staff improperly reimbursed more than once for the same travel from March 1, 2015 through February 29, 2016."
- "We substantiated the allegation that VAMC staff inappropriately approved beneficiary travel mileage claims using Post Office (PO) Boxes as beneficiaries' departure addresses instead of physical addresses, which violated VHA policy … because they lacked a local quality review program to ensure staff were calculating mileage reimbursements using physical addresses."
- "We substantiated the allegation that VAMC staff unnecessarily reimbursed most beneficiary travel in cash, rather than by EFT. In 2012, the VA published a financial policy directing the use of EFT as the primary method of disbursement, and VHA began providing guidance to VAMCs nationwide to reduce cash and increase electronic payments."

The online Beneficiary Travel reimbursement program was initiated primarily to address the above and provide VHA a tool to oversee the whole program.

In addition to fraud, travel kiosks provisioned with VetLink are being phased out because of an ending vendor contract and a perception that they were too costly and had a clunky interface. With timeline and access constraints, we were not able to evaluate the validity of this perception, especially as compared to BTSSS. Our findings revealed a strong Veteran preference for the kiosk experience.

Travel reimbursement is a topic that touches many parts of the VA: offices within VHA own the travel reimbursement program, since Veterans receive it because of their travel to health appointments. Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) manages the benefit scenarios that make a Veteran eligible for travel reimbursement. OIT groups provide necessary technical, product and project management services in developing, operating and maintaining travel reimbursement technology. (Figure 3)
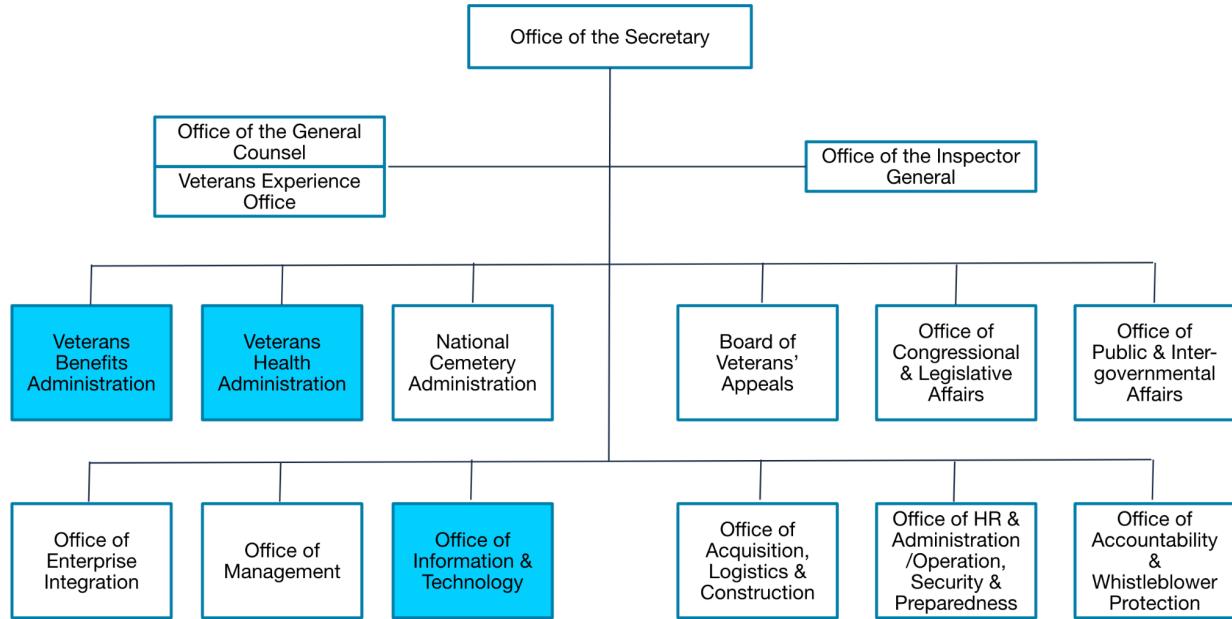
Figure 3: Administrations and Offices under the VA Office of the Secretary

Because of the variety of incentives and priorities across these groups, we observed collaboration and communication breakdowns throughout the development, implementation, and maintenance process.

These breakdowns may have partially resulted from changes in ownership. Initially, the Veterans Transportation Program (VTP) owned BTSSS and started the contract without OIT involved. Later, the VA OIT mandated that certain classes of off-the-shelf (COTS) products needed to have OIT representation and management, so the contract was structured under OIT and co-owned with VTP. This introduced strategic product ownership confusion and collaboration struggles that hurt BTSSS operations and outcomes for Veterans and clerks. Stakeholders expressed a variety of opinions on who should drive decisions.

BTSSS lacks an owner who has overall responsibility and accountability to deliver end to end Veterans experience of beneficiary travel reimbursement. Business/policy owners and technical experts *cannot* successfully deliver outcomes without one another, and they must be guided by user feedback.

BTSSS

The BTSSS launch was rough

We heard from the Veterans, travel clerks, and other VA travel staff, that the launch of the BTSSS was rushed:

1. There was inadequate time for training on the new system before launch, and many travel offices have since created their own custom training materials to get their clerks up-to-speed.
2. Many Veterans were unaware of the BTSSS launch and removal of the kiosks, and only learned about the system from other Veterans or local support.
3. The local hospitals were not prepared to switch over to BTSSS in a given deadline and requested to extend the deadline of kiosk removal.

Veterans and travel clerks are not primarily using BTSSS

With the introduction of BTSSS, VHA and VBA aimed to retire the old systems (kiosks and VistA, the underlying technology supporting BT). However, our research found that, as of April 2022 FY22 (YTD):

1. 57% (2.09M) of the claims were still entered via VistA (the old system), and
2. 43% (1.6M) were entered via the new BTSSS system.

Of the 1.6M BTSSS claims,

1. Some are still kiosk entries, which result in a form printed in the travel clerk office that are later entered into the BTSSS by the travel clerks.
2. Approximately 70% of these claims require manual adjudication by travel clerks. This means only about 30% of the cases don't flag any rule violations.
3. Auto adjudicated claims can receive direct deposit (Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT)) within 3-5 business days.
4. Manual adjudicated cases, as well as those via paper submission, could take up to 45 days for payment. We heard from a few Veterans that they never received any payment or notification, even six months later.

Veterans expressed a strong preference for the kiosk experience

Every single Veteran we interviewed who has used BTSSS vastly preferred the experience of filing their travel reimbursement claims at a kiosk inside of a VAMC, because:

- The kiosks were more convenient. Veterans could file their claims at the office, while it was on the top of their minds.
- The kiosk was a better overall user experience. Login and authentication was easy, and the questions on the kiosk were streamlined: *"it's just click click click and you're done."*
- Some Veterans using the kiosk perceived their reimbursement time to be much lower than using BTSSS:

> *"In all the years I used the kiosks, I had one denial... [with the new system] I have 7-8 that have been denied in the last few years."*

User experience findings

Insight from end users make up the backbone of each of our findings and recommendations, with secondary observations coming from a heuristic evaluation of BTSSS. Broadly, the application suffers from being designed around engineering flows and central oversight—not user needs.

Veteran pain points

> *"This is too much for a person with chronic PTSD. It's too much. I'm too tired."*

Some struggle to even find the link to even log in to submit for reimbursement on BTSSS. Some attempted to log in through the main MyHealtheVet portal, some used VA.gov search, and some had a complex repository of VA bookmarks.

Many Veterans spoke of login issues and timeouts; one Veteran tried logging in five separate times while we were on a call together, using two separate login

authentication providers and two different browsers, but the system failed every single time.

BTSSS fails to load, and performance is slow throughout the claims submission process. One Veteran had to drive to a VAMC to submit multiple claims on paper, because they couldn't get the website to load. The travel clerks they encountered expressed frustration that the claims were being brought in person. The application itself is very slow, including multiple redirects when logging in that take significant time.

Claims status are not clear to Veterans after submission. Claims that go into manual review enter a status abyss. They can stay in manual review for months, with no explanation as to why they originally went there or why it's taking so long. Rules are often flagged incorrectly, creating manual claims that could have otherwise been auto-adjudicated. This experience was also very inconsistent; some participants we talked to had no claims in manual review. Veterans whose claims were auto-adjudicated were much more satisfied with BTSSS than Veterans whose claims were sent to manual review.

Veterans forget to file once they return home after appointments. Seeing the kiosk at their appointments was a reminder to file right away. Some Veterans tried to submit their claims on their phones, but struggled with the mobile experience. Because the VA doesn't send any follow-up emails or texts reminding Veterans to file their claims, many forget after returning home from their appointments.

Information that Veterans felt "should" be prefilled isn't. Many appointments don't show up within BTSSS and have to be added manually, which introduces data problems that slows claim processing.

BTSSS contains superfluous screens, small text, confusing instructions, and unintuitive interface design. Key UI elements like submission or advancement to the next screen require a scroll, or jump around the page. Microcopy and instructions feel confusing; Veterans don't always know where to go or what to do next.

When they encountered problems, Veterans had no clear place to resolve or escalate them. Two participants tried reaching out to the VA or BTSSS tech support,

and spent more than an hour on the phone with no resolution. Others tried to escalate problems to their senators or higher level VA staff. Several Veterans expressed a desire for in-app support of some kind, whether through a chat box or a phone number on-screen. Educational user materials leave much to be desired.

Reimbursements can take months because so many claims are now being flagged for manual review.

Because of these issues, Veterans question whether filing beneficiary travel reimbursement claims is worth their time and effort.

Travel clerk pain points

Clerks frequently run into performance issues using the staff portal for BTSSS. The system times out or fails to save, and they need to start over. They perceive that this issue is more common when many people are using BTSSS across the country.

The BTSSS rules engine flags claims for manual review even when they should pass all of the rules. This creates extra work for travel clerks, who need to verify all information and then manually override the rules engines.

Clerks experience numerous unclear and confusing errors while using the software. This stops them from progressing on the claim and forces them to switch to troubleshooting mode with BTSSS, or find a workaround.

There isn't a way to customize BTSSS to add templates or repeatable inputs that are specific to a local office's rules or workflow, which increases how long it takes for a clerk to review a claim.

Reporting functionality breaks often enough that travel offices have created workarounds to generate the data from other sections of BTSSS. This risks the accuracy of national reporting and reduces the VA's ability to improve it.

All of these reasons combined have led to huge backlogs. Staff are struggling to catch up on processing claims, leading to extra long reimbursement times for Veterans.

> *"Vista was a lot faster, we could turn a claim in 1-2 minutes. With BTSSS it's taking us 7 minutes."*
>
> *"This process really doubled to tripled our workload. [One office] went from 4 clerks to 10. We went from 1 to 2. [Another office] went from 2 to 6. The dollars we're spending on this are astronomical."*
>
> *-Travel clerks*

Development, operations and maintenance of BTSSS

BTSSS is driven by business, not Veteran, needs

BTSSS was designed for reporting and oversight from the start. This priority is illustrated by the frequent report generation by VHA staff to to fulfill audit requirements to track claims, particularly fraudulent and improper payments. In addition, the current development request for enhancement process is prioritized with report features and bugs – at the expense of the user experience. End user bugs are deprioritized and backlogged.

BTSSS is developed without an end-user perspective

The development process involves mainly the BAH and VHA team: BAH developed BTSSS according to the features specification provided by VHA, who also wrote the User Acceptance Test (UAT), tested and accepted the BTSSS software. It appears to follow a waterfall software development methodology.

Based on the limited information we gathered and without access to the VHA's original project owner of BTSSS, we found that the development was done entirely between the BAH and VHA team, without or with limited participation from end users: Veterans and travel clerks.

BUSINESS
Veterans Health
Administration

REQUIREMENTS

BUILD
Booz Allen Hamilton

GIVE TO USERS
Veterans, Caregivers
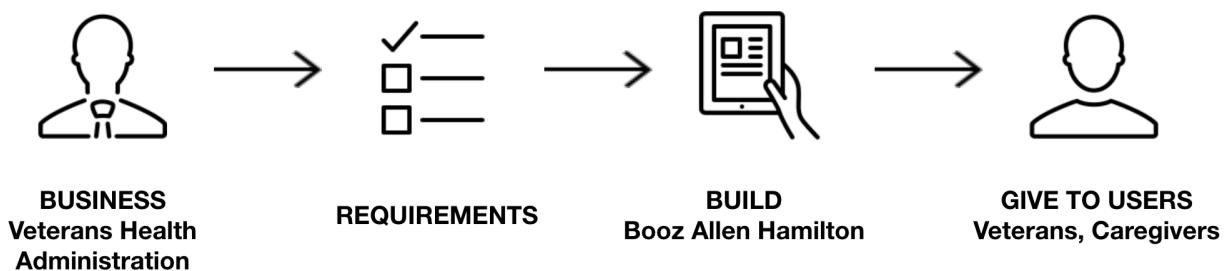
Figure 4: Current BTSSS software development process

The BAH team developed BTSSS with feature specifications given by VHA, who in turn tested and accepted the deliverables. VHA provided training and launched BTSSS to the local hospitals in less than 6 months.

The waterfall development methodologies adopted in these projects led to the pain points Veterans and clerks experience today (Figure 4).

> *"The biggest problem with all VA automation is that you don't have a veteran user engaged in the design." - Veteran*

Currently, the VA lacks qualitative and quantitative data which could be used to improve BTSSS. This includes user demographics and technology usage (such as mobile vs. desktop). Learning more about the Veterans claiming beneficiary travel benefits, and their technology habits, would help improve the overall development process and drive good feature decisions.

The operation and maintenance of BTSSS lacks a well-defined process to resolve Veteran and customer support issues

Both VHA management analyst and OIT teams own the operations and maintenance of BTSSS. The current process of resolving any problem/error/bug is as follows:

1. When a Veteran encounters a problem, their local travel office will try to help them and resolve the issue.

2. If not, local support will escalate the issue to the VHA Mgmt Analyst Team, who will review and decide if it is a business, user or IT issue.
   a. If it is business related, the VHA team will resolve and close the issue.
   b. Otherwise, they will escalate the issue to OIT.
3. Once OIT receives the issue/bug, the team will review it with the BAH team, prioritize, and put it into the queue.
4. OIT/BAH will work with the VHA team to reproduce, resolve and test the fix, before releasing it to the local hospitals.
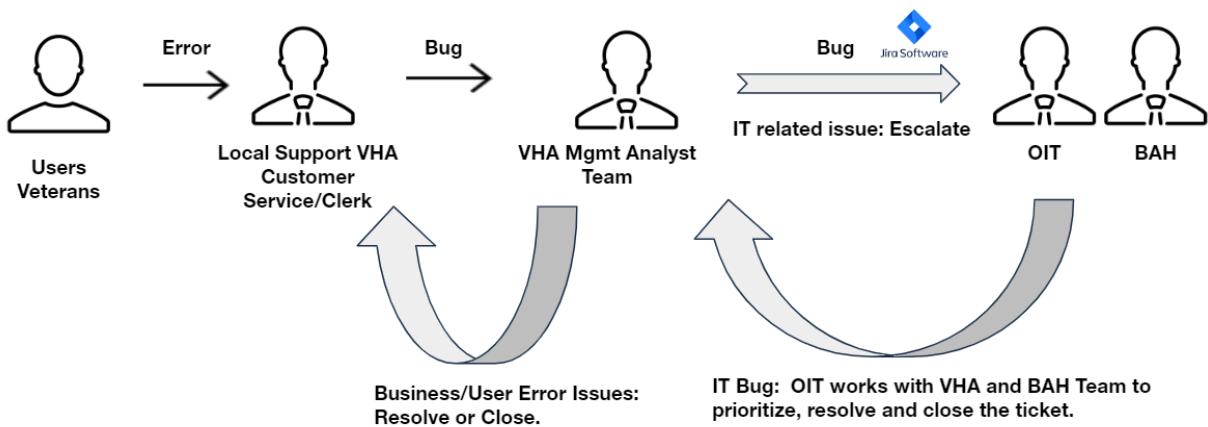

Figure 5: Current bug and feature enhancement process

Figure 5 illustrates the current flow of how issues are entered into the development tracking system and resolved. There are three independent triage points where a decision is made about how to handle an issue. Without a framework guided by Veteran outcomes, the prioritization decision may be biased, subjective, and inconsistent. The priorities of business and IT groups are inherently different, and the end user is missing from the discussion.

As a result, a UI bug may be put at the bottom of the bug ticketing queue. Having only nine VBA staff supporting BTSSS has worsened the backlog's depth.

The architecture design and inadequate monitoring data leads to a "Not-My-Problem" scenario
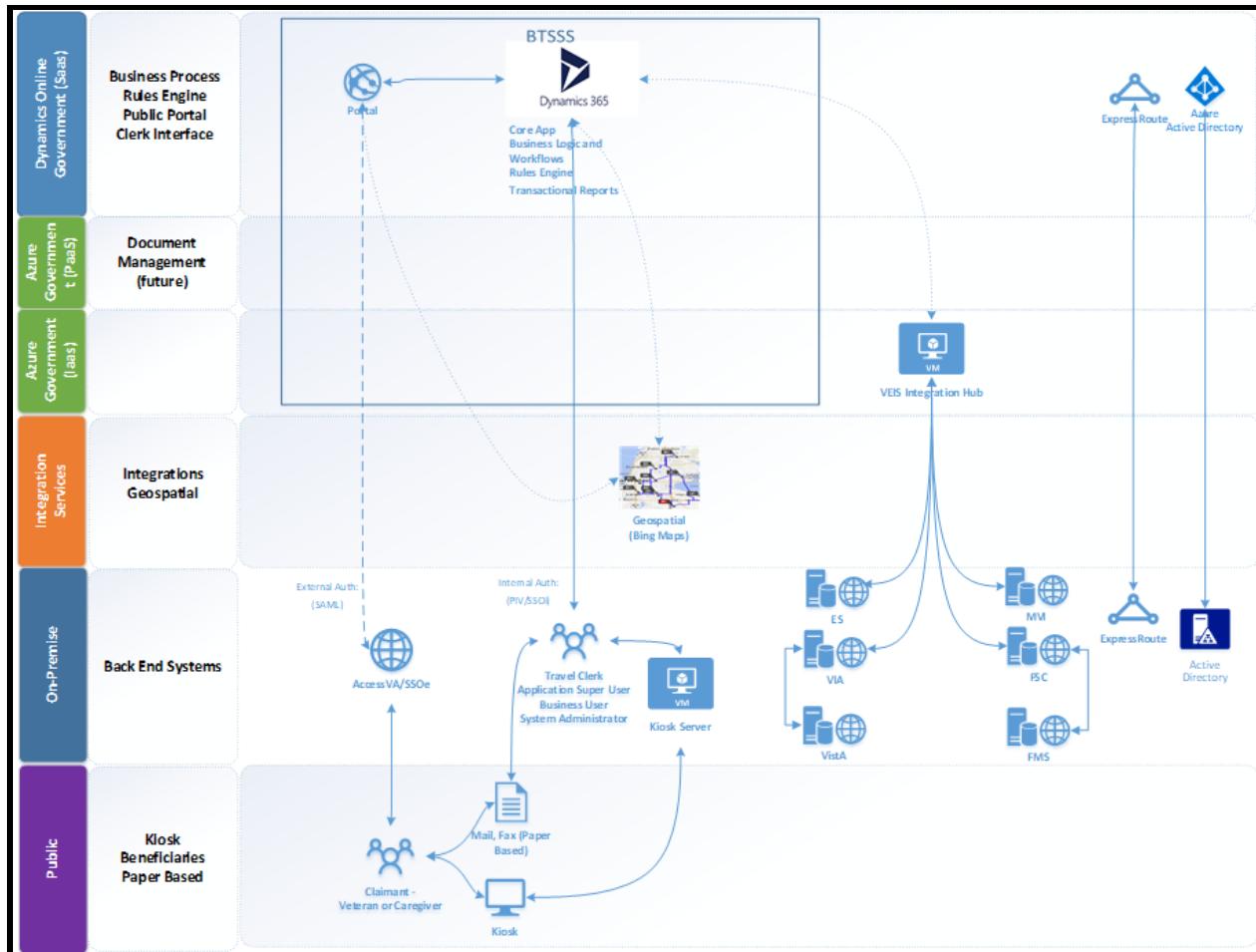

Figure 6: BTSSS architecture diagram

The technical architecture

BTSSS is a SaaS application running on the Microsoft Dynamic 365 cloud platform and exchanging Veteran related information with the VEIS via REST API, as shown in Figure 6. VEIS is an PaaS integration framework for the VA that provides an API interface to Veterans Affairs enterprise systems from within their Dynamics365 Line of Business (LOB) applications. Using Dynamics365 Plug-ins, Azure API Services, and Azure API Management (APIM) Service, the VEIS architecture provides the patterns and structure

for Dynamics365 LOB applications to connect to VA Services for information and processing of the LOB applications.

The loosely coupled design—separation of BTSSS applications, MS Dynamic 365 and VEIS layers—is advantageous and follows modern development methodologies. But because of the way the project team is structured, it creates obstacles for BTSSS to perform optimally and resolve issues quickly in operation and maintenance.

The development process

In our research, we found that there is currently no single team that handles end-to-end troubleshooting and fast problem resolution. Neither are there performance monitoring tools.

As mentioned in the previous section, the BAH team develops and maintains BTSSS. There is no direct participation from the Microsoft Dynamics or VEIS teams. They do provide technical support to the BAH team from their own product solution point of view.

In the case that a Veteran complains the UI is slow, the problem can be rooted to anywhere from the browser, BTSSS application, Microsoft Dynamic government cloud, VEIS integration hub, or downstream VA servers. During the interviews we conducted, both the VEIS and Microsoft Dynamic teams insisted any performance issues lie within BTSSS itself.

From the commercial business perspective, Microsoft (&VEIS) have less incentive to proactively provide assistance to the VA team as they were not awarded the development and maintenance contracts.

"The VEIS Platform team does not monitor or build dashboards for [BTSSS] outside of general visibility in Azure. As we have no visibility or understanding of the code and functionality of these services, our troubleshooting is limited to infrastructure related observations."

The contract relationship does not appear to encourage or require collaboration

We did not look deeply into the VA's acquisition services or the contracting methods used for travel reimbursement. But based on the interviews we conducted, we observed that the contract was awarded to BAH for BTSSS application development only. We did not observe an incentive to collaborate with other VA teams or vendors working on directly related systems. This siloing of work may cause poor performance and may increase time to resolve issues that touch multiple systems. These silos are exacerbated by breakdowns in communication between the VA OIT and VHA offices.

> *"We [VEIS] don't have a lot of visibility into BTSSS on the business side and what their input in their requirements are, so that's the challenge. That decision was made above us."*

4. The future state, and how to get there

Refined problem statement

The problem of slow, error-prone travel reimbursement software developed primarily for auditing and oversight purposes replacing other systems

Affects Veterans and their families, and the travel clerks who process their claims

The impact is an unreliable and slow benefit delivery experience, Veteran and clerk frustration/distrust, and unnecessarily complex and error-prone processing workflows – all driven by unclear priorities and minimal user-based measurable outcomes

Product vision

Please note: all of the mockups mentioned in this section will be included in our final deliverables, but you can also find them online in the VA's Sketch workspace.

We recommend taking a multi-pronged approach to improving the beneficiary travel reimbursement process:

1. Empower a user-focused VA product owner.
2. Prioritize addressing show-stopping usability concerns within the current system.
3. Meet Veterans where they are by folding the travel reimbursement experience into existing workflows.
4. Consider alternate methods of gathering BT claim information.

Empower a user-focused VA product owner

As BTSSS is being developed, there are indispensable Veteran voices and perspectives missing from the discussion. We recommend the VA designates a product owner, primarily responsible for Veteran experience. This role should balance business needs, contractor constraints, and technical options, and can focus on building relationships between these disparate groups within the beneficiary travel space. They should:

- Work with users, stakeholders, technologists, and the vendor to envision the direction for the product, with an eye ***toward delivering value to end users as quickly as possible.***
- Iteratively prioritize and define the work for the product team.
- Measure progress, and communicate with stakeholders and the cross-functional team that is building the product.
- Ensure that the product vision and strategy is clear, that there is space for teams building the software to learn, and that they're building or buying the right thing to incrementally show value to users.

The product owner must be a government employee. To make any impact, they must be explicitly empowered by their agency to represent stakeholders, prioritize features, and make product decisions without the need for many layers of approval. Product ownership is a full-time job.

This role will likely not be able to be named, informed, and empowered in an instant. Stakeholders interviewed throughout this research project revealed varying levels of frustration and resentment based on previous collaborations across the VA. Bringing

fresh perspective, building trust, navigating disagreement, and involving stakeholders in the process will be key for this role.

Prioritize usability concerns in the current system

Make BTSSS easier for Veterans to find

Our research found that many Veterans struggle to find BTSSS when they want to file a claim. We saw them search the VA site, check MyHealtheVet, and look through their email to find the link to log in.

To improve the discoverability of the application, we recommend creating more pathways to it:

- Provide poster designs with QR code links to BTSSS that travel benefit offices can display in VAMCs. These can remind Veterans to submit for reimbursement, help them find the link, and guide them through the process.
- Add links to benefit travel from more places within VA.gov and MyHealtheVet. Identify where to add them by conducting additional research with Veterans to observe how they start their path to requesting travel reimbursement or other digital interactions with the VA.
- Send reminder emails or texts after appointments to eligible Veterans with a link to file their reimbursement claim.

We also recommend changing the URL from https://dvagov-btsss.dynamics365portals.us/, to something simple and memorable like https://bt.va.gov.

Improve the user experience for Veterans

In our attached BTSSS redesign, we propose several user experience improvements. These include, but are not limited to:

1. Updating the header and footer to include helpful links.
2. Adding documentation and help links to the landing page.
3. Making button interactions more clear by using `disabled` button states.
4. Focus on improving readability and scannability of text by way of better font sizing, line-length, and usage of text formatting to call out important information.
5. Making text labels more clear.

6. Grouping related items using proximity and alignment.

Improve the visual design of the application

A strong visual design can improve the overall trustworthiness of an application. We recommend adopting some common design patterns from the VA's design system, such as font, button, and table styles.

More consistent alignment and spacing will also help improve the usability of the application.

See BTSSS Improvements.sketch (🔗) for a full list of our recommendations, in context.

Improve the usability and performance of the staff portal

The portal BT office staff members use to review claims has many usability issues, [outlined above](#).

The staff we spoke with seem enthusiastic and eager to help. With their experience helping Veterans and knowledge of BTSSS, they are an invaluable resource that should be consulted. We recommend the VA proactively work directly with BT office staff to identify, triage, and eliminate these kinds of issues. This could take the form of regular feedback sessions and 1:1 interviews with BT staff.

We also think it would be beneficial for the VHA business team to get together with BT office staff to workshop potential improvements to the rules engine, with the goal of simplifying and eliminating duplicate or troublesome rules.

Fold the travel reimbursement experience into other workflows

BTSSS is branded, and treated, as a separate application outside of the VA. We heard a strong desire from the VA OCTO to make the BT reimbursement process look and feel more like a part of the VA.gov website.

To accomplish this, we recommend:

1. Redesigning the application's look and feel to utilize [VA.gov's Design System](#).

2. Integrating parts of the BT process into existing VA applications, such as showing claims and expenses within the Health and Benefits Mobile App.
3. Integrating the BT claim process into the VA's mobile check-in project roadmap.
4. Looking for other opportunities where showing BT information, or linking to the reimbursement application, would be appropriate.

See[5] BT Mobile Reimbursement Form.sketch (🔗) and BT Mobile App Integration.sketch (🔗) for our mocked up recommendations. Please note, these mockups are meant to be conversation starters, not final designs ready for implementation. We encourage your team to iterate on them.

Consider other methods of gathering reimbursement information

Our previous recommendations cover very standard approaches to improving the BT reimbursement experience, but sometimes the best interface is little or no interface. We recommend the VA also explore other ways of gathering reimbursement claim information, such as:

1. Gathering information via text using a chat bot, instead of a web application.
2. Explore whether it's feasible to automatically reimburse Veterans for VAMC appointments, without them needing to file additional information.
3. Provide monthly or yearly travel stipends to Veterans, in place of having them file claims for each appointments

See BT Chat Bot.sketch (🔗) for one potential chat bot idea.

Finally, we recommend the VA not rule out the possibility of revisiting a way to provide beneficiary travel services on hardware inside VA medical centers, whether using kiosks, tablets, or otherwise. Veterans we interviewed expressed a clear preference for the in-person quick submission experience for reasons that cannot be replaced by software alone (for example, a smartphone mobile-check-in experience may solve the problem of being reminded to submit by offering text notifications, but does not serve Veterans who do not have a phone that can access the internet).

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[5] These are URLs to UI mockups.

BT offices and Veterans might develop their own workarounds if they're not offered a centralized solution for perceived need. We observed this happening already with up to 29 VAMCs directly working with a new kiosk vendor.

In the course of our short project, 18F was advised not to deeply evaluate the question of hardware, as we had limited time and the VA OCTO perceived this question had been evaluated thoroughly elsewhere. In future research, we encourage the VA to be open to solutions that involve physical in-person submission if it solves a clear user need.

Embrace user-centered design
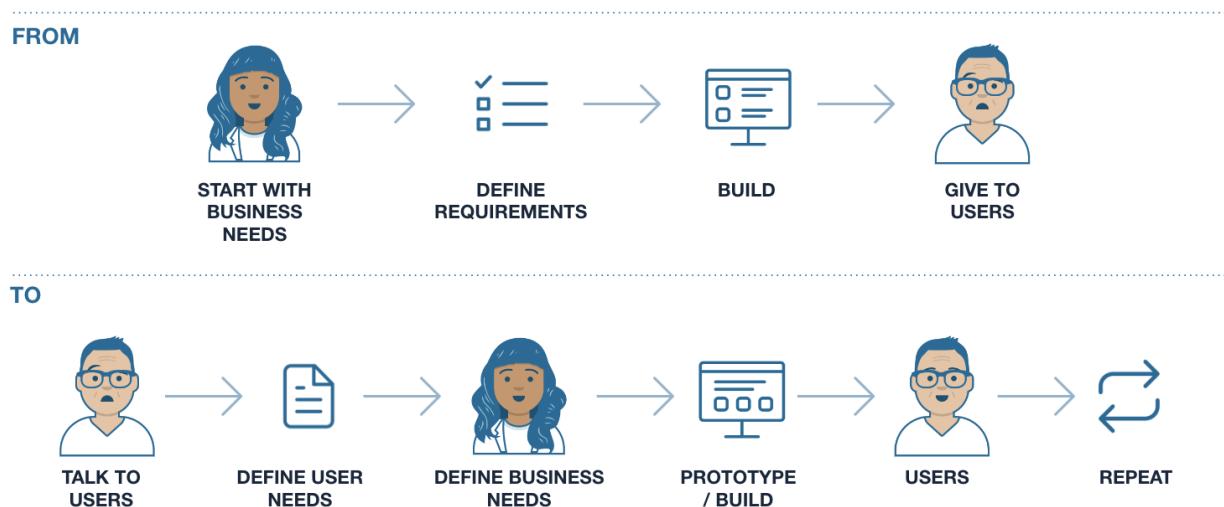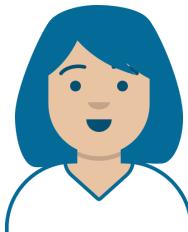
Figure 7: Adopting the new Agile and user centered design methodology

The VA's Digital Service Handbook provides a comprehensive overview of user research, design, and agile development methodologies. We recommend that all areas of the VA, even outside of OIT, adopt these practices (Figure 7).

All digital services and benefits offered by the VA would benefit from embracing agile, user-centered design practices, not just BTSSS. By understanding Veterans and their unique needs, the VA would be better equipped to make decisions that impact their service offerings and how new projects are scoped, contracted, and implemented.

Focus on users and good program outcomes are not mutually exclusive: they go hand-in-hand. Veterans' claims are the backbone of the beneficiary travel experience. Solving for them will help solve other needs downstream.

Good* Veteran claim submission experience…	Results in:	Leads to:
	• Accurate claim data • More claims eligible for automated processing • Increased Veteran trust and satisfaction	• Better BT outcomes: claim processing time, Veteran experience, accuracy • Fewer complaints to VA leadership and Congress

* Measured by key identified user outcomes, backed by continuous research

Bad* Veteran claim submission experience…	Results in:	Leads to:
	• Inaccurate claims data • Slow, manual claims processing • Additional support from travel offices • Confused and frustrated Veterans	• Poor BT outcomes: timelines, experience, and accuracy • Complaints to the VA • Complaints to Congress

* Slow, unresponsive, driven by top-down VA reporting requirements

Embrace agile and DevSecOps methodologies

Incorporate DevSecOps approach

DevSecOps (Figure 8) is a culture and approach to software development, delivery, cybersecurity, and operations: different phases are treated as interrelated and mutually

reinforcing practices. DevSecOps culture values continuous feedback and believes in improving processes and products over time. It breaks down the barriers between traditionally siloed groups, often by incorporating operations and security concerns earlier in the development process.

The BT product owner should support identifying where and when these groups are involved, including teams from BAH (dev), MS (App and Platform), VA VEIS (API services), VHA (business), VBA (operations) and OIT (security).
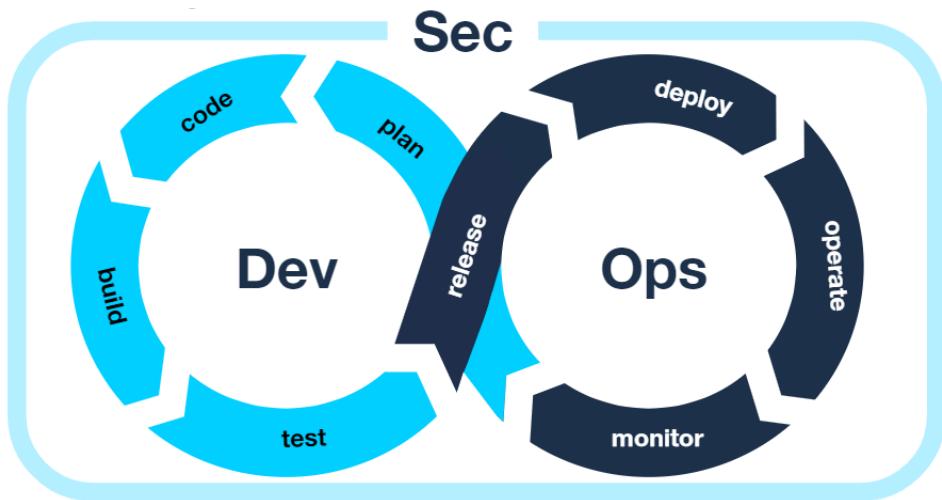
Figure 8: DevSecOps methodology

Build iteratively by identifying a "first slice"

We recommend the VA identify a simple and small first use case to test beneficiary travel outside of the core, current BTSSS system. In agile software development methodology, that first use case is often called a Minimum Viable Product (MVP).

Below, we've instead called this use case a "first slice" to reflect that the VA's first step will likely not be building a single product from scratch. The goal here is to identify the *fewest features possible* to release an *end-to-end user experience* that provides value. Within the VA's complex technology ecosystem, that means this use case will likely involve multiple products working together in very small ways.

The first slice will need to be large enough to test a clear hypothesis, but small enough to validate that hypothesis in minimal time and without unintended negative consequences to Veteran claims. It takes time to identify good first slice ideas and measurements, so the VA should make space for a team to research and shape the work appropriately (see "Roadmap" section for more).

Signs of a good first slice

- Can be validated or invalidated *before* deployment to production, using historical claim data, structured user interviews, static prototypes, and other research methods.
- Can be changed or abandoned based on information discovered during the development process.
- Is measurable with signs of success and failure, both quantitative and qualitative.
- Can be deployed in production – tested with real data, helping real Veterans.
- Has as few technical timeline dependencies as possible (look for manual workarounds to prove hypotheses as needed).
- Allows testing a workflow end-to-end (for example, from claim submission to final payment received).

Agile, iterative development best practices

- Identify key assumptions/uncertainties in new projects. Test them in minimally viable ways where possible.
- Prioritize for testing first: things that are most uncertain, things that are most essential to success.
- Experiment **with** the public, not **on** the public.
- If "pilots" are tests, describe them that way. Promise learning, not certainty.
- Be candid about results. Before and after, express that some failure will be required on the way to success.

Hypothetical first slice example:

We'll test allowing [a certain set] of Veterans to submit travel reimbursement claims at [certain VAMCs] [for certain types of appointments] to validate our hypothesis that submitting travel claims within the checkout flow will result in:

1. A higher percentage of claims able to be adjudicated automatically
2. Positive feedback from Veterans about the submission process
3. More time for clerks to process other, more complex claims

We'll deploy a pilot version for [x days] and measure against [these baselines] for our key signs of success above. We'll also measure the time from claim submission to receipt of payment, and error rates, and compare them to baselines from pre-release of our pilot in production.

As we develop the pilot workflow, we will test static design prototypes with Veterans. We'll evaluate past claims and interview clerks to identify the simplest claims to process, and make a plan for how to identify them. If we see signs that our hypotheses are not proving true, we will change our scope or abandon the project, before or after releasing features to production.

A set of designated travel clerks will review (or process offramped) claims from the pilot program, and we will conduct usability feedback with them regularly.

If our hypothesis is proven, we will identify another hypothesis – whether a new set of claims or additional use cases.

Award smaller, modular contracts that promote collaboration and accountability to user outcomes

We recommend contracts be written and awarded that require all vendors to collaborate in DevSecOps and agile models. Try staged budgets/contracts, start small, stop what's not working, or change it[6]. **Evaluate the contract with measurable user**

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[6] "We the Possibility-Hardness Public Entrepreneurship to Solve Our Most Urgent Problems", Mitchell Weiss, Harvard Business Review Press, 2021.

centered metrics, not just the use of budget. The goal and mission should focus on solving problems and not be limited by the budget avilable.

More resources on agile contracting and de-risking acquisitions can be found in 18F's [DeRisking Government Technology Guide](derisking-guide.18f.gov) (derisking-guide.18f.gov)

Technology and infrastructure

Conduct a technical evaluation

As shown in Figure 6, the current BTSSS software utilizes Microsoft Azure government cloud and the VA's VEIS interaction hub (VA Lighthouse API https://developer.va.gov/). The UI application rides on top of Microsoft Dynamics and Azure Cloud, and utilizes VA Lighthouse API to access multiple VA systems, including many legacy ones.

While the UI application and API platforms are deployed to the Cloud, many VA systems are on premises. Some of these facts may be the root cause of the poor performance. The current BTSSS application team is not monitoring any metrics of the UI, which leaves a gap in knowledge for other issues.

We recommend the VA team:

1. Evaluates if Microsoft Dynamics is an appropriate portal for the reimbursement program. This project revealed little to no information on the initial decision of choosing MS Dynamics as the portal for BTSSS. MS Dynamics is marketed as a Customer Resource Manager (CRM), which is not the core use case for BTSSS.

2. Works with VA Lighthouse API platform team to explore opportunities to use or build customized APIs for BTSSS' needs.

3. Monitors and measures the end user facing UI activities. Doing so will help to identify and fix issues quickly resulting in better user experience. The VA can use analytic tools such as Google Analytics or TrackJS (https://trackjs.com).

   a. "The Usage API takes page view records from remote agents for processing into the Dashboard. This shows how many page views a given

account and application have received, so you can attribute error spikes as new issues or high traffic."

4. Develops and recommends long-term strategies such as obsoleting legacy systems, reducing duplicate systems, and moving applications to cloud platforms.

5. Continues sharing good practices, tools, and data amongst different agencies and departments within the VA. We saw other great projects in development, such as the Mobile Check-in project and Health & Benefits mobile app, which have data and insights closely related to beneficiary travel work.

5. Roadmap

Now (in 6-12 months)	Next (1 year+)	Later (within 5 years)
• Empower a VA product owner. • Make BTSSS easier for Veterans to find. • Prioritize fixing show-stopping BTSSS performance issues and usability concerns inside the existing system. • Begin a focused technical evaluation of whether MS Dynamics is a suitable long-term architecture for claim processing. • Continue user research with Veterans and travel clerks to build knowledge of the problem space.	• Build on user and technical research to shape a "first slice" hypothesis for integrating BT into other VA.gov user flows. Start building and testing it. • Develop a longer-term vision for the beneficiary travel experience and outcomes it seeks to provide. Define its value proposition. • Act on the technical evaluation, either investing in changes to the current architecture or making a plan to incrementally abandon it. • Continue iterative improvements + building relationships across the VA BT space.	• Better align service acquisition to the development process. • Refine the vision. Continue shaping user-outcome based hypotheses and building against them.

Required roles, skills, and responsibilities

- Product Owner - responsibilities outlined earlier in report
- Product Manager(s) - put the roadmap into action
- Design Researcher(s) - choose, conduct, and synthesize the right type of research for each question
- User Interface Designer(s) - refine BTSSS interface and develop future travel reimbursement workflows, based on user feedback

- Front-end Developer(s) - implement designs and user flows incrementally in HTML/CSS/JS
- Back-end Developer(s) - evaluate existing BTSSS architecture and source code, implement changes to BTSSS, create connections to data sources required for BT workflows outside of BTSSS, shape long-term architecture

Appendix A: About 18F

18F is a government digital consultancy housed within the GSA's Federal Acquisition Service. It aims to help government agencies deliver exceptional digital experiences by practicing user-centered design, releasing features often, and deploying products in the open.

At 18F, each Path Analysis is customized to the needs of an agency, with the goal of moving from identifying a problem to working on a solution. We developed an action-oriented analysis of routes to pursue, places to narrow the project's scope, and the best ways to deliver value to the partner agency.

Our approach

At 18F, agile product development is realized in the combined practices of iterative software development, product management, user-centered design, and DevSecOps.

We start with a product vision and strategy, informed by users and the overall mission of our partner agencies. We do this so that the work always stays connected to an overarching goal that everyone understands and is excited about.

We also work to ensure that the infrastructure and processes are there to enable continuous delivery of software to end users (DevSecOps), and that a clear agile delivery process is established. Teams are free to tailor their agile process to suit their own situations.

We conduct discovery research before we build anything. Depending on the complexity of the problem space, this can take up to 2 to 3 months. As opposed to "requirements gathering," this process involves speaking with users and showing them prototypes to test out multiple concepts quickly before investing a lot of time or money in a build.

When we build, we aim to release early and often to end-users using agile development methods. Ultimately, the government's investment should be measured in working software, not phases, documents or milestones. Only working systems are of value to

real users. "Waterfall" is a software development methodology that focuses on completing steps sequentially in order to deliver a software product—this means that requirements gathering and design are completed before development starts, and development is completed before testing starts. In a "Waterfall" model, end-users only receive value at the end of the project, after all the costs have been incurred. Waterfall is a risky way of building software. Agile development allows the government to provide value and measure success at more regular intervals and, if necessary, make course corrections. The ability to measure and adapt reduces the overall risk to the project.

Having well-researched hypotheses beforehand allows us to be deliberate about what we build and why. Research continues throughout the agile process so that we can test our hypotheses and pivot when needed. Since our work is centered around user research and user needs, it is important to regularly show software to end-users and get their feedback.

A common pitfall is expecting agile to be a silver bullet to all that ails software development, and to expect agile to eliminate all project risks. In reality, agile does not eliminate risk completely; it provides techniques to manage risk more effectively and accepts that current unknowns will lead to change down the road. Agile treats change as an integral part of the process, as opposed to exceptions that need to be resolved via change control mechanisms. This enables agile teams to manage risk by allowing change to drive course corrections. Effective agile adoption enables an organization to be nimble and respond effectively to the inevitable change that arises during software development.

Appendix B: The project plan

Task List	Task Name	Week 1 3/14-3/18	Week 2 3/21-3/25	Week 3 3/28-4/1	Week 4 4/4-4/8	Week 5 4/11-4/15	Week 6 4/18-4/22	Week 7 4/25-4/29	Week 8 5/2-5/5	Week 9 5/9-5/13	Week 10 5/16-5/20	Week 11 5/23-5/27	Week 12 5/30-6/30
	Background Document Review	▓	▓	▓									
1	**Team Forming**	█											
1.1	Familar with the context of projects												
1.2	Introduction to stakeholders and team members												
1.3	Draft PA reserch goals and plan												
2	**Internal Kick off**		█	█									
2.1	Kick off meeting												
2.2	Review SOW and scope the goals												
2.3	Team Charter												
2.4	Setup internals tools/process												
2.5	Request access to VA Network												
3	**External VA Team Kick off**		█	█									
3.1	Meet and Greet with VA team stakholders												
3.2	Kick off deck preparation												
3.3	Kick off meeting												
3.4	Schedule user interviews and connect to stakeholders.												
	Discovery Interviews/Synthesis				▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓		
6	**User Interviews/Reserch/Synthesis**				█								
6.1	Revise interview questions												
6.2	Create interview questionaire template												
7	**User Interviews/Reserch/Synthesis**					█							
7.1	Booze Allen: BTSSS System Overview												
7.2	Scheduled Veteran Interviews next 2 weeks												
8	**User Interviews/Reserch/Synthesis**						█						
8.1	Conducted 9 end user (veterans) interviews												
8.2	Meeting debriefs (Mural)												
8.3	Demo: Kiosk												
9	**User Interviews/Reserch/Synthesis**							█					
9.1	Clerks and Vet interviews and data synthesis												
9.2	Check-in experience and Mobile App demos												
9.3	Mid-point Prep												
10	**Mid Point Presentation, 5/3/2022**								█				
10.1	Mid Point Presentation,												
10.2	Travel Clerks interviews												
10.3	Sechedule two technical interviews												
11	**Interviews/Reserch/Synthesis**									█	█		
11.1	Technical Interviwes: Microsoft and VA VEIS teams												
11.2	BTSSS interview: App and PM												
11.3	UI mock up												
	Report and Final Presentation Work										▓	▓	▓
12	**Data Sythesis and Report Writing**											█	█
12.1	Final Report 6/6/2022												
12.2	Final Presentation 6/2/2022												

Appendix C: Integrations

BTSSS connects to the following VA systems via the VEIS Integration hub:

- Data From MPI: Claimant Name, SSN, Phone #, Correlated IDs
- Data From ES: Claimant Address, Email, Net Income, Relationship Type, Service Connectivity, Eligibility Flags
- Data From FSC/FMS: Claimant Bank and Bank Account Info; Claim Vendor ID, Invoice ID, Obligation Codes, Claim ID, Claim payment data
- Data From VistA: Appointment data (appointment date, appointment status and facility location)
- Data From Caregiver Record Management Application (CARMA): EDIPI, ICN, Caregiver relationship information: Start/Benefit End date, Status, status date, Caregiver type
- For EHRM sites: Appointment Data thru a Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR) API: (appointment date, appointment status and facility location)

Appendix D: Quotes from Veteran and staff interviews

Note: All our interviews were done anonymously and 18F promised the interviewee not to share the contents of the interviews. However, some of the quotes are important to show the pain points and feelings of the interviewees. We only showed the quotes which will not identify the interviewee. In some cases, we deleted/modified a few words in the quotes.

Veteran quotes

Kiosk experience

"It's just click click click and you're done."

"The old system was very easy to use."

"The kiosk system is very simple and easy. Why can't we duplicate that online?"

"In all the years I used the kiosks, I had one denial... [with the new system] I have 7–8 that have been denied in the last few years."

"The online [system] is very convenient too. But the time you walk in, you see a kiosk, and the time you leave, you see a kiosk. You know the kiosk is right there."

"I'd love to see [accessibility improvements to the kiosks], so that it would talk to you and walk you through [filing a claim]."

"That was the best way, it was so easy. You didn't need to remember to get back on the computer or the phone or remember the website, you just dropped your VA ID, you

answered some questions, BAM and it was done. I don't know why they got rid of that because it was so easy and user friendly."

Is BT worth it for Veterans?

"I've given up on trying to get travel reimbursement."

Veterans want the system to improve

"It's a government thing." (Derogatory)

"I would put a veteran in the design team. It can't be any veteran, but a user who understands how they're supposed to use the system."

"I am a 100% disabled veteran. The VA system is my health care and having the systems work is very important to me."

"The biggest problem with all VA automation is that you don't have a veteran user engaged in the design."

VA digital ecosystem experience

"I used to [prefer requesting travel reimbursement in person]. But honestly it's so much easier to do it online. I have the VA app on my phone, so it's so much easier. All I need to do is go onto the app, all the appointment information is right there. It's completely foolproof. My 13 year old could do it."

"I just think it'd be good if everything related could be on the same website. The VA, [MyHealtheVet], reimbursements are medically related, it would be good to have them in one spot. As long as there's something on the main page you can click on. You have this appointment, do you want to get reimbursed…"

BTSSS tech issues and bugs

"I have to [file my claim] on an actual laptop. It's not very user friendly from the mobile perspective. I hate it. I go, and I just want to do it. But now I have to wait to go home and log in, and then I have to make sure I go and select the right appointment."

"I think your website is down by the way. I tried to access it online. It just spins."

"By the way, the website is still authenticating. It's been 3 minutes. Error is: Sorry, please contact your website administrator. Error 20 blah blah blah. It might be chrome. Let me try Edge."

"This right now my dear is ridiculous. It's totally ridiculous. There's no reason… I mean nothing's blocked on my end, I could go to any other website."

"When I went in person they were annoyed that I wasn't doing it online, but I couldn't do it online."

Notifications

"Honestly, I can't tell you how many times I've forgotten to [file my claim in time]."

"What would be nice is a message system. You can send an email right then and there and then the next time I log in, you can see that they have responded to the message."

"[I request reimbursement] if I remember! If i'm in the hospital itself. I'm not always in the hospital. They have the travel center on the ground floor where you can just fill out the paper. Other clinics like my primary care or gynecology, you have to go home and do it on your phone. If I can remember to do it I will, but honestly I can't tell you how many times I've forgotten to do it."

Claims process

"I've been very specific on giving them addresses. The only challenge is it doesn't factor in toll roads. No realistic way to get to the VA clinic from my house without the toll road."

"If it's manual, you're just waiting to see if they're going to reject it or not."

"Something about automation should be making this easier, but instead more claims are getting manually reviewed."

"Pay me cash then and there when my appointment is over. Non-VA care and VA care. On the spot. Lickiety split. On the spot. Go to the cashier. That's it."

"Every single one I have submitted has gone to manual review. I think I've used this system for 16 or 18 claims. I've been paid for 7-8 of them. I have 7-8 that have been denied and a few that are still open."

"It's like gambling, you don't know when it's going to validate that you were here today."

"[My claim] goes to the abyss and it says 'manually review.' Doesn't give me any information about why, just says 'sorry, manually review.'"

"Bring up the info pre-loaded. The date of the appointment is there, the location of the center is there, and your address is there. You could bring those up and validate them and three steps later, you're done."

"I never want to do the paper again."

"The automated process almost always goes to manual review. I told the clerks I was interviewing with you and they said, 'I hope you can make a difference, because we haven't been able to.'"

Manual claims

"It's easy if the appointment is already in the system."

"Bring up the info pre-loaded. The date of the appointment is there, the location of the center is there, and your address is there. You could bring those up and validate them and three steps later, you're done."

"They know where my appointments are, they know where I live, why do I need to request reimbursement? Why isn't there a one-time opt in, "I want reimbursement for everything I travel to?""

"I list all my visits on my phone. Sometimes the visits are already in the online system but usually I have to add them. I'd say 50% have to be added."

Login providers

"ID.me has had challenges. When veterans are hospitalized and family members cannot get in. A problem with these IT systems is that there needs to be a way for folks to get help when they get locked out."

Usability

"It's not straightforward. Keep the instructions simple. It's like they make you run around and get it done. ... The engineer or programmer writes the instructions and they don't think like us lay people."

"It's hard to find, hard to use, inconsistent, too many options that are the wrong options, and you have no idea when you'll get paid."

"Things are buried under deep menus that don't make much sense to me."

"For me [the portal] seems like another roadblock. I know it's for accessibility, but before it was easy. There already, qualify, boom done. Now with the additional layer of friction, I have to remember to log in online."

"I didn't quite understand the verbiage or language. When you come back as a veteran, your brain is kind of messed up. I want the instructions to be simpler and clearer."

"[Submitting digitally] is easy. I've been on computers since the univac 1100. Zeros and ones."

"You know the difference between a smartphone and one of those phones where you just press a button and it dials a number for an elderly person so they don't have to do anything? It'd be nicer if it's easier and more intuitive. I used to be a caseworker for homeless vets and they wouldn't be able to do this, they'd get annoyed and give up and say the VA isn't taking care of them."

"What it does right is that it gives you a code tied to the travel voucher and tells you how much it'll be paid."

"I'm computer savvy and technologically advanced, and it takes me 1.5 times the time to complete something [because of accessibility issues]. But you take someone who isn't as technically knowledgeable, it can be a burden."

"There's a warning page. I hate that I always have to validate my information. Especially my direct deposit. I just hate that. I don't know why that's always a starting page. It makes me keep having to validate it, which is confusing because it's really just ensuring it's the same all the time. It should be in the background unless I have to change it in my opinion. That's a deterrent in my mind. It's more confusing where I have to click edit, save, and then actually go into the dashboard."

"I try to be self-sufficient. If [the kiosk] could [turn accessibility features on] where it talks to me like my computer and phone do, I could fill it in myself."

"This is too much for a person with chronic PTSD. It's too much. I'm too tired."

"I'm a technologically advanced user, and it still takes me 1.5 times longer to do something online than an equivalent person with my technical knowledge [because I'm blind]."

"I feel like I'm computer savvy. Someone who's not? They're gonna give up, get frustrated and throw the monitor across the room. Depending on what stage of PTSD they're in."

"Get rid of the starting page. Put it as a toolbar somewhere if they need to update their bank statement. Like every other website. Unless there's an actual warning or something, it doesn't need to have a pop up every time. Get rid of that."

"People who are designing IT systems who don't use them and aren't eligible to use them, something is missing."

"[Submitting a paper claim] tracks the same data and I think it does it more effectively."

"It's all a cluster right now if you ask me."

"No one would prefer to use paper in 2021, but the automation is so bad."

"This is a failure of the system. The system will not bundle all appointments on the same today. It's confusing and difficult."

"The system will not bundle all appointments on the same today. It's confusing and difficult. You come back later and say, did I submit? If you have three appointments, it should remove the other two so you can't submit for the other two. People don't always remember what they did and they can't always tie every action. You go on the VA travel site and it says you can submit for each one, but you can only submit for one and the other two don't go away."

Support

"I was only able to get action when I talked to the Chief of Staff of the Secretary of the VA."

"There have been questions I have had before and it would have been nice to be able to ask the question directly. I either find my way around the issue or I just don't submit the claim."

Payments

"When we were handing in the paper copies it could take months. Then with the kiosks, 10-12 days. I'm not looking for the money, I'm not depending on it, so when it hits it hits. So I'm not paying that much attention to it. It might hit one day and then I'll notice it a few days later."

Devices

"I use [the system] on my laptop. I'm not a big fan of apps."

VA travel office staff quotes

General issues with BTSSS Staff Portal

"The system will automatically put it in the manual review because it's that claim that was created on the portal by the veteran."

"A lot of scrolling. A lot of dead space on the page. A lot of buttons we shouldn't even have to click. A lot of consolidation that could be done."

"BTSSS is a monster."

"There for a while it was really bad, it would just spin and spin for minutes on end and then it would error out. Sometimes you have to refresh a bunch of times. The last rule, when you have to override, it would hang up again. Right click, refresh, sometimes go through and sometimes wouldn't. When that was going on, I was spending 20-40 min per claim trying to get one to go through. It was really frustrating. It's gotten quite better now. This week it's been okay. But it's hit or miss."

"At a higher level I wonder what we could have done better to make this thing more efficient. If you look at the internal appointments and travel we do for VA appointments, check in, check out, why didn't we didn't develop an appointment that automates this

all the way through? The only ones we touch day to day would be community cares which have a lot more variables.”

“It should be as fast as it was before but it's, it's the program. The program is still struggling, it's getting better, but it's still struggling.”

Specific issues for Staff Portal

“I've got to go into all of these claims that are paid, and I've got to open each one of them up. Go to the payment detail and match this amount of this payment date to her list.”

“We juggle between having Google Maps open, we juggle between having CPRS open, having VistA open, and having this open (BTSSS).”

“There's too many rules, when you could narrow it down to a handful.”

“I have another Veteran that has, ever since he started turning in claims, started getting an error and it wouldn't map his mileage. It went all the way up to the developers and they told me just to take out his address and just use his street. So it's incorrect but that's what they told me to do.”

“We get very creative. I'll go to Google. I've used Zillow, sometimes because Bing Maps won't find the address, because we get things like 'South East Avenue' and, you know, we get some really weird addresses here. We have some really rural areas, that's where it gets fun, those rural areas where you've got '4901 Road…' Yeah. Or rural routes, we have a lot of rural routes.”

“As long as I know the veteran's name and their address, I can audit their claims. The problem is you may have folks with the same name. In VistA you used to be able to search by SSN or by last name and last 4. So when you're on the phone with a customer, it can be hard to find the specific individual, but once you do find them you can pull a complete list and send it to them through MHV. The problem is it doesn't explain what it means to the veteran. So if it's on hold, it doesn't tell you why it's on

hold. They may think they did something wrong, when in fact it's on hold to give the staff time to do a review."

Community care appointments

"Community care is a forever changing environment for us. Bigger places, they have static care. We have providers here that will be here for a year, and then they shut down, and we have to go to another provider."

Backlog issues

"This process really doubled our workload. Salt Lake went from 4 clerks to 10. We went from 1 to 2. Grand Junction went from 2 to 6. The dollars we're spending on this are astronomical."

"Vista was a lot faster, we could turn a claim in 1-2 minutes. With BTSSS it's taking us 7 minutes."

"Sometimes 5 [claims] per day. Sometimes 50. We're not getting a lot in the portal. We get a lot mailed in. We get a lot of people that stop at the window. We have a computer where I can help walk them through how to do it on the portal, but it takes me away from my work, and the computer is very slow."

"Sometimes the system is extremely slow. We want our team to be able to catch up and process 25 claims per hour, but when it is slow it can be 5 per hour and so we can't catch up with the backlog. You can hear the staff…hey is your BTSSS down? Yes, and then you can hear across other sites. [Processing claims] is not something you can multitask. It requires a rhythm and system slowness breaks that rhythm."

"Feels like we're going back to the old days of lines building up in the admissions area."

Workarounds

"It's honestly what's killing us. While we're waiting on fixes we're having to use workarounds."

"Over time, I did a lot of work myself for all of this in [20]19. I developed the BTSSS Veteran User Guide, as well as training other sites, like hey, this cradle to grave, this is what you do. This is what I found to be best practice. And it really has become just people like myself … that we now have on board that they've taken it upon themselves to spend the time into and, for lack of a better expression, just play with the program."

Veterans BTSSS experience

"Veterans adore the kiosks."

"[Veterans are] afraid of the technology, they're afraid of taking someone's job away."

"If it can be better for the veteran, it will be better for the auditor."

"So we have a lot, a lot of that people have in login issues."

"Keep it simple, stupid (KISS)"

"Yeah, and you have that percentage of the population that they just absolutely positively are going to refuse to use it. They want nothing to do with technology."

"It should be clickable buttons [like the kiosks]."

"For the veteran portals, instructions that we don't have to provide, I mean, because there is no instruction on the veteran portal, unless we provide the veteran with the instructions on how to do it."

"The biggest proponent is ease of access for veterans. My generation has no problem. I mean they get tripped up on occasion, but it really is just a plug and play it's very very simple, but there there is the older generation that they're like, 'oh, I have a flip phone, I

don't even have internet,' and that's understandable and they want to stick to the paper."

"It should take less than a minute [for a Veteran]. They should be able to click yes, yes, yes."

"We get a lot of people. There's a lot of latency in the system so it's slow so people are having to go in and people have issues logging in."

"[Veterans] are concerned that an online system would take away VA employees' jobs."

Stipends

"From my perspective, this is intermediate. I think we'll end up going to a stipend and we'll take out all this process. Cut down on congressional complaints. They'll get x dollars a year, i'll say in 5-10 years we'll end up there. We've heard that before. Stipends have kinda been out there."

"I think the idea of a stipend is interesting. It means some folks won't have a job, but we can also move those folks over to be administrators to schedule patients. We're pulling from that pool to process claims. Some veterans would be upset because they wont get massive checks, but it would make things a lot simpler. This would also enable us to focus more on veterans with physical or cognitive challenges who need specific travel support. Those folks need more support."

Appreciate improvements

"There's been a ton of fixes over the last probably two years, that it's gotten easier, compared to what it was in the beginning, it was, it was a monster. You couldn't get anything to work. It was, for lack of a better expression, a piece of crap."

Cerner

"One thing that I know is going to be harder, and it is really just learning about it over the last couple weeks is CERNER. When CERNER comes online… that thing is a hot mess, it's a disaster. It is going to create a lot of problems for beneficiary travel."

Very experienced staff

"I can walk people through, through doing a climb over the telephone I could probably walk somebody through it in my sleep."

Supporting Veterans

"Another huge thing for me is the veterans portal doesn't look like our side. I have to say 'I think it looks like this' when I'm walking them through on the phone. I think it looks like this? It gets frustrating."

To Veterans: "No, it's not actually MyHealtheVet, it's access.va.gov. Look at the MyHealtheVet username and password as a key, it's going to unlock the door. So you're not actually using MyHealtheVet, you're just using the credentials to log in."

"I like the historical piece of BTSSS. I like seeing the claim they turned in 6 months ago. That part I think is probably the best thing again. Historically going back and being able to tell a vet what we say, what we dealt with, why what we did."

"Answering veteran complaints about BTSSS and wanting to know why we're using such a crappy system and, yeah, we spend a lot of time on the phone with people."

Hard on staff

"We've literally had people stomp their feet and throw the clipboard back at my staff because I didn't feel that they should have to do anything other than sign a piece of paper, like in the old system."

"I appreciate being given the opportunity to provide feedback."

Reporting

"I never use Reports, they're hot garbage."

"It takes time to play with [reports]. There's a LOT of categories – almost too many to pick from. Seems to be temperamental at times. Am I asking too much info? Getting the right mix? I'll pull a list of claims we've processed, which bogs down the system, then I'll dump it into excel to manipulate the systems as I've needed it."

"Yes, I do a ton of reports. It's not simple to do. You have to tell the computer what you're looking for step by step and what type of product you want it to tell you and it's never right. You have to keep trying different things to find what you're looking for. Some you can find by site and some you can't. When you're trying to track what your staff is processing, it's very difficult. You have to create a separate report for that. You used to be able to do it in VistA, generate a report by staff member and you could see the list of names and you could audit individual claims. Now it's very difficult and to audit you have to sit with the employee."

Want systems to improve for Veterans

"I'm hoping the end result of something about this is that we can think bigger. Take inside-va appointments, run scripts for travel eligibility, hands-off approach and send them in to FNS. Focus on the ones we truly need to have hands on. Then we reduce the demand on that system through the day. 90-some percent should flow through. Less need for people, less demand."

"My biggest hope is that we could set up a system and run in-house claims behind the scenes, get these claims put into the finance system, and we're hands off. We've got to find ways to electronically do this."

Each office, an island

"For the most part we're kind of in our own little silos. Each location can be different. [Location] is 6-7 hours south of us and they have their own needs, demands, etc."

"Have to put in your own language every time for local policy. I have a spreadsheet I keep of the national policy and add my language in there."

"Sometimes we override the nearest facility policy with geographical location because we have so many mountains and rough areas—it's not logical to pay a veteran to a nearer facility for a 3 mile facility when it's putting their life in danger."

Rollout

"Because this was a nationwide thing you would think that the Big VA would have let everybody know, "hey look this is coming down the pipeline." Instead they left it to the facilities to let people know. Well, people are going to get overlooked with the volume of people that we see. We're going to tell most of them, but we're going to miss people. And then you're going to have those people again that are going to get mad because nobody told us this. And I've actually had people say, well nobody cleared this with us. Well, they didn't clear it with me either!"

"...the adjudication… we were told it would be 60-70% and it's actually 40%. It wasn't rolled out properly."

"The analogy that I've always used is they're building a plane mid flight."

"VBA seems to be really apprehensive about, well, nobody told us about this."

"I would like the Big VA to put the information out to the veterans don't leave it up to the stations to tell the veterans hey this is coming."

"But as far as the transition goes, it was a rough transition because there's a lot of resistance from the veterans, and we still have veterans that still want us to provide them cash and the VA went away from give them cash in 2012."

"A lot of people were under the impression, 'well, if it's not broke don't fix it,' and then we try to explain to them. You know why this system was developed due to improper payments…"