

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

July 22, 2021

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We write today to formally express our ongoing concerns regarding the roll out of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) new Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS). While you and your team have taken a number of actions to help smooth the implementation of this new system, we see issues that remain and will cause further challenges if they are not adequately addressed. Many veterans are still choosing to submit paper claims instead of using the system and many more have ceased accessing this benefit altogether. For a system that was intended to make the process easier and more accessible, this is discouraging.

One of our ongoing concerns is the paper claim backlog. While VA met its goal of bringing down the nationwide paper claim processing timeline to ten days on average, many facilities are still struggling. As of June 12, one in five facilities still have paper claims that are twenty or more days old, nearly double the goal turnaround time. With only five tiger teams available to cover the facilities struggling the most, there is still a lot of progress to be made with only local staff available in most locations. We are also concerned these self-reported backlog numbers are not reliable and not providing the full picture. Some facilities listed the oldest claim in inventory as dating back to 2020, but it is not certain if that is when the claim was submitted or when the appointment took place, with the veteran submitting the claim much later. The number of claims in the backlog that are more than 10, 30, 60 or more days past-due is also not clear and self-reported, leaving room for misinterpretation and error. There needs to be not only a long-term plan in place for ongoing and potential spikes in backlogs going forward, but also a more reliable and detailed tracking system in order to identify and address issues as they arise. Even as your staff work to transition veterans to utilizing the BTSSS, there will always be veterans for whom paper claims are the most accessible option.

Looking beyond the current backlog, we are interested in the long-term plans to maintain a ten-day processing time. Much of the backlog was overhauled with the help of new, temporary staff in the form of tiger teams. Additionally, some staff members are now performing a more public-facing role to assist veterans with claims submission, taking them away from processing claims full-time. Each facility also maintains its own paper claim processing and digitization procedures, meaning to assist facilities when backlogs creep up, additional staff has to be onsite, rather than provide support from a central location. This is not only inefficient, but potentially not sustainable if facilities need to return to working remotely at any point. Staffing is one of the biggest pieces of the puzzle in addressing the backlog, encouraging veterans to utilize the new system, and warding against error and fraud. VA needs to have a permanent, sustainable staffing plan in place in order for this new system to be a success.

Finally, utilization of the new system is less than ten percent of what it was prior to the pandemic when the old system was still in place. We are a year into the rollout of the program in some locations and amidst a documented rise in in-person appointments that were put off during the peak of the pandemic. Yet veterans are forgoing their earned benefits likely because they no longer know how to submit for reimbursement or they are finding the new options for submitting a claim too daunting. This is especially alarming for veterans who rely on these reimbursements in order to afford going to their medical appointments. If they are uncomfortable utilizing this benefit, they may skip necessary medical services, because they cannot afford the transportation to access them. One of the main reasons VA pursued the new BTSSS was to improve ease of access and utilization of the beneficiary travel mileage reimbursement benefit for veterans. It is imperative that goal is met.

We have some questions that we hope will shed light on these concerns and facilitate further discussions and planning to make it as easy as possible for veterans to access this important benefit:

- What communications about the new BTSSS have gone out to non-beneficiary travel office staff at VA facilities?
  - To what extent are staff encouraged to alert potentially eligible veterans of this benefit and to direct them to access it?
  - What engagement have you done with care-in-the-community partners about the new system to help inform veterans that non-VA appointments can also be eligible for mileage reimbursement?
- What communications do veterans receive after their appointments at VA and in the community regarding accessing this benefit?
- What have been the biggest barriers to reducing the backlog and how do you plan to mitigate them going forward?
  - What is the number of claims processed per day on average at each beneficiary travel office compared to how many claims are submitted per day?
  - What plans, if any, do you have to audit facilities to ensure paper claims numbers are accurate and processing is uniform?
- What is the current staffing level of each beneficiary travel office around the country and how many staff have been hired specifically to help with the rollout of this new system?
  - What staffing changes are planned through December 2022?
- What changes do you have planned for the BTSSS software over the next 18 months?
- What are your utilization goals for the next calendar year?
- To what extent does the President's budget cover long-term plans including staffing adjustments and software updates?

We look forward to hearing from you about these important issues and continuing regular updates until these issues are resolved.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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Jon Tester  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Bost". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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Mike Bost  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs