

United States Senate

August 9, 2022

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

Dear Secretary McDonough,

Last year, I wrote to you regarding the new Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS) and its shortcomings, despite the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) best intentions. I have not yet received a response to that letter. In the intervening months, my concerns about decreasing utilization of this essential benefit have grown and new concerns have emerged. In fact, Montana veterans and caregivers are contacting my office now more than ever to request assistance with BTSSS and express deep frustration and their belief that VA is keeping veterans from accessing their earned benefits. Despite a number of improvements and commitments by VA to address the concerns of veterans, Montana veterans and those nationwide are not reaping the impact of those efforts.

One of the largest ongoing barriers to veterans attempting to access Beneficiary Travel reimbursement benefits through BTSSS is lack of resources. Many veterans, especially those most in need of financial assistance for transportation to and from medical appointments, do not have a computer or a smart phone. In rolling out this new program, VA also did not account for inconsistent access to internet – especially in areas like rural Montana where it can be a luxury to have access to reliable and fast internet and public computers to submit Beneficiary Travel claims, let alone view the training videos VA directs veterans to in order to learn about BTSSS. In response to these concerns from veterans and my letter from July 2021, VA committed to providing facilities with computers and tablets specifically for veterans to access this benefit. While many facilities finally have this equipment, veterans and clinic staff in Montana are frustrated VA has not taken necessary steps to inform veterans and staff of this resource and how to use it.

Veterans cannot receive benefits they do not know how to access. While your staff has developed and disseminated written and digital training materials to veterans and some local staff, nothing is more effective than hands-on education and support. It is understandable that in the early stages of this rollout during the height of the pandemic, digital and written education was the best and safest option. However, as most VA facilities are now open for in-person appointments, it is time VA doubled down on ensuring every veteran and staff member assisting them is comfortable using this system. This can be achieved in a three-fold effort:

- First, VA must continue its work to make the system more user-friendly. Progress has been made, but is nowhere near the finish line. At a minimum, submitting a claim should be at least as easy and straightforward as it was to submit a claim via the kiosks used with the previous system.
- Second, all front office clinic staff should receive training to become comfortable teaching a veteran how to navigate BTSSS.

- Finally, VA needs to commit to a nationwide, in-person training program at local facilities. With extensive notification and invitations to veterans and caregivers, VA should send knowledgeable staff to clinics and host events at VA Medical Centers to set veterans up with the accounts they need to access BTSSS and provide in-person trainings on how to submit claims. This would also be an excellent venue for identifying veterans that cannot be expected to use BTSSS due to a disability or other significant barrier and working with them to confirm a suitable, long-term alternative. For every veteran who is expected to use BTSSS, they should have the opportunity to receive as much training and support as they need until they feel confident enough submitting claims that they could teach someone else how to navigate the system.

I am aware of the actions VA has taken to improve BTSSS and encourage veterans to utilize it, but it seems rural veterans and those that are less tech-savvy are still being left behind. Unique Beneficiary Travel reimbursement requests are down nearly 23 percent from Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 (pre-BTSSS) to FY 2021. That cannot all be accounted for by increases in telehealth utilization and the pandemic when eligible in-person appointments are down less than 14 percent over the same time period. I am most concerned about those veterans who are only able afford the cost of gas to get to their appointments because of this benefit. For a veteran in Montana, attending a basic primary care appointment can mean more than 100 miles of driving each way to their nearest facility. Before adjustments, that's more than \$80 in reimbursement and almost a full tank of gas, which is about what is needed just for that trip. If they haven't already, some veterans who have been struggling with BTSSS will give up on accessing this earned benefit. For many rural veterans who have to drive great distances for care or veterans stretching every grocery trip and tank of gas, this will mean skipping necessary medical care. That is an insupportable outcome of a system that was intended to increase utilization and expedite receipt of these benefits.

I look forward to hearing from you about VA's efforts to increase access to and utilization of Beneficiary Travel benefits. I think we can agree that even one veteran skipping one appointment, because they cannot afford the gas to get there, is not acceptable. My staff and I are ready and available to provide more perspective and context on the needs of Montana veterans and those in rural areas nationwide.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs