U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Public Law 115-336, "21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act"
December 2021 Report
Prepared for the Office of Management and Budget and the public per the requirements of section 3(d) of Public Law 115-336.

Progress to Implement the
21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act
2021 Annual Report

Background

Section 3(d) of the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (21st Century IDEA) requires the head of each federal executive branch agency to report annually (through 2023) to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the public on the agency's progress to implement the requirements of the Act, and modernize their websites and digital services. The information below details our efforts to modernize our websites and digital services in 2021.

Efforts to Date

In order to align the VA's digital experience with our users' expectations—and to meet the goals put forth by the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) —VA has placed a major focus on modernizing our digital experience. Building on the work we began in 2019 and 2020, in 2021 our agency digital strategy had three primary goals: 1) increase the use of self-service tools, 2) enable faster access to care and more timely delivery of services, and 3) improve the customer experience and reliability of VA's online services. VA has made significant progress on these goals throughout 2021, even as the organization continued to respond to the demand for unique new digital experience capabilities in support of VA's COVID-19 pandemic response.

Accomplishments in 2021 included:

Accomplishment #1

VA Flagship Mobile Application: On the VA.gov website today, nearly 40% of all traffic comes from users on their mobile devices and this traffic is often driven by users who want expedient access to information or to complete a quick transaction, for example viewing the status of a claim or finding a VA facility. Launched this year, the VA flagship mobile application is a native mobile application (available for both iOS and Android) with features that cut across VA's administrations, with a goal of presenting a single view of VA to Veterans. The goal of the first release has been to make it easier and faster for Veterans who are already engaged with VA to complete an initial set of simple transactions in support of both their VA benefits and their VA health care. By leveraging native phone functionality, users can call or text VA directly from the app, leverage their phone's native map functionality to navigate to VA, and receive VA notifications in real time through app notifications on their phone. Users can currently review their VA claim and appeal statuses, view VA health care appointments, view vaccination records, exchange messages with their VA health care team, and more. Additional features will be released on an ongoing basis.

Accomplishment #2

VAMC website redesign: Veterans told us that they found VA Medical Center (VAMC) websites confusing to navigate, with outdated or missing information, and without a meaningful connection to their VA healthcare journey. VA addressed this shortcoming by redesigning all 140 local VA medical system websites with simplified navigation and clear access to the most-often needed information and tasks. All content was made fully accessible and was written in

plain language. Veterans, their families, and caregivers can now quickly find what they need to access care at their local facility and can connect quickly within the local VAMC website experience to national transactions (for example, prescription refills, appointment management, etc.). The year 2021 saw the completion of this project for all VA Medical Centers, including staff training. In addition, a similar project was initiated for Vet Centers. Vet Centers are invaluable resources for the Veteran community, and VA hopes that by making content about the Vet Centers easier to find and understand online, more Veterans will utilize their services.

Accomplishment #3

Modernized form search and detail pages: While VA has been working on digitizing forms and processes as much as possible, VA also is aware that it must continue to make it easy for users to access "offline" channels as well, to include paper forms. In order to make finding a VA form as easy as possible, VA redesigned the "Find a VA Form" page (Find A VA Form | Veterans Affairs) to be more user-centered, including adding calls to action to simplify finding top tasks and also to drive traffic to top online benefits application, for those who might think a form is still required and not be aware that an online option is available. The page also includes more contextual information on when and how to use the forms.

Accomplishment #4

Spanish and Tagalog translations: To improve access to services for people with limited English proficiency, VA began translating content around COVID-19 into the most common non-English languages: Spanish and Tagalog. This pilot provided insight into what is necessary to make content available to more people and VA is now working on a technical plan for how to translate more existing content, how to ensure new content is translated, how to assure existing translations are updated when necessary, and how to add more languages — all while enabling users to access this content with less friction.

Accomplishment #5

Veteran dashboard / MyVA: When users log into a website with their personal credentials, they expect to be met with an experience that is tailored to their personal circumstances, having taken the time to log in. The MyVA Dashboard now provides logged-in Veterans with tailored page with a direct route to their most relevant tasks and updates, based on their unique interactions with VA. Current capabilities of the MyVA Dashboard include seeing one's disability ratings; the current status of all applications, claims, and appeals; notifications about upcoming health appointments and secure messages from one's health team; and more. New features will continue to be added to the dashboard, which will ultimately providing a complete personalized view of a Veteran's relationship with VA.

Accomplishment #6

Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program: VA implemented VRRAP to provide up to 12 months of training and employment assistance for Veterans unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. VA launched a brand-new digital tool allowing Veterans to easily apply for VRRAP benefits and the submission results are incorporated into the automated process VA.gov employs to route form submissions directly to the appropriate regional office for processing. Since the April 30, 2021 launch, more than 4,200 applications have been submitted on VA.gov. VA technical teams are currently working with Education Service processing staff to identify opportunities to reduce friction in their workflow, to enhance the speed of application decisions for Veterans.

Accomplishment #7

Appeals Modernization: Higher-Level Review (HLR) for Disability Claim: Prior to HLR, there was no digital tool for Veterans to appeal any decision. This left paper as the only mechanism through which Veterans could contest claims, which lengthened the claims adjudication process. With the launch of the digital HLR, Veterans can now submit a request for a higher-level review for their disability claim on VA.gov. Approximately 25,000 online submissions have been recorded since launch in Quarter 2 of 2021.

Accomplishment #8

Appeals Modernization: Notice of Disagreement (NOD): In support of appeals modernization, the Notice of Disagreement, also known as a board appeal has been historically handled by filing form VA-10182. This form informs the Board of Veterans Appeals that the Veteran disagrees with the claim decision and requests a formal hearing. As with all paper form submissions, it is subject to error on the part of the Veteran and VA, and incurs cost for sending, receiving, and processing. The online version of NOD has been developed and will be released in early CY2022.

Accomplishment #9

Veteran Debt Resolution: VA is committed to providing Veterans with an accurate picture of their financial relationship with the agency. Building a comprehensive solution is a multi-year endeavor; the end vision is a comprehensive solution across all administrations that will involve business process re-engineering and modernization of systems. In support of an initial minimum viable product (MVP), the Debt Management Center (DMC) sought to implement a solution to allow Veterans to understand any debts more quickly and easily with VA, the nature of those debts, and how to resolve them. Veterans will be able to come to single place on VA.gov to get general information about VA debts and to learn about their options for managing that debt. Work in 2021 included digitizing the Financial Status Report (FSR, Form 5655), adding pro-active notifications of new incurred debt, and adding medical co-pays to the debt resolution center. Future iterations will be developed based upon user need, with the expectations that these will include other debt types and auto-filling of additional required forms.

Accomplishment #10

eBenefits Consolidation: A key component of VA's Digital Modernization Strategy is the consolidation of disparate web products and tools onto a single, modern platform where Veterans can easily log in to track and manage their benefits. VA is re-platforming features from eBenefits to VA.gov, prioritizing those features that are most important to Veterans. Recently completed features included Viewing Rated Disabilities, Applying to Add Dependents, Applying for Veteran Readiness and Employment (Chapter 31), and managing direct deposit for Education benefits. VA will continue to develop additional features which include such as adding or viewing a representative, viewing payment history, and a viewing a digital certificate of eligibility for home loan guarantee.

Accomplishment #11

Disability Claims Forms: VA is beginning a redesign of the 526-claim submission flow. Based on user research with Veterans with PTSD, VA has found areas for improvement in the applications and is coordinating with VBA to address these opportunities to make associated forms more accessible to all Veterans.

Accomplishment #12

Education Benefits: VA is specifically tackling in-demand educational opportunities in STEM

and VET TEC by digitizing the application entry-points for these benefits. Work in 2021 included development of key features including:

- VA Form 22-10203, STEM Decision Automation
- VA Form 22-5490, Transfer of Benefits: Updating questions about sponsor's death, POW/MIA status
- VA Form 22-10203, STEM Scholarship: Updating School Certifying Official email and Education benefits wizard

Accomplishment #13

VA Online Scheduling: An important component of VA's Digital Health Modernization is the integration of VA Online Scheduling (VAOS) into VA.gov. VAOS enables Veterans to self-schedule and request primary care appointments. Depending on whether a facility offers these capabilities, Veterans can also use VAOS to self-schedule or request audiology, optometry, and outpatient mental health appointments. The tool allows users to view appointment details, track the status of requests, send messages about requested appointments, receive notifications and call reminders for appointments, and cancel appointments. VA has deployed VAOS nationwide, and OIT will continue to add appointment types and functionality for direct scheduling. This will also involve support for scheduling of telehealth and community care appointments.

Accomplishment #14

Demographics and Personalization: VA is adding new fields to the health care application form and online profile for self-identified gender identity, preferred pronouns, preferred names, and birth sex. This will enable VA to better understand the population it serves and more importantly, will allow those serving Veterans to provide better care and support, allowing them to address Veterans in the manner they prefer.

Accomplishment #15

COVID-19 Vaccine Appointment Scheduling via Text Message: As part of VA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent Save Lives Act, VA expanded vaccine access to all Veterans, caregivers, spouses, and CHAMPVA recipients. In order to relieve the additional strain on facility staff scheduling vaccine appointments, VA leveraged the existing VEText product to allow patients to schedule vaccine appointments via text message. Recipients provide contact information to VA to request an appointment ("One Way") or schedule vaccine appointments by text message without staff involvement ("Direct Scheduling"). To further enable Veterans and their families to schedule by text message, VA released a Patient Initiated COVID-19 Vaccine Scheduling feature. This new feature allows patients registered with VA to simply text the word "VACCINE" to the VEText short code (or 10-digit phone number they receive their appointment reminders from) to receive an offer of a COVID-19 vaccine appointment at their registered VA facility. Since launch, several hundred thousand vaccine appointments have been made without manual staff involvement, saving VA tens of thousands of hours of staff time.

Implementation Challenges

The biggest challenges currently facing the implementation of the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) relate to budget, staffing, and the scope of work as defined by the act.

Budget, Scope & Staffing: There are dozens of individual tools, hundreds of forms, and hundreds of thousands of pages of digital content that were created over the course of decades by thousands of people, costing hundreds of millions of dollars. These tools, forms, and pages

of content were created to serve not only Veterans and their support networks to include families, caregivers, dependents, survivors, but many were also developed to serve a broad coalition of other stakeholders including Veteran Service Organizations, medical and research professionals, staff at educational institutions, legal professionals, lenders, and more. In this initial effort, VA is focused predominantly on modernizing the top tools and services directly intended for Veterans themselves. These efforts are constrained primarily by the budget allocation dedicated to the associated modernization efforts and the limited supply of qualified digital service experts. Any reduction of velocity of capability delivery results in an ever-growing backlog for modernization. Two specific areas critical to the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act that will experience the implications of the challenges mentioned above are:

- **Language Requirements**: New legislative requirements around providing services in languages other than English pose unique challenges, as each new language represents a nearly two-fold increase in effort in support of translating and digitizing all content, forms, and tools in the new language. In addition, translation efforts require VA to identify and hire subject matter experts in each language, who are also familiar with VA's benefits and policies.
- **Accessibility and Section 508**: Intrinsic to the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act is the idea that modern digital experiences must be accessible to everyone, irrespective of their physical abilities or limitations. While modern practices for building new digital services incorporate accessibility as a core part of the development process, VA still has significant barriers to overcome, both in remediating existing shortcomings and ensuring that robust accessibility practices are adopted across the enterprise. These challenges, detailed in VA's Web Accessibility Remediation report, include barriers such as determining budget needs, addressing competing program priorities, identifying and hiring accessibility-skilled staff, training on multiple content platforms, and clarifying/enforcing policy.

Conclusion

VA has made great strides toward achieving the vision outlined in the 21st Century IDEA. In partnership with subject matter experts across all of VA, the Office of the Chief Technology Officer within the Office of Information and Technology is leading the digital transformation including the enumerated accomplishments above. A modernized VA.gov and newly launched flagship mobile applications are the centerpiece of the re-designed Veteran digital experience. These and other new digital tools are mobile-first, accessible, secure, written in plain language, and are developed in partnership with Veterans and other end users. Given the vast size of VA's digital footprint and the services delivered, there is still significant work to be done; VA remains fully committed to this critically important effort.

/s/ Neil C. Evans, MD
Chief Officer, Connected Care, Performing the Delegable Duties of the Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology and Chief Information Officer