

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**

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Executive Summary

As a direct result of the collaborative efforts by DoD and VA, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) claims adjudicators who use the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) in all 56 VA Regional Offices now have the capability to retrieve certified and complete electronic versions of the DoD Service Treatment Records (STRs) for Service members who separated or were discharged after January 1, 2014, to assist in processing disability benefits claims. This enables VBA to process future Veterans' disability claims for newly separating Service members in a fully digital claims-processing environment; reduces the amount of time it takes to gather required evidence; and helps to improve the accuracy of disability claims decisions.

DoD is responsible for providing VA with Service members' information to allow accurate and fair claims adjudication. STRs provide the necessary military service related healthcare evidence needed to reach a decision of a Service connection on a VA disability claim. VA has recently required that these records be certified prior to transfer from the DoD to VA. DoD subsequently issued policy to ensure compliance.

The certification process requires that the final military treatment facility (MTF) for each military Service verify the completeness of each Service member's STR at the point of separation from military service. When the MTF certifies the STR, it indicates to VA that no further records exist and the STR for the Service member is complete as of the date of certification.

In January 2013, in support of VBA's transition to a fully digital environment for claims processing, DoD committed to accelerate the deployment of the Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) for the purpose of transferring electronic STRs to VA. DoD committed to the development and implementation of a secure interface to allow VA to query the HAIMS repository for relevant STRs effective not later than January 2014. We have achieved this goal.

To do this, DoD revised its HAIMS deployment strategy, refocused its training strategy to deliver training to Patient Administration Department (PAD) personnel and clinic administrative staff, and formed a VBA interface "tiger team" to plan and develop the automated interface. The certification process was also modified to ensure that the complete STR has been uploaded and is retrievable from HAIMS. In DoD, the process begins with authorized DoD personnel scanning the paper-based elements of a newly separating Service member's STR. This and the Service member's DoD electronic health record, is submitted into the HAIMS repository and made available to the VA as a single record. HAIMS now fully supports the electronic transfer of digital STR information, including military and private-sector treatment records, to VA.

As of December 31, 2013, the Services stopped mailing hard copies of STRs to the VA and the STR scanning process commenced on January 2, 2014.

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for extending the invitation to discuss the collaborative actions taken by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to enable the secure electronic retrieval of disability benefits claimants' certified Service Treatment Records (STRs) by VA. As a direct result of our collaborative efforts, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) claims adjudicators who use the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) in all 56 VA Regional Offices now have the capability to retrieve certified and complete electronic versions of STRs for Service members who separated or were discharged after January 1, 2014, to assist in processing disability benefits claims. Achieving this milestone represents a meaningful step forward – it enables VBA to process future Veterans' disability claims for newly separating Service members in a fully digital claims-processing environment; reduces the amount of time it takes to gather required evidence; and helps to improve the accuracy of disability claims decisions.

DoD is responsible for providing VA with Service members' information to allow accurate and fair claims adjudication. STRs, in particular, are an important part of that information in that they provide the necessary military service related healthcare evidence needed to reach a decision of a Service connection on a VA disability claim. Because of the reliance on this information, VA has recently required that these records be certified prior to transfer from the DoD to VA. DoD subsequently issued policy to ensure compliance with this process.

The certification process requires that the final military treatment facility (MTF) for each military Service, including the National Guard and Reserve component, verify the completeness of each Service member's STR at the point of separation from military service. When the MTF certifies the STR, it indicates to VA that no further records exist and the STR for the Service member is complete as of the date of certification.

In January 2013, in support of VBA's transition to a fully digital environment for claims processing, DoD committed to accelerate the deployment of the Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) for the purpose of transferring electronic STRs to VA. Specifically, DoD committed to the development and implementation of a secure interface to allow VA to query the HAIMS repository for relevant STRs effective not later than January 2014. We have achieved this goal.

In order to accommodate this new requirement, DoD revised its HAIMS deployment strategy by realigning technical resources to support HAIMS deployment, refocusing its training strategy to deliver training to Patient Administration Department (PAD) personnel and clinic administrative staff, and forming a VBA interface "tiger team" to plan and develop the automated interface. The certification process was also modified to ensure that the complete STR has been uploaded and is retrievable from HAIMS. As a result of this focused effort, HAIMS fully supports the electronic transfer of digital STR information, including all military and private-sector treatment records, to VA.

Funding for this effort included Joint Incentive Funds (JIF) used to support the Military Departments' procurement of high-volume scanning equipment and additional

personnel to digitize paper-based medical information for newly separating Service members.

As of December 31, 2013, the Services stopped mailing hard copies of STRs to the VA and the STR scanning process commenced on January 2, 2014. The process for digitizing a Service member's STR and making it retrievable by VBA begins with authorized DoD personnel scanning the paper-based elements of a newly separating Service member's STR. The digitized STR, comprised of the scanned information and digital content from the Service member's DoD electronic health record, is submitted into the HAIMS repository and made available to the VA as a single record.

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and members of the distinguished subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. The Secretary of Defense is committed to ensuring that information is made available to VA when a Service member's status changes to civilian status as a Veteran and he or she files a disability benefits claim. DoD continues to work closely with VA to ensure that important information regarding a Service member, including relevant medical information, is available for ongoing healthcare delivery or adjudication of VA benefits.

We look forward to your questions.