

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 18, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express our serious concerns with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) new Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS). The implementation of this system has resulted in lengthy delays in processing veteran travel reimbursement claims for necessary healthcare appointments, creating unacceptable financial hardships for Maine veterans.

As you know, veterans are required to pay out of pocket for costs associated with transportation, lodging, parking, and meals for travel to and from healthcare appointments. These appointments often take place at considerable distances from veterans' homes, particularly for specialized care, and can result in hundreds and sometimes even thousands of dollars in travel costs for the veteran. Until recently, the VA utilized a receipt-based reimbursement system (VISTA Benefit Travel) which allowed veterans in most instances to receive their travel reimbursements 14 days after filing. The system was reliable and trusted by veterans to provide timely reimbursement for healthcare travel expenses.

Despite the reliability of the receipt-based system, this past July, the VA announced that it would be switching to the new BTSSS system to assist veterans in getting "their travel reimbursements more securely and efficiently." This new system was implemented in Maine in September 2020.

Since its debut, our offices have received numerous complaints from veterans that the BTSSS system is difficult to use and consistently fails to provide timely reimbursement for travel costs. Veterans are often unable to access the system due to frequent website failures and the DS Logon identity verification system used by BTSSS has also proven onerous for many veterans. These issues compound the difficulty in obtaining travel reimbursements for many older veterans, who are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with accessing online systems generally. Furthermore, many veterans in Maine, particularly those in rural areas, lack the reliable internet service necessary to access BTSSS.

While we understand that the VA has temporarily resumed use of the VISTA Benefit Travel system in Maine to try and resolve the current backlog of outstanding claims, we feel compelled to highlight the delays and financial burdens already experienced by Maine veterans regarding this matter. Whereas before the adoption of the BTSSS system the processing time for claims was an average of 14 days, since its implementation the processing time for veteran travel reimbursement claims has increased to a *minimum of 60 days* for our constituents. In many instances, Maine veterans have been waiting up to *seven months* to receive reimbursement payments from the VA.

The delay in the timely processing of travel reimbursement claims constitutes a substantial, often profound, financial penalty for many veterans who cannot afford to wait weeks or months to be reimbursed for hundreds to thousands of dollars for travel costs. For example, one Army veteran from Ashland, Maine is currently waiting on five outstanding reimbursements for travel from his home to the Togus VA Medical Center, a 434-mile round trip. Costs associated with this travel are approximately \$550. As this veteran is on a fixed monthly income of \$1,700, the outstanding \$550 represents an enormous financial burden. Meanwhile, another Maine Marine veteran with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, has to travel from Maine to Boston, Massachusetts, for cancer care. He recently had to wait 45 days for VA to reimburse more than \$4,500 in travel expenses. It is unacceptable that those who have faithfully served our nation must incur such significant costs to receive necessary medical care.

Therefore, we respectfully ask that the VA provide our offices with the following information no later than Friday, March 26, 2021:

1. Why did implementation of the BTSSS system result in such a dramatic increase for the processing time for Maine veteran travel reimbursement claims?
2. How will the VA prioritize the processing of backlogged veteran travel claims? Will claims be processed chronologically or by other criteria, such as the amount of reimbursement owed to the veteran?
3. Are there any recommendations regarding how to flag veteran travel claims that have been delayed by more than 60 days for immediate action?
4. What criteria regarding veteran travel reimbursement processing times will be used to evaluate when the VA will again transition to the BTSSS system?
5. When the VA does return to the BTSSS system, will there be alternatives to filing travel claims in BTSSS for veterans who have difficulty navigating the system or who live in rural areas that may not have reliable internet access?

Thank you for your attention to these concerns. We look forward to working with you in the coming months as we continue to ensure that our nation meets its obligations to our veterans.

Respectfully,



Jared F. Golden
Member of Congress



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator