

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

August 15, 2023

Secretary Denis R. McDonough
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20571

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We write to bring to your attention obstacles veterans in Maine and across the country face in receiving mileage reimbursement for travel to and from Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and VA-authorized care. As you know, the Beneficiary Travel Self Service System (BTSSS) was introduced as the new payment processing system for mileage reimbursement, replacing the legacy Veterans Health Information System and Technology Architecture (VistA) system. The VA has spent billions of taxpayer dollars on its roll out, yet BTSSS is riddled with complications that negatively impact veterans. As we discussed in your recent trip to Maine, we strongly encourage the VA to look into the issues with BTSSS to ensure our veterans receive the best service possible, and allow Maine veterans to continue to utilize in-person travel reimbursement options.

BTSSS is intended to replace the legacy VistA system, which is prone to inefficiencies, and provide veterans with a more reliable travel reimbursement process. While we recognize and commend that BTSSS is addressing some of the problems experienced with VistA, such as duplicate payments, it is clear the new system has its own significant issues. For instance, although BTSSS provides the ability to submit and review the status of a claim, it only does so for veterans who have access to the internet and are adept with a computer. With around half of Maine veterans over the age of 65, and over 60% of our veterans living in rural areas of Maine, this creates unnecessary obstacles due to unreliable internet access and computer proficiency.

The BTSSS system also has a number of flaws that delay the processing of a travel claim and cause unnecessary hardship for veterans. For example, if a veteran has to bypass a closer VA medical facility to go to a different one or a community provider for specialty care, this cannot be automatically processed by BTSSS. Instead, the system creates an error that has to be manually reviewed and overridden by a VA employee, causing significant delays. Additionally, for veterans with multiple addresses, such as snowbird veterans, BTSSS is unable to recognize and pull a secondary address to process mileage. The error created by this issue requires veterans to contact the VA to get the staff to manually override the system to allow for payment. Furthermore, a May 2023 report from the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) found that BTSSS fell drastically short of all of its system performance goals.

We have received a significant amount of correspondence from Maine veterans confused and frustrated by the BTSSS system. Given the difficulties veterans face receiving reimbursement through the new system, we are concerned that VA may soon remove the option for Maine

veterans to use VistA, forcing all travel reimbursements to be processed via the current BTSSS system without addressing its many faults. This would undoubtedly add to the hardships of veterans instead of alleviating them. The VA's efforts to modernize are appreciated, but all efforts should be made to ensure the burden of these changes is not placed on our veterans. We therefore strongly encourage the VA to address these and any other previously unforeseen issues surrounding BTSSS before removing VistA as an option for Maine veterans.

We look forward to your response to the following questions:

- Will the VA ensure that Maine veterans have access to the VistA reimbursement system until the significant issues with BTSSS have been properly addressed?
- How does the VA plan to fix the processing issues with non-standard reimbursement claims on BTSSS before entirely replacing the VISTA system?
- How does the VA intend to address the impact of limited computer access and proficiency on older, rural veterans seeking mileage reimbursement?
- Will VA implement the two recommendations from the OIG's May 2023 report on the BTSSS program?

We appreciate your efforts to reimburse Maine veterans for their VA related travel expenses without facing unnecessary obstacles. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,


ANGUS S. KING, JR.
United States Senator


SUSAN M. COLLINS
United States Senator


CHELLIE M. PINGREE
United States
Representative


JARED F. GOLDEN
United States
Representative