

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 4, 2022

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

Secretary McDonough,

Veterans represent a distinct segment of the American population, with unique needs and concerns. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is tasked with serving American veterans and ensuring they have access to the benefits they have earned through their service to this nation. As such, the systems and processes the VA develops must consider our veterans and their unique challenges and concerns.

The VA established the Beneficiary Travel Self Service System (BTSSS) to streamline claims processing to reimburse veterans' Beneficiary Travel (BT) for health visits and improve accessibility and utilization of healthcare services for veterans, wherever they may reside. The goal of this program is admirable, and we are grateful for your leadership on this initiative. However, we are concerned that the cloud-based interface to submit these claims will exclude a large segment of American veterans who continue to rely on paper filings, due to trouble using computers or who reside in rural communities and do not have reliable access to the internet.

For instance, when veterans asked for assistance with BTSSS, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) help desk responded with a series of hyperlinks to six different YouTube videos. Videos frequently offer little assistance to those veterans who have difficulties accessing the new cloud-based format. This has led to many veterans forgoing BT reimbursement and therefore having to decline future health visits due to an inability to pay for travel.

We understand that the VA has ongoing efforts to improve BTSSS, which ought to reduce the paper application backlog. Unfortunately, our veteran constituents in Montana continue to suffer either protracted delays or completely unanswered claims. While BTSSS may be a helpful tool, it is right now a poor fit for a significant segment of the veteran community. Therefore, we write to ask you to recommit the VA to answering and fulfilling paper claims, particularly in communities with older, less connected veterans.

Further, we write to ask for clarification on the following matters:

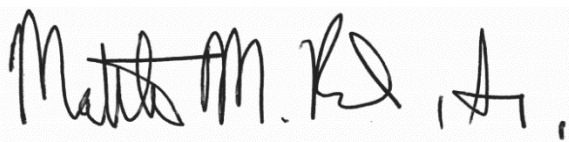
- What brought on the change to the BT reimbursement system? In the past, Montana veterans rarely had issues with BT reimbursements.

- Before rolling out BTSSS, did the VA attempt to determine any possible issues with Veterans filing claims using the new system? If so, what are the results?
- Has the VA attempted a study using applicable demographics such as age, socioeconomic level, computer access, internet access, education level, etc., to determine whether BTSSS benefits all veterans? If so, what are the results of the study?
- Did the VA give Veterans prior notice of the impending change to BT resulting in the cloud-based BTSSS system?
- What are the current wait times for reimbursement? What were the wait times for reimbursement before BTSSS?
- What prevents the VA from using the legacy system in conjunction with BTSSS until Veterans can comfortably transition to the new system?
- What was the annual cost for the VA to provide veterans BT reimbursements in the two years before implementing BTSSS?
- What is the annual cost for the VA to provide Veterans BT reimbursements since implementing BTSSS?

We ask that you provide answers to these questions, no later than March 18, 2022 to ensure we are able to effectively serve Montana veterans—and that our constituent veterans are able to access the benefits they earned, and that they were promised.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthew Rosendale, Sr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Matthew Rosendale, Sr.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Technology Modernization
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Steve Daines" in a cursive style.

Steve Daines
United States Senate (MT)