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"This effort began in 2019 to automate veterans' travel reimbursements and eliminate improper payments using a new, web-based system. I am sure the idea made sense on paper. But in reality, VA blindsided millions of veterans with a complicated and confusing new process. Training was minimal, and user testing was limited to a small group of VA employees. Without warning, the Department deactivated and then removed the popular VetLink kiosks from most of its facilities. Veterans had been successfully using the kiosks for years. But veterans struggled with the new website, and they continue to struggle with it today. I am proud to represent one of the most rural districts in the country. Montana veterans travel long distances to receive the health care they have earned. I routinely hear from my constituents about their frustrations with the new system and their struggles to get reimbursed on time, if at all. As a result of these problems, most veterans are relying on the paper travel reimbursement form, and a huge claims backlog developed that took several years to work down. We have seen this movie time and time again. VA undertakes an ambitious IT modernization project to revamp a business process, but it fails because it isn't developed with the user in mind. And veterans who rely on the system to manage their health or finances get hurt. In this particular situation, BTS-3 caused confusion and frustration for veterans across America who count on receiving travel reimbursements when their VA medical appointments are not available close to home. This project has been a glaring example of poor planning, misunderstanding of veterans' needs, and general dysfunction. According to the Office of Inspector General's report, the system is a long way from meeting any of its goals. The contract was signed eight years ago, but as of last year, only 34% of travel reimbursement claims were being submitted electronically. That is far below the goal of 80%. The project was supposed to simplify the entire travel reimbursement process by auto-adjudicating 90% of claims. But as of last year, the system was only able to auto-adjudicate about 40%. Veterans submit about 6 million travel reimbursement claims every year. A majority of those claims have to be keyed into the BTS-3 system manually. Worse, the software is completely unable to auto-adjudicate travel reimbursements for community care, so 100% of those claims have to be manually reviewed. More than four years after the system was rolled out, VA still does not have a good solution for that. VA actually had to add about 140 more employees to process the travel claims manually. The project's budget started at \$11 million—which is modest compared to Oracle or the supply chain modernization—but I understand it has doubled. The budget does not seem to include all the additional expense from extra staffing and rework. And it surely does not account for all the veterans' frustration and wasted time. I expect clear answers from our witnesses about the path forward. Despite several years of software updates, the BTS-3 system is still too difficult to log into, too slow to load, and too confusing to navigate. We learned that VA is planning to fold it into VA.gov soon. Given the difficulties that other parts of VA.gov have experienced recently, that consolidation needs to be handled very carefully."

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