

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS  
FULL COMMITTEE**

**Hearing On “Appeals Reform: Will VA’s Implementation Effectively Serve Veterans?”  
Tuesday, January 30, 2018  
334 Cannon House Office Building**

**QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**RAMP**

- 1) What is the VA doing to persuade veterans and the VSO---some of whom are recommending their members do not enroll in RAMP and feel like their comments are being ignored---to join the program? What are we doing to address these concerns and help encourage participation in the program?**

VA has worked extensively with Veteran Service Organizations (VSO), Congressional staff, and other stakeholders to design and improve the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP). This included providing stakeholders with draft versions of RAMP notification/decision letters, review rights, communication materials, and processing guidance. Based on stakeholder comments, VA made a number of changes to the RAMP procedures and the materials being sent to Veterans. Beyond the changes that VA has made to RAMP, VA regularly meets with stakeholders to discuss developments in the RAMP program and solicit feedback.

To ensure that Veterans are aware of and understand RAMP, VA is expanding its outreach and marketing campaign. As part of this expanded outreach, VA has increased its digital communication efforts through the use of informational and reminder e-mails to RAMP-eligible Veterans. To date, VA has e-mailed information on appeals modernization and RAMP to over 160,000 Veterans with pending compensation appeals. In addition, VA is sending targeted monthly e-mails to Veterans previously invited to participate in RAMP, reminding them of the opportunity to opt-in to RAMP.

During the week of February 5, 2018, VA’s Appeals Management Office (AMO) personnel traveled to the Phoenix, San Diego, Oakland, and Los Angeles Regional Offices to conduct targeted outreach to Veteran stakeholder groups. This outreach included contact with local

VSOs, private attorneys, Congressional stakeholders, and employees with outreach responsibilities to Veterans. VA intends to conduct similar outreach the week of February 20, 2018, at the Denver and Seattle Regional Offices and will continue these events at other locations as the program progresses.

- 2) As part of the process of reaching out to Veterans after they have received their opt-in letters for RAMP, the VA has stated that they are sending follow up letters and will be making follow up phone calls. We want to ensure that veterans are informed of their options, but do not want to appear to harass veterans who may not want to opt-in. Please explain what the follow on phone call and reminder letter schedule will be.**

VA is mindful of the need to provide Veterans with accurate and relevant information on RAMP and appeals modernization. Beginning January 15, 2018, VA started mailing follow-up opt-in notices approximately 45 days following an initial mailing to those Veterans who have been invited, but remain undecided about RAMP. VA is not currently making any follow-up phone calls; however, any outbound phone calls would be informational in nature.

- 3) The VA has stated that it intends to set up an outbound call center regarding RAMP. What procedures will you put in place for the outbound call center to inform veterans without appearing to act as a salesperson for the program?**

VA is exploring the possibility of creating a RAMP outbound call center. The call center would contact all claimants who have received an invitation to participate in RAMP. The call center would contact Veterans to ensure they have received the invitation and answer any questions regarding the program. Prior to making outbound calls, the call agent would be supplied with a call script. The script would provide information about the new law and guidance that VA personnel should not provide advice or encouragement as to whether the Veteran should elect RAMP. Call agents should provide Veterans factual information about RAMP and refrain from providing recommendations to participate in RAMP, or suggesting which lane may be the best option for the Veteran to pursue. Consistent with the RAMP invitation, scripts also would advise

Veterans to consult with their VSO, attorney, or claims agent if such a representative has been designated.

- 4) Please provide your plan to not inundate veterans with the blast info email regarding RAMP, the targeted email for those who have been sent opt-in notices, the follow up emails and phone calls.**

Consistently, VSOs, Congressional staff, and other stakeholders have expressed concern that Veterans need more information on RAMP and appeals modernization. Based on the feedback received from these stakeholders, VA is increasing and improving outreach. Accordingly, VA is employing various proven and effective methods of communication (i.e., direct mail, personal contact, Internet, etc.), that will reach a variety of audiences. The goal of VA's communication strategy is to ensure all interested parties are provided the required information to make a decision that is best for them. In VA's view, a direct mail invitation followed by a 45-day reminder letter and potential e-mail, strikes the right balance.

- 5) Please provide written reason that you are not testing RAMP within the Board of Appeals? Provide specific regulatory guidance that would prevent you from testing RAMP at the Board. If you cannot provide regulatory guidance that prevents you from doing so, please provide a detailed explanation why you are not testing RAMP at the Board.**

The focus of RAMP is to address the approximately 400,000 cases that are not yet activated at the Board and to offer claimants a faster resolution. The Board currently has approximately 72,000 cases activated and is focusing resources on reducing this pending legacy inventory, including through streamlining processes to allow attorneys and Judges to deliver as many decisions as possible. To date, the Board has issued approximately 28,000 decisions this fiscal year, nearly 15,000 more decisions than last year at this time, and is on pace to reach an historical fiscal goal of 81,000 decisions.

The Board is exploring a pilot program that will allow VA to make predictions regarding Veteran behavior, resource allocation, and timeliness in all five options in the new system. As a first step, VA is working with its United States Digital Service (Digital Service) partners to perform research with Veterans to investigate their understanding and thought processes concerning the choices the new law provides. Digital Service conducts user research in conjunction with current Caseflow development, and is able to adjust its methodology to capture specific Veteran data about the new system within this ongoing effort. User research with Veterans provides preliminary data about Veteran choices and experiences, which will allow VA to construct trend models and tests that account for uncertainty. The Board will use this data to develop a pilot program that is in line with the type of pilot the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommends. The goal of a Board pilot is to identify needs and concerns related to full implementation, and make predictions about timeliness and productivity. The Board will engage all stakeholders before launching any pilot.

**6) What metrics is the VA using to compare RAMP and the Legacy system? If the VA does not have specific metrics, why hasn't the VA developed the metrics? If the VA has plans to develop metrics in the future, when will they be available for review?**

RAMP and the legacy appeals workload are monitored using separate metrics. The primary correlation between the two workloads is that as claimants opt-in to the RAMP program, they are withdrawing their legacy appeal. Therefore, in our current modeling, the forecasted RAMP inventory will provide a coinciding drop in the legacy inventory. The metrics for the legacy workload and the RAMP workload are tracked separately. Some of the current metrics for RAMP include:

- Average days pending – Monitor timeliness for claims processing within RAMP disaggregated by supplemental claim and higher-level review lanes.
- Average days to completion for completed claims – Maintain completion within the goal of 125 days on average for the higher-level review and supplemental claim lanes.
- Average days from Notice of Disagreement date to date of opt-in – Monitor the age of appeals that are being opted into the RAMP system. This will help with

outreach by indicating what population of legacy appeals is showing the best tendency to opt-in to the RAMP process.

- Average days from opt-in invitation letter date to opt-in date – Determine the average time claimants are waiting to submit opt-in responses. With follow-up invitations being sent on the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month, approximately 45 days after the initial invitation, following the initial invitation letter being sent, this helps identify the effectiveness of the follow-up letters as well as focused outreach at regional offices.
- Capacity – As RAMP progresses, VA is learning what the capacity requirements are for higher-level reviews and supplemental claims to better forecast resource needs and productivity targets. Currently the sample size is insufficient to accurately make these determinations.

**7) Current VA planning appears to be operating under best case scenarios for high RAMP opt-in rates, but has not provided any models for varying levels of opt-in rates, funding, FTE or what would happen if IT equipment and software is not delivered. Please provide us with:**

- a) A projection of varying levels of opt-ins for RAMP and how that would affect the overall implementation of Appeals Modernization.**

The current opt-in rate does not provide a sufficient sample size for accurate forecasting; as small changes in opt-in receipts would have a large impact on any forecast modeling. Currently, using the limited data received from RAMP, VA is identifying the key metrics and incorporating those metrics into a model that is being developed. RAMP will yield the actual needed data that will assist VA in creating a forecasting model, identifying best practices, and making changes to its procedures, processes and systems in order to gain efficiencies and faster adjudications. VA is using the data collected during RAMP to create a capacity model based upon actual data. VA will use this model to project the resources required to address the legacy appeals inventory and process supplemental claims and higher-level reviews under RAMP. During this program, VA will gather data and conduct trends analyses on aspects of Veterans' behavior, to include their decision to opt-in to the new system, employee productivity, processing timeliness, and

inventory measures. Moreover, the model will account for varying RAMP opt-in rates and will help delineate the upper and lower bounds of the resource requirements to work both RAMP claims and reduce the legacy appeal inventory. VA will use RAMP data to assist in developing future resource requirements as part of the annual budget process.

**b) Projections of current and needed funding throughout the implementation of Appeals Modernization process.**

VA will use existing resources devoted to drafting regulations, implementing IT system changes, establishing internal procedures, creating training materials, conducting training, and releasing communications and outreach products necessary for implementation of the new system. VA subject matter experts (SMEs) representing the Board, as well as VBA's program business lines, the AMO, and the Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity (PA&I), support the Office of Business Process Integration's (OBPI) rotational planning and requirements gathering sessions to ensure that methods for capturing the data to accurately measure, track, and report metrics required by the Appeals Modernization Act are developed. In addition, to further refine the development schedule, VBA's OBPI is working with the VA Office of Information and Technology and Digital Service to ensure full integration.

Regarding delineation of the total resource requirements to administer the new appeals system and address the legacy appeals inventory, VA maintains the RAMP pilot will provide better data and trend analysis for capacity modeling the resources needed; however the current RAMP participation rate is not yielding sufficient information to make this determination. Therefore, VA is adopting additional strategies to better delineate the resources required. With new strategies, as well as continued analysis of data received from RAMP, VA will project various scenarios detailing resource requirements and delineation to be shared with the Congress and GAO in the near future.

VA will use the data collected during RAMP to create a capacity model based upon actual data. VA will use this model to project the resources required to address the legacy appeals inventory and process supplemental claims and higher-level reviews under RAMP. During this program, VA will gather data and conduct a trend analyses on: 1) Veterans behavior, to include their

decision to opt-in to the new system; 2) employee productivity; 3) processing timeliness; and 4) inventory measures. Moreover, the model will account for varying RAMP opt-in rates and will help delineate the upper and lower bounds of the resource requirements to work both RAMP claims and reduce the legacy appeal inventory. VA will use RAMP data to assist in developing future resource requirements as part of the annual budget process.

The Board anticipates that its existing resources will allow for successful implementation of the new system. Additionally, the Board will not require separate resources for legacy and new system appeals. The Board plans to make adjustments to administrative procedures such as intake of appeals, routing to Veterans Service Organizations, scheduling of hearings, and dispatching decisions which will be aided by technology upgrades to assist staff in performing these duties. Similarly, attorneys and Veterans Law Judges will be well-equipped to adjudicate appeals in both systems, as the applicable law regarding Veterans' benefits does not change. Therefore, it will not be necessary to divide resources between systems. Moreover, the Board will utilize Caseflow Queue for the management and distribution of appeals in all four dockets under the new law.

The Board is leveraging project management support from the VA Office of Enterprise Integration (OEI) and additional support from VA's PA&I, and OBPI to develop better predictions regarding specific resource allocation between all dockets.

**c) A schedule of projected completion dates for IT program, if/how delayed implementation would affect implementation of Appeals Modernization.**

**High-Level 2018 Calendar**

Caseflow Product	Q1 (Jan-Mar)	Q2 (Apr-Jun)	Q3 (Jul-Sep)	Q4 (Oct-Dec)
Status	Finalize language; develop backend; Release Status v2	Discovery on changes required for AMA appeals	Ongoing discovery; development on changes required for AMA appeals	Ongoing discovery; development on changes required for AMA appeals
Reader	Add features based on user feedback			
Queue	Discover Attorney/Judge work flow; Release Queue mocks to attorney staff. Begin development	Release Queue functionality to initial user base; Test functionality with admin staff; Ongoing discovery & development	Release new functionality to additional users; Ongoing discovery & development	Release new functionality to additional users; Ongoing discovery & development
Intake	Ongoing discovery; Implement functionality to receive RAMP NODs	Ongoing discovery; Release reporting functionality; Integrate with NWQ	Ongoing discovery; Support processing of official forms	Ongoing discovery & development
Hearing Prep	Complete pilot with Judges	Release to all Board Judges		
Hearing Scheduling	Present development plan; Obtain FY19 scheduling policy from Board	Discovery & Development	Development; Release schedule allocation for FY19	Ongoing discovery & development focused on placing Veterans into hearing slots

Releases to users will occur throughout timeline, even if not specifically indicated; all dates and work subject to change based on evolving VA policies and processes

As is the practice of agency teams of the Digital Service, and common of leading private sector technology companies, Digital Service implements agile software development methods in developing Caseflow. Applying these methods, the team has not developed a comprehensive set of requirements prior to initiating development, but rather develops the project in two-week iterations or "sprints." New code is continually integrated into the production environment, meaning that improvements are made available to users as frequently as every day. The contents of each sprint are informed by a schedule that is continually revised to reflect new information and shifts in external factors.

Caseflow Intake was launched to VBA users on October 30, 2017, prior to the first mailing of RAMP opt-in notices. Digital Service has continued to focus its development of Board-specific Caseflow functionality to be prepared in late summer 2018, to ensure there is sufficient time to adapt should unexpected challenges arise in the discovery and development process.



Additionally, Digital Service is well aware that changes in the implementation plan, and the development of new VA policies surrounding the implementation, may impact VA's needs for Caseflow development.

**8) What in depth planning outlines will you be providing to Congress in the next 60-90 days?**

VA will submit the next 90-day update to its implementation plan in February 2018. Thereafter, pursuant to section 3(d) of Public Law 115-55, VA will submit an update every 90 days through February 2019, and every 180 days thereafter for the seven-year period following such applicability date.

**9) What metrics are you using for the 3% uptake? What do you feel is causing the 3% uptake?**

It is still too early in the process to determine what motivates Veterans to choose to opt-in to the RAMP pilot. VA initially extended the invitation to participate in RAMP to Veterans who have the oldest appeals pending. However, preliminary data shows a lower than anticipated election rate. It is possible that this segment of the population may be reluctant to "get out of line" in order to participate in the new process. As VA has received more data from RAMP elections, it has begun to test various assumptions on Veteran behavior. For example, in February 2018, VA has continued to mail invitations to the oldest appellants in each of the appeal stages identified above, but has also sent approximately 10,000 invitations to Veterans with newly established appeals. This will allow VA to test the assumption whether the age and stage of a pending appeal impacts the election rate.

Moreover, throughout the week of February 5, 2018, VA's AMO personnel traveled to the Phoenix, San Diego, Oakland, and Los Angeles Regional Offices to conduct targeted outreach to Veteran stakeholder groups. This outreach included contact with local VSOs, private attorneys, congressional stakeholders, and employees with outreach responsibilities to Veterans. During the

week of February 20, 2018, VA conducted similar outreach at the Denver and Seattle Regional Offices and will continue these events at other locations as the program progresses.

**10) Assuming the new system is ready for implementation in February 2019, there will be essentially three systems in effect - the legacy system, RAMP, and the new system. What are the plans for winding down RAMP, and how will RAMP cases be treated in the new system?**

RAMP is a temporary program, which allows most Veterans who have a pending legacy appeal to opt into VBA's supplemental claim or higher-level review lanes in the new claims and appeals process. VBA will stop RAMP invitational mailings prior to the February 2019 implementation date of the new law. However, VA will continue processing any remaining RAMP elections by Veterans after the effective date of the law. Veterans who opt into RAMP after February 2019 and receive an initial supplemental claim or higher-level review decision will be permanently in the new system in the same manner as any other Veteran who receives a decision on a claim after February 2019.

**11) In the event that RAMP opt-in participation remains low, what effect will that have on processing legacy claims at the VBA and Board of Appeals?**

If the RAMP opt-in rate remains low, it will take longer to resolve the legacy backlog. Caseflow Queue will assist VA in management and distribution of appeals in all dockets after implementation. The Board is partnering with Digital Service to ensure that Caseflow Queue functionality includes the ability to adjust the case distribution ratio between all Board dockets based on the rate of: 1) the Veteran election in each docket; 2) the individual attorney productivity in each docket; and 3) the rate at which Veterans with legacy appeals opt into the new system.

The Board's goal is to provide resolutions for all Veterans with pending legacy appeals. Given the complex, non-linear legacy process, it is difficult for VA to project when all legacy appeals

will be resolved, or provide timeliness goals for legacy appeals. Moreover, the rate at which legacy appeals may be adjudicated depends largely on personnel resources, which is contingent on future appropriations. The Board is working with program management staff and Digital Service to develop milestones for the reduction of the legacy inventory, considering such dependencies as the opt-in rate from RAMP and statutory mechanisms, current resource levels, trends in adjudication of legacy appeals at the agencies of original jurisdiction, and any increases in productivity resulting from the strategies discussed above.

## **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

### **1) Please provide more specific information about the features of Caseflow and how it interfaces with VBMS? Will its functions be visible to representatives?**

Caseflow and VBMS are integrated in three areas, Certification, Dispatch, and Intake, where handoffs are necessary between the two systems. A description of each is provided below:

- 1) Caseflow Certification facilitates the transfer of cases from VBA to the Board and assists AOJ employees in accurately transferring appeals to the Board by cross-checking data between VBMS and the appeals database. This functionality checks that all required documents are of record are correctly uploaded to VBMS, validates the Veteran's hearing preference and Power of Attorney, and automates the completion and upload of the VA Form 8.
- 2) Caseflow Dispatch facilitates the transfer of cases back to VBA following issuance of a decision by the Board. Board decisions cannot be implemented until an "End Product" is established in VBMS. Caseflow Dispatch assists ARC employees in establishing End Products in VBMS, including those that would otherwise need to be routed to an RO or specialty center, and brokering those claims to the correct location.
- 3) Caseflow Intake functions as a front door for review requests under the Appeals Modernization Act to ensure that VA is able to comply with tracking and reporting requirements, for both RAMP and the full implementation of the law. Caseflow Intake processes all RAMP review requests, but is additionally undergoing continuous development to ensure that all necessary functionality is in place prior to

February 2019. Initial Intake functionality includes receiving and processing supplemental claims and requests for higher-level review, as well as notices of disagreement as Veterans re-enter the RAMP process. Specific to VBMS integration, Caseflow Intake functionality includes:

- a. the ability to establish EPs in VBMS for supplemental claims and higher-level reviews;
- b. the ability to route supplemental claim and higher-level review EPs to the National Work Queue;
- c. the ability to correctly track reviews in the supplemental claim, higher-level review, and appeal lanes to meet the Appeals Modernization Act tracking requirements; and
- d. the ability to collect and store all necessary routing data to enable VA to comply with the Appeals Modernization Act reporting requirements.

At this time, Caseflow functionality is not available to representatives. The current focus of development is squarely on ensuring VA is capable of managing the processing, tracking, and reporting of appeals in accordance with the Appeals Modernization Act.

**2) Will the new Caseflow system automatically flag veterans who have met the veteran age threshold for expedited appeals? Will Caseflow automatically flag cases coming into the Board that were previously expedited from the VBA?**

- a) If so, what checks and balances do you have in place to ensure that this automatic flag is being conducted appropriately?**
- b) If not, please provide what procedures will be in place to flag cases that are new to the Board?**

Yes, Caseflow at the Board will automatically flag Veterans who are eligible for Advancement on the Docket due to age, which occurs when Veterans reach 75 years old. As VBA flags Veterans for expediting when they reach 85 years old, this cohort will already be flagged upon

receipt of the appeal at the Board. The Board's administrative support staff, attorneys, and Veterans Law Judges will be able to verify that flags were appropriately placed.

**3) Mr. McLenachen indicated that the Appeals Management Office would not need a new IT system. Rather, he stated that VBMS would need a few "tweaks" to achieve the level of operability to necessarily to handle the appeals workload. He indicated that the VBMS modifications would reach 75% functionality by August 2018 and fully functionality by December 2018.**

- i. It is unclear why modifications that were described as "tweaks" are still nearly a year away until 100% functionality. Please provide a detailed explanation of the modifications made, the reason for the modification, and those planned to be made to VBMS.**

Within the VBA IT systems environment, implementation of the new process will primarily require modifications to VBMS. Implementing the necessary changes within VBMS will require modification to core VBMS functions, ratings, correspondence and National Work Queue (NWQ) processing rules. VBMS and other existing systems will be modified to support the new processes, procedures, and reporting requirements mandated by the law. Some of the VBA lines of business not currently using these systems will be brought into this framework. In the event all required IT updates are not available for business lines with low numbers of appeals, VA can still implement the new law through manual processes.

- ii. Please explain what "75%" functionality refers to. What will be operation in August and what will still need development?**

VBMS modifications are planned to reach 75 percent functionality by August 2018 and should reach 100 percent by the end of the calendar year. VBMS already collects most of the data that is required to track and report on appeals as required by new law in addition to fully implementing requirements for review of compensation claims. Changes to VBMS's modules will extend tracking and reporting of claims status beyond compensation claims, where the vast majority of VA's pending legacy inventory lie, to VBA's other lines of business to ensure that all required elements can be tracked for all claims.

## **General Functions**

Modifications to core functions will enable VA to:

- Electronically differentiate between a higher-level review, a supplemental claim, a Board remand, and a Board grant based on Veteran preference to allow appropriate handling of information within the VBMS system.
- Track the following elements related to a higher-level review, a supplemental claim, a Board remand, or a Board grant of benefits:
  - Date of establishment;
  - Contention;
  - Date of final disposition;
  - Type of claim: (higher-level review, supplemental claim, Board remand, Board grant); and
  - Status of final disposition (i.e., granted, denied, etc.).
- Store, format, and share claim-related data with VBA's Corporate Data Warehouse so it can be consolidated and used to issue VBA-wide reports as required under the statute.
- Map a contention to a previously rated issue.
- Automatically set the correct status for End Products 030 and 040.
- Route claims based on routing preferences and auto-assign claims based on higher-level adjudicator role.
- Capture positive findings of fact for rating and non-rating decisions so that they are available for any future decision on the same issue/contention within eFolder.
- Add dispositions to a contention (ex: Duty To Assist, Denied, Granted).
- Retrieve a claim and disposition for all rated issues associated with the claim.
- Capture the disposition of a non-rating review.
- Support storage and handling of additional document types (ex: higher-level review decision document), and ability to create required correspondence (ex: improved decision notice).

These modifications allow for increased integration with internal governmental systems, consolidation of reporting data to a single location, and improved accuracy in reporting based on data integrity.

## **Ratings**

Decision makers across all the VBA regional offices use VBMS to issue rating decisions. The Appeals Modernization Act mandates that all VA's decision notices contain seven specific elements. In most cases across VA, decision notifications do not contain all seven. Rating functionality within VBMS will be updated to enable all claims processors to track and use all seven, which include:

- Identify the issues adjudicated.
- Provide a summary of the evidence considered during the decision.
- Provide a summary of the applicable laws and regulations.
- Identify findings favorable to the claimant.
- In the case of a denial, identify elements not satisfied leading to the denial.
- Provide an explanation of how to obtain or access evidence used in making the decision.
- If applicable, identify the criteria that must be satisfied to grant service connection or the next higher level of compensation.

The System needs to:

- Provide glossary and formatting enhancements to support the new content required under the statute.
- Update to ratings glossaries and standard data.
- Deliver consistent decision notices that are compliant with the Appeals Modernization Act.

## **Correspondence**

The new review types and other rule changes contained in the Appeals Modernization Act will require that VA modify its communications with the Veteran in the following ways:

- VA must communicate to every Veteran who receives a Statement of the Case (SOC) or Supplemental Statement of the Case (SSOC) by VA of the option to “opt-in” to the new claims process.

- VA must provide the appropriate forms to Veterans who request review or appeal of a VA decision.
- Updates to language contained in notification decisions and letters and functionality to ensure Veterans understand that they may not request a higher-level review of a higher-level review decision.

The System needs to:

- Make approximately seven new forms available in the VBMS forms library.
- Support updates to language to various VBMS letters.
- Support logic changes to the automated decision letter (ADL).
- Track elections by claimants related to the S/SOC opt-in option.

### **National Work Queue (NWQ)**

VA is obligated to provide every Veteran who receives an S/SOC after February 2019 the opportunity to “opt in” to the new process from the legacy process. The business need is for VA to be able to modify NWQ to:

- Limit the routing of higher-level review requests to VBA decision-makers who are authorized to perform a higher-level review.
- Route requests for a higher-level review to a station other than the station that issued the original decision, if requested by Veteran. While the default will be routing to another station, the Veteran may request that the claim remain at the station that issued the original decision.

The System needs to:

- Synchronize tracking within the Corporate Database of all individuals who opt in or stay with the legacy process from Caseflow inputs based on receipt of SOC or SSOC.
- Begin processing all Appeals Modernization Act claims at the appropriate time.
- Trigger outbound communication to Veteran as attachment or within letters that opt-in to the new process.



## **Timeline**

The VBMS development team is currently in the “design” phase of system modernization. Full business epics and sub-epics have been developed documenting the necessary requirements. Based on the current projected schedule, the design phase will be followed by two “development” phases in which the business solution will be developed, tested and deployed as detailed below.

<b>High Level VBMS Appeals Modernization Schedule</b>			
	<b>May 2018</b>	<b>Aug 2018</b>	<b>Dec 2018</b>
<b>Appeals Claims Establishment</b>	Discovery & Technical Design Alternatives	- Establish and process appeals claims in Caseflow intake - Route claims using the NWQ national routing	Enhance NWQ routing based on appeals attributes and user feedback
<b>Appeals Processing Support</b>	Discovery & Technical Design Alternatives	-Share information with Caseflow on appeal process from Efolder and Claims disposition	Refine interactions with Caseflow
<b>Tracking &amp; Reporting</b>	Discovery & Technical Design Alternatives	- Track claims processing - Store metric for reporting - Include provisions for Federal Tax Information as required	-Refine data with PA&I for report creation

## **BOARD OF APPEALS**

- 1) As noted in the 01/30/2018 hearing, BVA has a backlog of hearing requests at nearly 85,000. Our understanding is that they have the capacity to handle about 11,000 -**

**12,000 hearings a year. What are BVA’s specific plans for managing the pending backlog of hearing requests, and how will these be handled when the new system goes into effect and hearings also need to be handled in the new system?**

The Board currently offers approximately 25,000 hearing opportunities per year. The hearing take rate is approximately 70 percent. Last year, the Board Judges held 16,626 hearings and is on pace to hold a similar number in fiscal year 2018. The Board works closely with its VSO and advocacy group stakeholders on hearing scheduling. The Board is also working with OIT to upgrade current hearing capability technology. Once the new system is in place, Caseflow queue will manage all cases with hearing requests based on whether they are legacy cases or the new process hearing lane. Hearings will be managed and held according to the appropriate distribution.

**2) How will the RAMP cases that have been appealed to BVA be processed into the various lanes at BVA?**

RAMP participants who have received a decision on higher-level review or a supplementation claim have the option to appeal to the Board. If they choose to appeal to the Board, they may request: (1) Board review without a hearing or submission of additional evidence, (2) Board review without a hearing but with the opportunity to submit additional evidence, or (3) Board review with a hearing, which includes the opportunity to submit additional evidence. When the new system becomes effective, RAMP appeals will be processed on one of the Board's dockets in accordance with the participant's choice.

**3) If a Veteran opts-in to RAMP and subsequently in need to have their appeal expedited at the Board of Appeals or VBA, what procedures are in place to ensure that their case can be expedited at the VBA or advanced on the docket at the Board? We understand that the current Legacy system already has a system in place, please provide the regulatory and internal guidance that ensure that RAMP and Appeals Modernization participants have the same protections.**

Currently, the Board's regulatory guidance for advancement on the docket is codified at 38 C.F.R. § 20.900(c). The Appeals Modernization Act did not change the statutory authority for advancement on the docket.

- 4) Chairwoman Mason indicated that training completion for the new IT system “Caseflow Queue” currently had no timetable for its completion. However, Chairman Mason also indicated that a timeline would be completed by the end of February 2018. Please provide the timeline once VA has completed it at the end of February 2018.**

Caseflow Queue, an application for managing work at the Board of Veterans’ Appeals, is undergoing continuous iterative development to ensure it is ready to manage legacy and the new process appeals dockets prior to February 2019. Consistent with its agile development methodology, Digital Service is rolling out functionality to small groups of pilot users in stages, to ensure that the application meets users’ needs. The first group to pilot Caseflow Queue functionality is attorneys at the Board, and training for that pilot group was conducted on Thursday, February 15, 2018. Digital Service is on schedule to release additional functionality to users as it is developed, and will deliver a minimally viable product to all users prior to February 2019. Digital Service will continue to provide additional training as additional functionality and new user groups are added.

- a) If that timeline has not been completed by the stated date, please provide an explanation to the Committee and my office. That explanation should include an expected date in which VA can provide the timeline.**

In accordance with agile software development methods, Digital Service has not developed a specific timeline; rather, the project is developed in two-week iterations or "sprints." New code is continually integrated into the production environment, meaning that improvements are made available to users as frequently as every day. The contents of each sprint are informed by a schedule that is continually revised to reflect new information and shifts in external factors.