



Office of Information and Technology

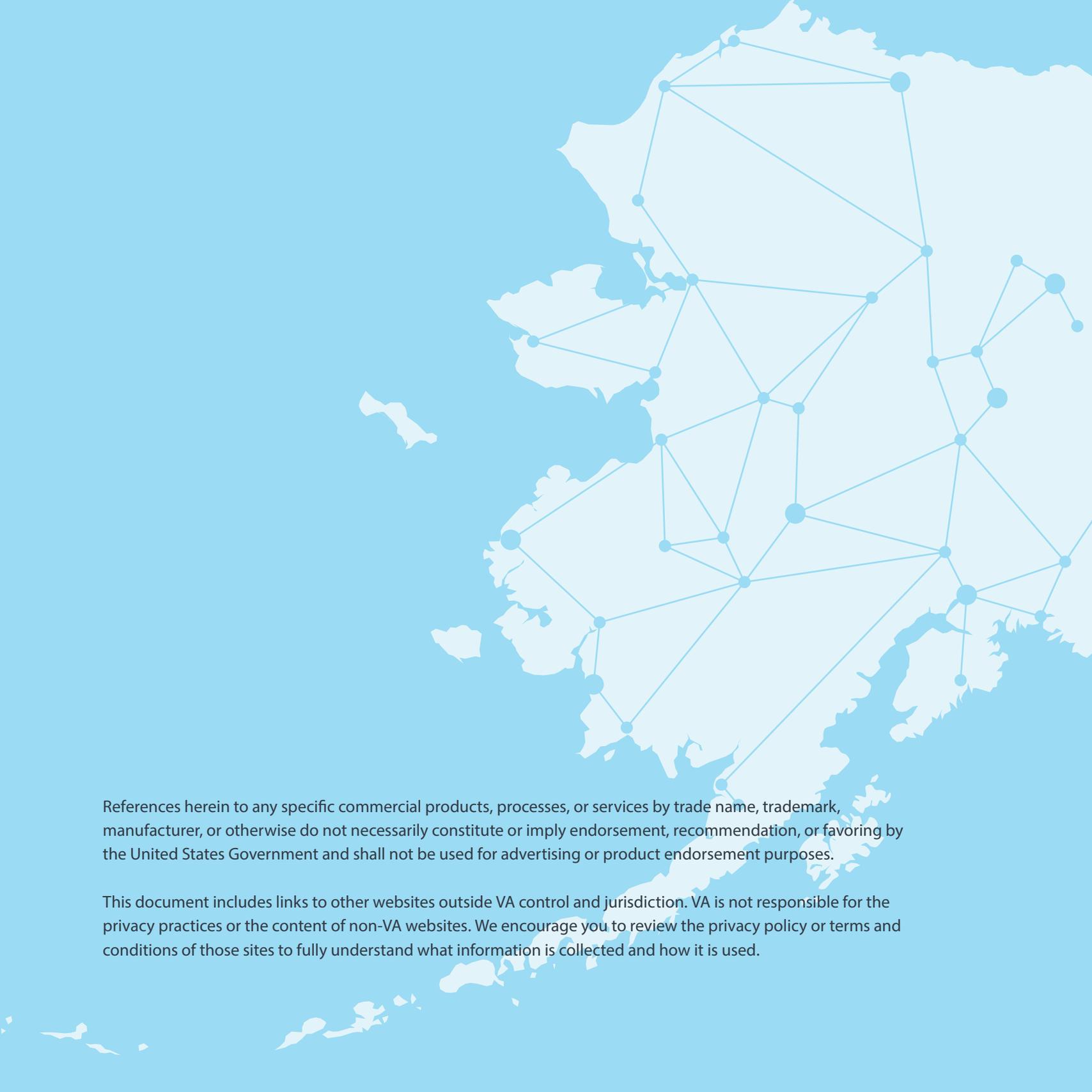
# Driving Digital Transformation at VA

FY20 Year in Review

**VA**



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**  
Office of Information and Technology



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# MESSAGE FROM THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY

## **ACCELERATING OUR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION – OIT'S 2020 YEAR IN REVIEW**

In March of 2020, the United States was thrown a curveball in the form of a once-in-a-century pandemic—and at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), we rose to meet that challenge with historic results. I'm proud to present the Office of Information and Technology's (OIT) 2020 Year in Review as a highlight reel of these results and of the achievements we have made as an organization so far in 2020.

It's been a year of unprecedented challenge and hardship, but 2020 has also brought us insight and opportunity. The COVID-19 pandemic jumpstarted an accelerated implementation of our [Digital Transformation Strategy](#) as we strove to provide care, benefits, and services not only to our Veterans, but to the country in support of VA's Fourth Mission. But despite these challenges, OIT has made incredible progress—just not necessarily in the ways we had anticipated back in 2019.

This pandemic has taught us many things, but chief among them is that no matter the circumstances, VA's prime directive remains to provide world-class service to our customers. Even as we pivoted to quintuple our telehealth capacity, ensure VA staff could continue to work remotely without experiencing service disruptions, and deliver crucial equipment all over the country, we are continuing work on other focus areas like cybersecurity, IT Workforce Transformation, and interoperability.

Customer service is everything in VA and OIT. It drives our dedication to Digital Transformation and our reason for pursuing new technologies, new capabilities, and new partnerships with industry-leading companies. And if there's one thing we know in OIT, it's that customer service Starts With Us. We know we need to focus on providing an excellent customer experience not only for Veterans, but for the VA staff who serve them. By ensuring that VA employees have the tools and technology they need to do their jobs—no matter where they are or what situation they're in—we can continue to make sure that our nation's Veterans have access to the care they need and deserve.

Secretary Robert Wilkie said it best when he was named VA Secretary in 2018: “We have a solemn responsibility to our Veterans—not just today, but in the months and years to come to set the standard for the millions coming into our VA, and for the millions who will join the ranks down the years.” No matter what the future holds for VA, OIT will always stand ready to weather the storm and ensure that VA can continue to support our nation’s Veterans—today’s, tomorrow’s, and all those who will one day retire from their service to our country and turn to us for the benefits they have earned.

I’m incredibly proud to be part of the OIT team that has enabled VA to sustain its operations and deliver care to our nation as we battle COVID-19. It’s thanks to the dedication, passion, and heart for service of each member of our team that we are realizing our vision to become a world-class IT organization that provides a seamless, unified Veteran experience.

Sincerely,

**James P. Gfrerer**

**Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology  
and Chief Information Officer**

**Department of Veterans Affairs**





# INTRODUCTION TO VA'S DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

## **OUR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**

VA's strategy for Digital Transformation provides a common understanding of not just where technology is going, but how VA will get there. A national OIT workforce of 16,000-plus—supporting 1,255 health care facilities, 143 cemeteries, and 56 Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA) regional offices—is driving this Digital Transformation to realize a seamless, unified Veteran experience.

Every OIT team centers their work on what is known as the “4-5-6” framework: four guiding principles for how to accomplish the work; five strategic goals to bring about the next phase of our Digital Transformation; and six focus areas that help integrate and direct product design and solution development. Combined, they help OIT deliver effective solutions that enable VA to provide improved customer service and a secure, seamless experience that drives value for our Veterans, VA employees, and the taxpayers who fund VA.

## HOW OIT SUPPORTS THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS' PRIORITIES

### VA'S PRIORITIES



Customer Service



MISSION Act Implementation



Business Transformation



VA/DOD Collaboration

**Customer Service:** Our goal is to make accessing VA services seamless, effective, efficient, and emotionally resonant for Veterans and their caregivers, beneficiaries, and families.

**MISSION Act Implementation:** This landmark legislation fundamentally transforms how VA approaches and delivers health care. As we improve our benefits and services for

Veterans, we're also improving the choices they have over where to receive that care and service. Since meeting our initial June 6 milestone in 2019, we have continued to make significant, impactful progress—but we are not finished yet.

**Business Transformation:** We empower our employees to provide the world-class customer service VA employees need and Veterans deserve. By reforming the IT systems responsible for HR management, finance, and acquisition and supply chains, we're restructuring the very core of our operations in OIT.

**VA/DOD Collaboration on EHRM:** We're working closely with DOD to implement a modern and fully interoperable electronic health record (EHR) inside and outside the departments. OIT is a crucial partner in this effort.

### OIT'S FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES



Transparency



Accountability



Innovation



Teamwork

**Transparency:** We share our successes and our failures. We tell it like it is, instead of qualifying or glossing over the truth.

**Accountability:** We own the issues within our environment and our organization, and we hold ourselves accountable to take the steps to improve them while transparently sharing our progress along the way.

**Innovation:** We ask, “Why not?” and “What if?”. We look at our environment and our Veterans’ needs and find opportunities to change things for the better.

**Teamwork:** We work for the successes of the team, not the glory of the moment. We focus on outcomes. We ask ourselves, “Is this in the best interest of the Veteran?”

# OIT'S FIVE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES/GOALS

These five imperatives drive our strategy and outcomes.

**Exceptional Customer Service:** Deliver exceptional customer service by reinvigorating partnerships with VA business lines to understand customer needs, prioritize business problems, and deliver IT solutions based on human-centered design and product management, culminating in a world-class Veteran experience.

**IT Modernization:** Drive IT and VA capability modernization through Digital Transformation, the refreshing and decommissioning of software and infrastructure, and an OIT business value framework that is designed around customer-driven requirements.

**Strategic Sourcing:** Transform procurement and acquisition processes to support aggressive modernization efforts by optimizing all available sourcing capabilities and streamlining processes for selecting the right capability for each Digital Transformation requirement.

**IT Workforce Transformation:** Inspire a culture of Digital Transformation, IT modernization, and customer service in every OIT employee through education, training, reskilling, and professional certifications while transforming recruiting efforts to make OIT an employer of choice for next generation IT workers.

**Seamless and Secure Interoperability:** Achieve seamless and secure data interoperability across VA, DOD, Federal, and commercial partners by identifying, documenting, and disseminating well-defined, standardized, and secure design, interfaces, and processes to access authoritative data that streamlines the Veteran experience.



Exceptional  
Customer Service



IT Modernization



Strategic Sourcing



IT Workforce  
Transformation



Seamless and Secure  
Interoperability

## OIT'S SIX FOCUS AREAS

We are changing the way we procure services by taking a “buy first” approach to new systems, getting out of the business of building our own applications, and relying more on cloud, managed and shared services, and commercial-off-the-shelf products. These efforts focus on six areas.

**Manage Data:** We are defining authoritative data sources and ensuring data is consistent and secure across VA so we can better leverage our vast data stores, improve data-driven decision making, and simplify the way Veterans interact with VA platforms.

**Migrate to the Cloud:** We are migrating infrastructure and applications to commercial cloud providers to reduce operational costs and increase flexibility, allowing us to deliver services to Veterans more quickly and reliably.

**Improve Cybersecurity:** We are implementing an enterprise cybersecurity risk management framework—based on industry best practices—to stay at the forefront of protecting VA data and Veteran information from cyber threats.

**Digitize Business Processes:** We are upgrading VA's customer-facing digital tools to give Veterans easier access to their care and benefits while using new technologies and services to streamline our internal business processes.

**Decommission Legacy Systems:** We are moving critical functions from outdated platforms into more modern systems that operate at lower maintenance costs. We will reinvest these cost savings in projects to improve services for all Veterans.

**Recruit and Retain a World-Class IT Workforce:** We are not only dedicated to recruiting next generation IT workers to OIT, we are committed to training and re-skilling current employees and ensuring that VA has the right people powering its digital modernization.



Manage  
Data



Migrate to  
the Cloud



Improve  
Cybersecurity



Digitize Business  
Processes



Decommission  
Legacy Systems



Recruit and Retain a  
World-Class IT Workforce

# COMBINING IT ALL TO BRING OUR STRATEGY TO LIFE

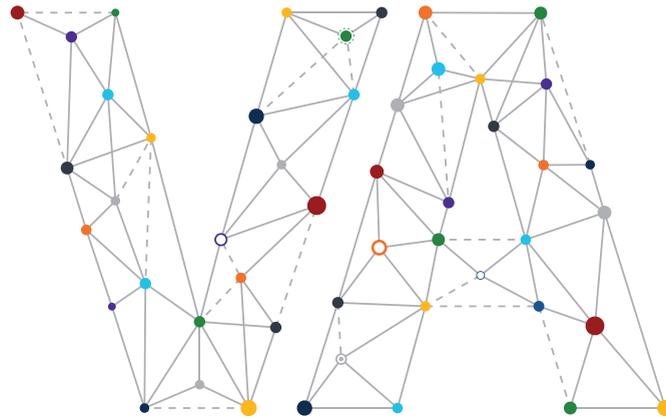
Everything that we do in OIT maps directly to one of our five strategic imperatives and falls under one of our six focus areas.

*Every OIT employee fits into this strategy like a single piece into a huge puzzle.*

No matter what state, town, or VA facility we're located in, we're intrinsically linked together by the strategy that defines our everyday work. From field employees at local VA Medical Centers to the staff in the VA Central Office in Washington, D.C., we all have a crucial role in the success of major initiatives across the enterprise.

Our actions in 2020, especially within the context of our nation's response to a once-in-a-century pandemic, are proof that even the smallest daily task can make a nationwide difference.

With all of OIT working together from coast to coast over the past year, we are beginning to realize our vision—a world-class organization that provides a seamless, unified Veteran experience through the delivery of state-of-the-art technology.



## ***A Passionate IT Organization***

“Why would I choose to work for OIT? Simply put, the drive to create the best possible support to those caring for our Veterans is evident across everyone in OIT.”

**Robert Finigan - Director of Operations, Territory 2**



**Watch Video**



*This is how VA's Digital Transformation will create the experience that our nation's Veterans need and deserve.*



EXCEPTIONAL  
CUSTOMER SERVICE

## CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES RISE DURING PANDEMIC

As OIT rises to the challenge to support VA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, so too does its customer satisfaction score. In April, OIT's Customer Satisfaction Index Score rose three points—from 75 to 78—putting the organization on par with major technology companies like Google (with a score of 79) and Microsoft (with a score of 77).

Our dedication to our business partners, stakeholders, and—most importantly—our nation's Veterans, shows in the results of OIT's most recent Customer Experience Survey. This monthly survey was distributed to 35,000 randomly selected employees across the VA enterprise. Close to 7,000 of those employees responded, representing a six percent jump in the response rate compared to March.

OIT's Net Promoter Score—an indicator of how likely our customers are to recommend our products and services to a friend or colleague—saw a nine-point increase from March, with 52 percent of those surveyed indicating themselves as promoters. Scores in effectiveness, trust, emotion, and ease also increased across the board, demonstrating improvement in all facets of the OIT customer experience dimension.

Over the past several months, the Department has made a massive shift to a telework environment, requiring increased support from IT staff. While telework has been a large adjustment for some, our customers noted that, helpdesk and local IT staff have been extremely helpful, reliable, and responsive when walking them through telework setups.

Customers also noted a strong sense of teamwork, empathy, and patience between themselves and IT staff. This focus on empathy and service was a key contributor to OIT's success.

As OIT continues to support VA, our Veterans, and the nation's Health care system to fulfill our Fourth Mission, we thank every one of our valued employees and applaud their efforts to ensure our Veterans, their families, and their caregivers have access to the care, benefits, and services they deserve.

*"Part of the department's mission is its commitment to providing exceptional customer service...Among the Veterans' calls VA heeded: building a simpler, more user-friendly VA.gov website and expanding telehealth services to the 40% of Veterans living in rural areas."*

**VA Secretary Robert Wilkie about VA Being Recognized for Health IT Innovations Directly Impacting Veterans**

# THE ENTERPRISE SERVICE DESK NOTCHES TOP QUALITY MARKS

OIT is dedicated to improving support for its customers—staff within VA—so they, in turn, can better serve Veterans. As part of the Enterprise Service Desk’s commitment to delivering an improved customer experience, Enterprise Service Desk formed a team of dedicated Quality Analysts with a primary focus of monitoring Tier 1 calls to assess service desk agent performance. Tier 1 is a customer’s first line of support to resolve IT-related issues—VA’s IT “help desk” for its employees.



Through the work of the Quality Analyst team, the Tier 1 desk recently achieved a call-quality score of 94 percent—their highest monthly average since the program launched over a year and a half ago.

The Quality Analyst team evaluated each Enterprise Service Desk agent three times per month on more than 30 behavior indicators in the following areas:

- Call opening and closing
- Customer service skills
- Problem solving
- Job knowledge

The top-notch rating is attributed to improved coaching and a more effective development counseling structure between Enterprise Service Desk management and agents. A quality evaluation is the key to gaining valuable insight to support positive behaviors to tailor a personal approach for agent coaching sessions.

# OIT SUPPORTS VBA STAFF WHO PROCESS RECORD NUMBERS OF VETERAN CLAIMS DURING PANDEMIC

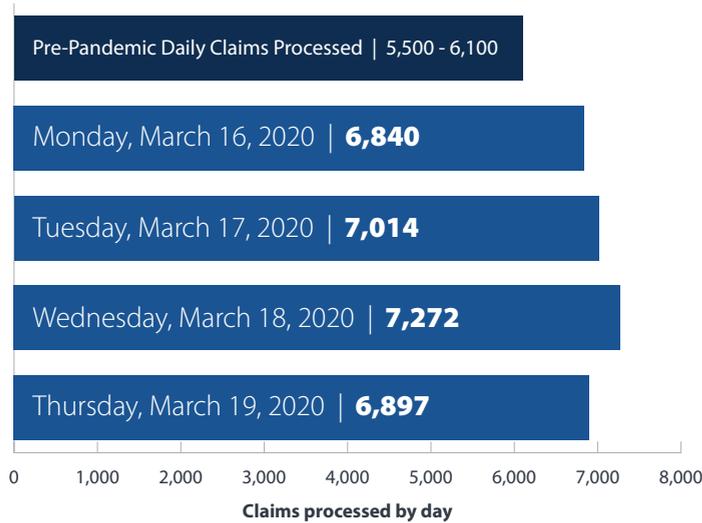
As VA ramped up its response across the enterprise to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, OIT went the extra mile to ensure that Veterans continued receiving uninterrupted service.

In support of VA’s Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the dedication of OIT employees drove exceptional results amid challenging circumstances. VBA and OIT leadership teams worked shoulder to shoulder to conduct joint gateway ‘stress tests’ on the Virtual Private Network (VPN) and the Citrix Access Gateway (CAG). Both ‘stress tests’ enabled expansion

of VBA’s telework capacity, which, in turn allowed VBA to successfully process record numbers of Veterans claims as processors started working from home.

One key category of essential services for VA is processing Veteran’s disability compensation and pension claims. IT Specialists distinguished themselves by ensuring that VBA processors, many moving to work remotely, could process and address claims without disruption.

As VA activated coronavirus pandemic-related IT systems testing and expansion in March, VBA processed the following total claims per day:



To put these data points into context, during a normal week, VBA production volume fluctuates between 5,500 to 6,100 claims processed daily, according to Bennett Gebken, Senior Program Analyst of Integrated Systems Delivery at VBA's Office of Business Process Integration.

"Using rough numbers, VBA's productivity was 10 percent to 15 percent above the normal averages even as VBA claims

processors worked from home to implement social distancing measures," Mr. Gebken said, referring to the week of March 16. He added,

*"It's impressive that we are producing more than normal, instead of having a drop in productivity."*

"It highlights that our telework capabilities are working as designed, thanks to years of OIT investment coupled with VBA continuity of operations and human capital planning."

Even as VA's systems infrastructure specialists activated emergency stress-testing to expand VA workforce telework capacity and other coronavirus pandemic-related contingencies, IT Specialists dug deep, and worked shoulder to shoulder with VBA personnel to meet claims-processing requirements.

The OIT specialists' successful support of VBA claims processors during the fast-moving pivot to emergency footing represents their commitment to fulfilling VA Secretary Robert Wilkie's promise: consistently providing quality delivery of the benefits and services that Veterans have earned.



## *Working for DigitalVA*

"There's no finer mission...we get to truly serve heroes every day."

**Jack Galvin - Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, IT Operations and Services**



**Watch Video**

## DISABILITY CLAIMS MADE EASIER

As part of VA's commitment to providing Veterans quality customer service, OIT partnered with VBA to develop VA's Digital 526 Disability Compensation Tool, *with Veterans, for Veterans*. The online tool's user-friendly platform streamlines the submission process and helps Veterans provide clear and complete information to support disability claims, and means less time and delays contacting Veterans for clarification.

VA also released an easy-to-follow video series, walking Veterans through the process of using the tool. The video series covers information such as how to add supporting evidence for Veterans' claims, how to prepare for the final interview questions, and helpful tips for revising and editing claims data. The tool also explains what happens to their claim following submission.

This Digital 526 Disability Compensation Tool is available on [VA.gov](https://www.va.gov), and the complete video series is available on OIT's [YouTube](#) channel.

*"Veterans need solutions that meet them where they are, not where we are. We are infusing industry best practices into VA to build Veteran-centric user experiences. This helps us deliver information and services to Veterans more effectively."*

**Clarice Chan, Presidential Innovation Fellow**

## VBA BEATS ITS COLUMBUS DAY CHALLENGE GOAL

During back-to-back VBA claims processing challenges in FYs19-20, OIT strategically addressed IT help tickets, provisioned equipment, and showed nimbleness in responding to VBA's claims processing needs.

When the dust cleared and the last claim was reviewed on the final day of the challenge, VBA's success was impressive: VBA surpassed its goal of **400,000** claims closed. The final tally for the Columbus Day Challenge totaled 440,000-plus—exceeding their goal by 10%. The high number of claims closings by VBA is a prime example of VA's commitment to providing Veterans timely, meaningful service, an initiative that OIT is proud to have supported.



**440,000-plus**

Claims closed. Exceeded goal by 10%

As James P. Gfrerer, Assistant Secretary of Information and Technology and Chief Information Officer put it, OIT's sharp teamwork, concentration, and dedication distinguishes VA's Digital Transformation.

## REDUCING CLAIMS PROCESSING TIME WITH BENEFITS API TOOLS

VA continues to simplify the benefits process for Veterans, their families, and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs). And OIT is reducing the time Veterans spend submitting applications, increasing transparency, and shortening the time it takes to receive a decision from VA by launching and enhancing application programming interfaces (APIs).



### LIGHTHOUSE

APIs are tools that connect different systems to each other in a standardized way, similar to how an electrical wall outlet connects various devices to electricity. The Benefits Intake API and Benefits Claims API are just two of many APIs currently available through [VA's Lighthouse API program](#). VA Lighthouse supports a growing number of easy-to-use and standards-based APIs that facilitate collaboration with core VA partners such as business owners, developers, VSOs, and Veterans.

OIT operates the **Benefits Intake API** in partnership with Veterans Claims Intake Program and the Office of Business Process Integration. The Benefits Intake API accepts claim documents as PDFs (as an alternative to physical mail or fax) and passes them digitally to mail processing vendors for upload to VA's Centralized Mail Portal. From there, Claims Assistants enter claims in the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). Veterans' claims processing is 5-6 days faster compared to those submitted via paper mail.

In June, the Benefits Intake API reached a **milestone of 68,000 digital submissions**, each of which represents saved paper, ink, and time. Automatic status updates alert VSOs to progress in document processing, saving them hours each week.

Veteran Service Officers report that the ability to submit documents and receive a tracking number while still sitting with Veterans has improved Veterans' confidence that VA receives the documents.

When VSOs use the new **Benefits Claims API** to submit eligible claims as data with accompanying PDFs, the API automatically establish the claims in VBMS. This reduces processing time by about 10 days.

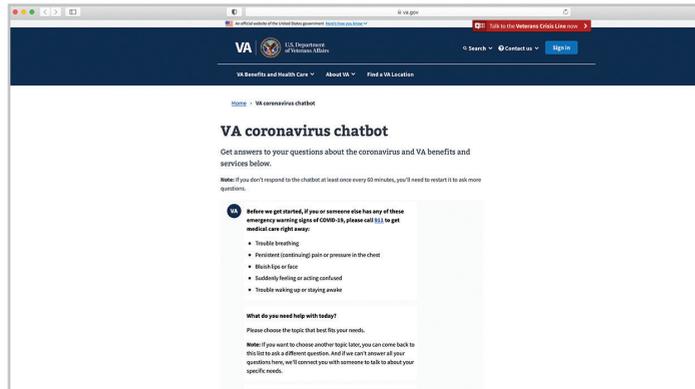
OIT will continue to design and develop APIs with Veterans, Veterans' representatives, and VBA claims processors, seeking out their direct feedback about the claims process. By involving users in research and testing, OIT ensures it is building practical, meaningful solutions to problems and, ultimately, creating a superior customer experience for Veterans.

For more information, please subscribe to the [VA Lighthouse Community Newsletter](#) or email [api@va.gov](mailto:api@va.gov) to share feedback or ask further questions.

*"Customer service to Veterans is one of my core values and by using technology, VA continues to improve service to countless Veterans. Every document received through this [benefits intake] API saves taxpayer money and helps VA deliver faster decisions to Veterans."*

**VA Secretary Robert Wilkie about the Benefits Intake API built collaboratively by VBA and OIT**

# OIT RELEASES NEW CORONAVIRUS CHATBOT



VA's coronavirus chatbot website

In partnership with the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Office of Connected Care and the Veterans Experience Office (VEO), OIT recently launched an interactive [VA coronavirus chatbot](#).



## The problem: A nationwide coronavirus pandemic leads to a surge in call volumes

Since the implementation of nationwide public health measures on physical distancing in March, VA contact centers have seen a significant increase in calls from Veterans with concerns about COVID-19 and how it affects their VA health care and other benefits and services.

This rapid surge in call volume led to frustrating hold times for Veterans, staffing challenges for VA, and delayed access to clinical advice for callers with urgent health care needs



## The solution: A tool to help Veterans and relieve pressure on contact centers

In keeping with OIT's agile methodology, the team developed and launched the chatbot in just 3 weeks. Along the way, they tested several iterations directly with Veterans and incorporated feedback to ensure the tool meets Veterans' actual needs. Denise Kitts—VEO's executive director of multichannel technology—and Kathy Frisbee—VHA's executive director of connected care—say leveraging existing digital tools played a major role in the rapid development and release of the new chatbot.

*"We were able to leverage the Microsoft Healthcare Bot service that was used to launch the CDC chatbot. We could also quickly leverage authoritative content developed for other channels."*

The chatbot serves as a resource to better meet Veterans' increased need for information and services and as a tool to reduce center call volume so representatives can help callers with urgent medical needs as quickly as possible. Hosted on the [Microsoft Healthcare Bot service](#), the chatbot features an interactive question-and-answer format that helps Veterans get guidance for when to seek medical help for their symptoms, based on the latest CDC self-checker tool. The chatbot also answers common questions about how COVID-19 may impact VA health care and other benefits and services.

Charles Worthington—VA's Chief Technology Officer—applauded the technologists, analysts, and partners across VA and private industry who collaborated to deliver this innovative IT solution.

*“At VA, our number one priority is delivering excellent customer service to our Veterans. During this unprecedented pandemic, it has been incredible to see so many VA staff from across the [department] come together and quickly deliver creative solutions to new problems.”*

—Charles Worthington, VA’s Chief Technology Officer

“This product is a great example of VA’s commitment to using new technologies to improve our services.”

Several organizations around the country, such as Virginia Mason Health System, Novant Health, and Walgreens, have released similar [tools](#) to assist Veterans and Health care workers. The CDC recently made multiple updates to their chatbot, such as changes to multiple language strings as well as to reporting outcomes and localization patterns. Similarly, OIT will continue to test the chatbot with Veterans and update features and content to meet evolving needs during and beyond the pandemic.

Veterans and their family members can access [VA’s coronavirus chatbot](#) through VA.gov. VA will soon be adding access on other platforms, including individual medical facility websites and MyHealthVet, where Veterans can refill prescriptions online and schedule telehealth appointments with their VA medical centers.

## OIT STANDS UP EMERGENCY EQUIPMENT IN A FLASH

While testing identifies more COVID-19 patients, hospitals like the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital in Hines, Illinois, are finding ways to ensure they are prepared with enough hospital beds and medical equipment to meet demand. Working shoulder to shoulder, OIT and VHA solved the Hines facility’s shortage of intensive care unit (ICU) beds for COVID-19 affected Veterans. In just two and a half days, emergency management staff from VHA and OIT turned an empty parking lot into a fully equipped and functioning ICU by deploying C-FORTS (Compound Fold-Out Rigid Temporary Shelters). The shelters allow staff to treat COVID-19 patients in a separate space when demand for hospital space by non-COVID patients is high. OIT emergency communications equipment powers the shelters to keep operations running smoothly for medical staff and Veterans.

As it was the first time OIT’s Office of Emergency Management worked with a C-FORTS structure, project requirements were

unique and demanding with little time or room for error. OIT’s focus on timely and relevant support through close collaboration with VHA and local partners enabled them to quickly get the shelter up and running.



The mission succeeded as a result of strong partnership among many VA organizations and local institutions, including OIT’s and VHA’s Offices of Emergency Management; local and remote OIT End User Operations staff; Hines VA Hospital Leadership; and local police, medical, biomedical, and pharmacy personnel. “The results-driven response from

our business partners was the key to success. The combined efforts of most everyone involved was remarkable,” Rick Zigrosser, Director of OIT Office of Emergency Management said as he reflected on this team effort. OIT provided printers, phones, and computers; supported biomedical and pharmacy equipment; and more to deliver continuous medical support to patients. OIT’s Office of Emergency Management provided emergency communications through the deployment of LTE routers and satellite terminals. These devices connect medical staff to VA’s network and give patients internet access during their treatment. OIT’s Solution Delivery and Infrastructure Operations teams engineered and remotely supported the shelter’s equipment design and ensured proper functionality during the rapid deployment.

With their first C-FORTS ICU operational, VHA and OIT now have a new way to deliver health care to Veterans, not just during the COVID-19 pandemic but during other emergencies or disasters as well. OIT is monitoring the shelter and its capabilities to make improvements for the future. “For example, we will be permanently installing certain IT components and wiring the C-FORTS for future deployments,” said Mr. Zigrosser.

VHA can be confident that facilities like this one have proper medical space to care for Veterans and combat COVID-19 cases. With the use of ICU C-FORTS, the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital medical staff can now manage sudden influxes of patients while continuing to deliver world-class benefits and services. The ICU C-FORTS added space also allows Veterans the room needed to continue physical distancing during treatment.

## VIDEOCONFERENCE TECHNOLOGY ROLLED OUT SUCCESSFULLY FOR BOARD OF VETERANS’ APPEALS HEARINGS

In May 2020, VA introduced virtual hearings for appeals to help Veterans attend their appeal hearings on connected devices from the safety of their own homes. COVID-19 and physical distancing guidance created demand for more robust tools and services to assist Veterans with navigating and accessing services. Product Line Manager Eric Hickam and Project Manager Geoffrey Stienblock have shepherded Caseflow’s Virtual Hearing new Generation (Gen) 2 functionality into production. The nationwide launch of virtual hearing technology allows Veterans to connect with the Board via their mobile phone or laptop when using the VA Video Connect app—the videoconferencing system that Veterans also use for telehealth appointments.



Several weather-related shutdowns drove the identification of a need for Virtual Hearings, which were originally designed for Veterans who were too sick or too far away from a Regional Office to attend in-person hearings or when severe weather prevented judges from attending. The previous video hearing technology required Veterans to use proprietary hardware and software that could not be easily upgraded.

Virtual hearings allow the judges, Veterans' representatives, and the Veterans to use their smartphone, tablet, or computer to hold secure hearings about their appeals. All participants in the appeal receive an email notification and a link to test the equipment they plan to use for their hearing. That way, they know in advance what to expect. Just as in a regular hearing, the proceedings are recorded and transcribed for the official documentation of the hearing.

Previously, the Board's hearing team successfully tested its first Virtual Hearing Gen 2 functionality in March. A Veteran joined the videoconference hearing from Japan—where they were stranded due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions—

along with their representative and the Veteran Law Judge in the United States. By using videoconferencing, hearings can take place as scheduled. The importance of this work was heightened and accelerated with the COVID-19 crisis, which forced the cancellation of hearings and required Veteran Law Judges to work from home until further notice.

Not only did the pilot go smoothly, but the Veteran Law Judge who participated remarked that it was intuitive and easy to join the hearing. He also noted that the video quality was "actually better on this [than using the previous version] even though [the Veteran was] in Japan."

The timing of the release is even more critical in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting increased need for remote hearings due to travel restrictions. With the new functionality, Veterans will have greater access to Board hearings, and more choice and control in their appeals process. Anything that helps keep appeals on track will go a long way to reducing the backlog of appeals.

## SECURE IT SOLUTION SUPPORTS HASSLE-FREE SPEECH RECOGNITION

As part of its continuing commitment to provide quality service during the coronavirus pandemic, VHA is extending the reach of a critical service delivery software, Enterprise-Wide Speech Recognition. Previously, only clinicians equipped with Government Furnished Equipment, such as a VA-provided laptop, had access to the speech recognition software. However, as COVID-19 mobilization across VA facilities continues nationwide, health providers are relocating to telework locations without VA laptops. The new speech recognition software allows teleworking clinicians to experience the same speed, accuracy, and flexibility that previously was only available on VA-furnished equipment.



OIT and VHA staff prioritized expanded access to enterprise-wide speech recognition to seamlessly deliver the Dragon Medical One software. The software permits clinical teleworkers to convert spoken data to an Electronic Health Record for documenting Veteran care reliably and securely.

The expanded access means that clinicians can now stay productive anywhere by deploying verbal commands to convey sensitive patient information more naturally and efficiently. VA will use this solution through the duration of the pandemic to improve clinical telework efficiency and allow patients to receive uninterrupted care.

The rollout of the new speech recognition software is the result of close collaboration across VA. OIT's Enterprise Program Management Office and IT Operations and Services, the VHA Executive Director of Health Information Governance, and the VHA Medical Records Administrator worked together to implement Dragon Medical One automatically, rolling out the new remote capability across VA in just six weeks.

This effort not only meets Secretary Robert Wilkie's mandate for VA to prioritize consistent, quality customer service to Veterans, but it also enhances the path to Electronic Health Record Modernization. Thanks to the focused collaboration and execution among OIT and VHA, clinicians now have the benefit of hands-free Veteran data entry, all in a safe, secure, environment.



## *Veterans Day*

On Monday, November 11, 2019, the nation observed Veterans Day. Events included a Veterans Day Breakfast; commemorative events at the National World War II Memorial, the National Observance at Arlington National Cemetery, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and at the Pershing grave site at Arlington National Cemetery for a World War I Armistice commemoration attended by representatives of the allied nations of World War I.



**SPECIAL FEATURE:  
OIT PROVIDES  
RAPID SOLUTIONS  
FOR VA'S COVID-19  
RESPONSE**

**At the start of FY20, few could have predicted the challenges and constraints that lay ahead for the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) in meeting VA's needs during a global pandemic. While developing innovative solutions to deliver quality health care to Veterans was not new to OIT, doing so under rapidly evolving pandemic conditions, across a remote workforce, to an expanding Veteran population was uncharted territory to navigate.**

In response, OIT staff rose to the challenge of providing exceptional customer service to ensure VA met its primary mission as well as its fourth mission—to support our nation's Health care system in times of crisis. Whether collaborating with the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health to [leverage VA's 3D-printing capabilities for the production of personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](#) or cancelling vacation and working extended hours to install an emergency system patch allowing non-Veteran COVID-19 patients to receive treatment, OIT staff met every challenge with steadfastness and determination.

Throughout this pandemic, staff consistently embraced OIT's guiding principles of transparency, accountability, innovation, and teamwork. OIT staff's unwavering dedication to maintaining continuity of operations and unrelenting resolve in tackling tough problems are testaments to OIT's shared vision of being a world-class organization that provides a seamless, unified Veteran experience through the delivery of state-of-the-art technology. In this feature, we'll explore the many ways OIT contributed to and positively impacted VA's COVID-19 response efforts.





## CONNECTING A REMOTE WORKFORCE TO SUPPORT VA'S MISSION

To reinforce new and current employee relief efforts, OIT approved \$1.645 billion in IT procurements for VA's COVID-19 response. Using this funding, OIT coordinated shipments and sent equipment to priority locations based on criticality and demand. OIT procured and deployed more than 199,000 laptops and 11,000 mobile devices for VA to connect remotely with Veteran patients and provide much needed virtual care.



To ease Health care access constraints in rural communities, OIT distributed 499 VA Virtual Office routers across the country. Additionally, each VA Medical Center (VAMC) received a minimum of 150 laptops to support VA's COVID-19 frontline staff needs.

OIT expanded network access via the Department's RESCUE Virtual Private Network (VPN), Citrix Access Gateway (CAG), and Citrix farms to facilitate employee and contractor connections to VA's network from any location with any approved personal device. At peak, OIT increased Rescue VPN access from 120,000 to 500,000 users. CAG access grew from 16,000 to 260,000+ users. OIT also doubled its gateway bandwidth from 80 GB to 160 GB and quadrupled virtual servers from 1,700 to 7,600 servers. Additionally, OIT deployed a proof of concept for Windows Virtual Desktop to streamline and enhance the telework experience. To help first time remote workers, OIT created [a quick reference website](#) to offer resources and troubleshoot potential connection issues.

Once remotely connected, internal VA project teams required collaboration and communication tools that could work across multiple platforms. In response, OIT ramped up team conferencing capabilities by rapidly deploying Webex and Microsoft Teams across the Department.



## IMPLEMENTING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO SUPPORT MISSION OBJECTIVES ON THE FRONTLINES

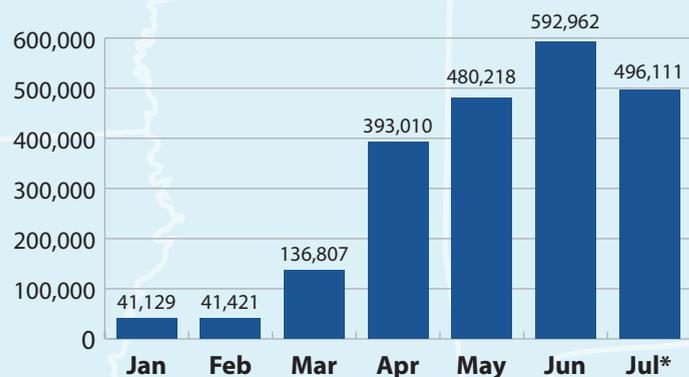
Quickly getting OIT staff on the network was only the beginning. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, states issued stay-at-home orders and infection rates sharply increased. OIT customers and Veterans required reimagined channels for safely delivering quality health care and benefits during this time. To meet this need, OIT leveraged industry partnerships to provide innovative, forward-facing telehealth technology solutions.

OIT rapidly expanded VA's primary telehealth system, VA Video Connect, increasing visit capacity to stay ahead of unprecedented demand and allow more clinicians and patients to conduct remote appointments simultaneously. OIT accomplished this by first upgrading on-premises hardware (tripling pre-COVID capacity) and then, in just five weeks, further expanding the system to the cloud (Care2 Cloud) and achieving quintupled

capacity. Since the outbreak, the expanded system has supported a 1600% surge in demand for telehealth appointments, with VA Video Connect now frequently supporting more than 38,000 daily telehealth visits to Veterans' homes or other non-VA locations, compared to fewer than 2,500 a day prior to the pandemic. Telehealth visits continue to play an important role in flattening the pandemic curve by providing patients quick, easy, and effective access to health care professionals. The number of patients conducting telehealth appointments continues to rise each month—a record 398,804 unique Veteran patients used the VA Video Connect in August 2020 (compared to 29,709 in February 2020). Thanks to OIT's dramatic increase in system capacity, VA Video Connect supported approximately 3.9 million visits in FY20, compared to just under 295,000 visits for all of FY19.



### Total Monthly Clinical Video Telehealth



\*Month's total to date; includes data through July 26

Additionally, in partnership with Veterans Health Administration (VHA), OIT supported VA's launch of "I am Here", a new VEText virtual feature providing the capability for VA facilities to check patients into their appointments while ensuring physical distance. "I am Here" continues to grow with 60 sites currently using the tool. To date, the tool has recorded 19,700 patient interactions. OIT also supported the new Veteran-facing tool, Annie, a symptom checker application for both VAMC and non-clinical locations. Further, OIT improved the Veteran experience by launching a Digital Pre-Entry

screeener tool, currently used by VA facilities in 35 metro areas and facilitating 3 million screenings since June 2020.

*To connect critical care teams to patients, OIT helped VHA fulfill an eight-year vision for tele-critical care (formerly called tele-ICU) in just four months.*

This innovative solution made it easier for intensive care units (ICUs) in VAMCs and clinics to access a team of physicians, specialists, and nurses with critical care expertise at other locations. This tele-critical care system included more than 250 mobile carts that allow tele-critical care team members to remotely monitor and assess patients, in concert with the bedside care team. OIT joined forces with VHA and leveraged dynamic port security configuration, an existing solution previously deployed for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), to enhance tele-critical care cart mobility across 139 VHA sites. OIT helped VHA achieve one tele-critical care cart for every eight ICU beds, surpassing the initial 1:10 tele-critical care cart goal.

During the pandemic, two other VA telehealth services, My HealtheVet (Patient Portal) and Rx Refill, experienced sharp increases in user engagement. My HealtheVet experienced a 30 percent increase in appointments—reaching more than 470,000 total patients. Rx Refill filled over 461,000 prescriptions in the first two weeks of April 2020 alone. OIT increased application monitoring capabilities during the pandemic, providing monitoring for 118 COVID-critical applications.

Meeting Veterans' mental health needs is critical during a time when symptoms are exacerbated by isolation. Since February 2020, OIT supported providers with completing more than 30,000 mental health appointments using VA Video Connect (a 70 percent increase), 2,700 group therapy sessions (a 200 percent increase), and more than 154,000 care and consultation appointments (a 280 percent increase).

While OIT was making huge strides with telehealth and other remote access initiatives, the VA volunteer program deployed IT staff to "hot spot" locations for on-the-ground, frontline support. OIT worked with business and industry partners, formed crisis support teams, cut through acquisitions barriers, and quickly opened up facilities, like the Garland, Texas VAMC, to treat COVID-19 patients. The rapid deployment of this facility included technology installations and IT equipment provisioning. Establishing the Garland VAMC helped dramatically lower average wait times across North Texas Veteran health facilities.



**70% increase**  
mental health appointments  
using VA Video Connect



**200% increase**  
group therapy sessions



**280% increase**  
care and consultation  
appointments



### ***A Personal Connection***

"We have some great people that are dedicated—no finer group of people—as was evident with our COVID response...We stood up a major medical center in 21 days."

**Jack Galvin - Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, IT Operations and Services**



**Watch Video**

## INNOVATION AND PARTNERSHIP—THE PATH FORWARD

The COVID-19 pandemic forced OIT to think differently about innovation, customer service, and supporting VA's mission while keeping OIT staff safe. OIT's ability to rapidly respond to the pandemic speaks to VA's advocacy of digital transformation, DevSecOps strategies, and robust partnerships within VA and with health and technology industries at large. OIT continues to share findings and lessons learned with other government agencies and private Health care systems to tackle this pandemic.

The Department's agility also points to its commitment to engaging the next generation of the Federal workforce. OIT continues to focus on developing top talent and pushing ground-breaking innovation to battle this once-in-a-century event while ushering in a robust digital health care future for our nation's heroes.

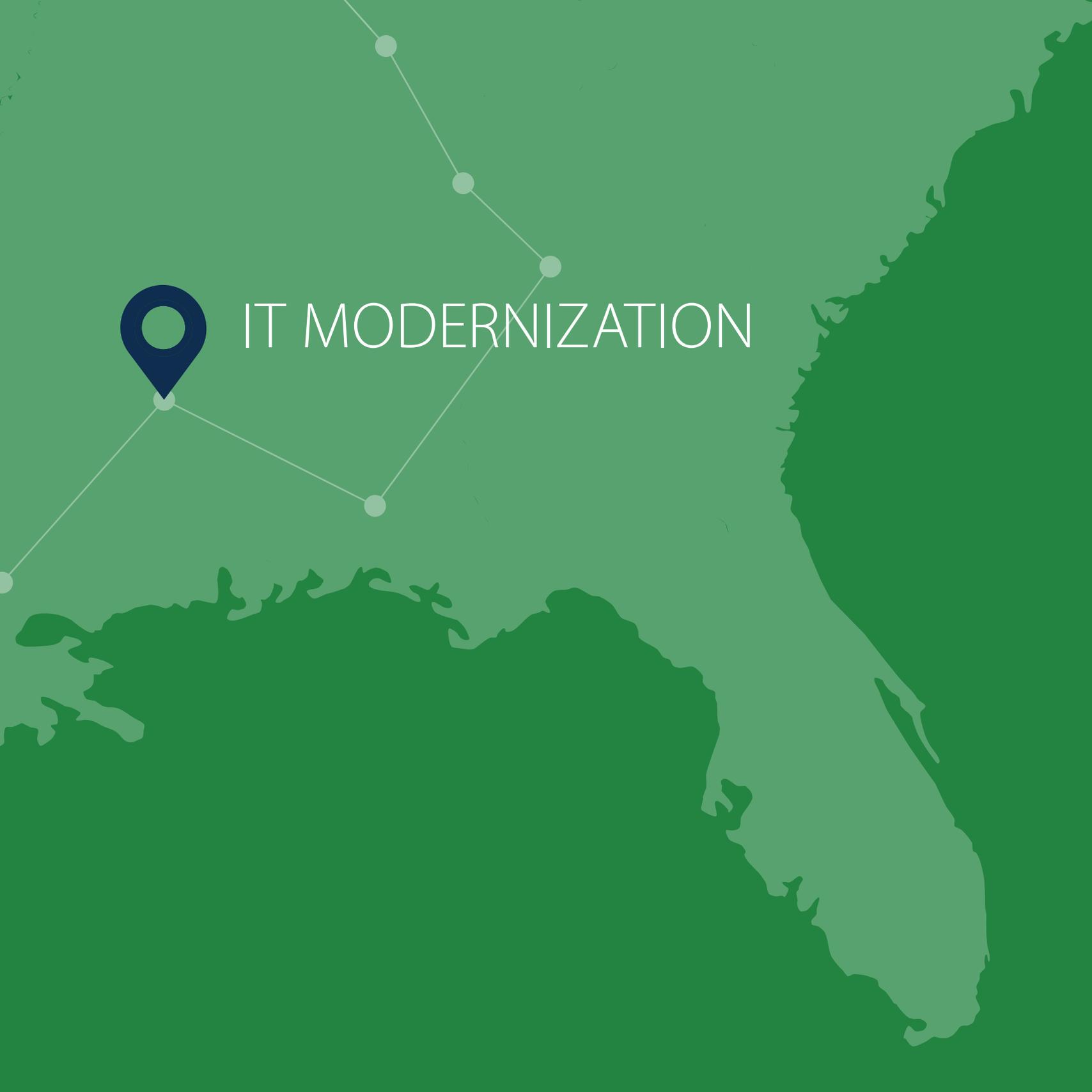
*Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures and thought leadership. OIT continues to exemplify teamwork, resilience, empathy, and determination in the face of a global pandemic.*

As VA COVID-19 response efforts persist, OIT remains dedicated to providing exceptional customer service and maintaining continuity of Veteran care. OIT is building on benchmark practices to pivot and scale services based on need. Now more than ever, OIT embraces the It Starts With Us customer service creed. After all, OIT business partners—and 20 million Veterans, caregivers, and survivors—depend on the Department to deliver quality health care and benefit services America's Veterans have earned and deserve.





# IT MODERNIZATION



## VA ACCELERATES PHONE SYSTEM MODERNIZATION

With 72 of the 164 VA Medical Center (VAMC) phone systems set for modernization at the start of this year, VA's efforts to build a new, innovative enterprise contact center in 2020 were well underway. In addition to improving phone service for Veterans and reducing maintenance costs, the modernized communication tools foster new real-time connections across VA to support continued health care innovation benefiting Veterans.

As OIT modernizes VAMC phone systems across the nation, we are continuing to build this new VA enterprise contact center. The contact center more effectively connects Veterans to the health care resources they need. Among the more immediate benefits realized, smaller VAMCs with fewer staff available to answer phones now receive surge support from other sites. This support means Veterans experience shorter wait times, fewer dropped calls, and better access to care.

*Veterans who call their VAMC and need nurse triage services connect to a nearby facility in their region rather than waiting on hold for a nurse to become available in their own facility.*

Veterans with specific health care needs can also connect to experts in those specialties from anywhere in the nation. As a result, VA expects new Centers of Excellence, which are national hubs focused on health care specialties, to emerge as enhanced communication capabilities develop.

Following a DevSecOps model, the OIT team uses a “crawl, walk, run” analogy for this project. The team focuses on understanding customer perspectives and funding, planning, and managing the project in small parts to learn and build momentum in preparation for larger parts.

This also allows the team to break the massive project into four phases. Phase 1 is building the new telephony superhighway across VA. Phase 2 is building “on-ramps” at the facility level so all can access the new system. Phase 3 is building contact center capabilities for specific business units, and Phase 4 is replacing legacy systems.

Eventually, VA will end its long-term telephone maintenance contracts. Until recently, these contracts were necessary to ensure eight legacy system types remained functional. By ending these contracts, VA expects to redirect the use of more than \$35 million per year to more valuable efforts after project completion.

The next-generation contact center modernization plan is possible through collaboration between OIT and direct customers in VAMCs across the country. OIT is partnering with the Veterans Experience Office, Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery Administration to aggregate systems, fully leverage enterprise licenses, and realize other efficiencies.

OIT will continue to lead the way to bring technological innovation that enables better service to Veterans today and strengthens VA's preparedness to meet Veteran needs in the future.

## VBA AND OIT COLLABORATE TO INTRODUCE THE VIRTUAL ASSISTANT E-VA



Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) helps service members, Veterans, and eligible family members with job training, employment accommodations, resume development, and job-seeking. When VR&E wanted to offer Veterans more flexibility in how they communicate with VR&E and improve operating efficiency, they partnered with the OIT and the Office of Business Process Integration (OBPI). Together, they have worked on the first large-scale artificial intelligence (AI) tool at VBA: e-VA.

e-VA stands for electronic Virtual Assistant. e-VA uses a commercial software product called Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant (SARA), an active, intelligent interface between Veterans and the VR&E counselors. e-VA gathers information, interprets responses, and acts accordingly. Veterans who prefer to use text messages or email to

communicate with VR&E can use e-VA to get answers to basic questions, schedule and reschedule appointments, and receive reminders. They can also easily use their mobile phone to scan and upload documents needed by their VR&E counselor.

In addition to offering Veterans greater convenience, e-VA saves VR&E counselors approximately 34,000 hours each year. Kevin Scott, Assistant Director of Operations, VR&E, VBA Central Office, said, “We conducted a time study of how our counselors were spending time annually across small, medium, and large facilities. We found that a large part of their workload was scheduling and rescheduling appointments.”

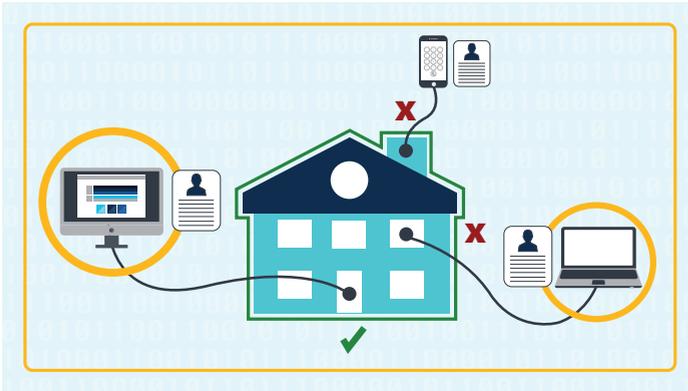
*“Thanks to e-VA, we can reinvest counselors’ time into additional counseling activities to continue to improve services to Veterans.”*

OIT continues to collaborate with VR&E and other partners within VBA. Providing innovative solutions like e-VA meets Veteran and stakeholder needs today and better positions VA to respond to Veterans’ needs in the future.

## VA LAUNCHES NEW CYBERSECURITY TOOLS, IMPROVING CONTROL OF DIGITAL NETWORKS

As VA’s digital landscape evolves, we must rise to meet challenges and work proactively to mitigate risks. As part of its Continuous Diagnostics and Mitigation (CDM) strategy, VA sought tools to secure its internet networks. Now, VA has

the capability to better protect valuable Veteran data by identifying every single device on its networks. OIT partnered with the Department of Homeland Security to introduce two network management tools: Forescout and Gigamon.



Today, 271 VA sites use Forescout to improve cybersecurity, reduce equipment down time, and improve patient care and service to our Veterans.

*“The biggest thing is that we now have visibility to every device that’s connected to our network,” said Jason Hyer, CDM Program Manager with OIS. “We had an understanding with some of our previous tools, but now we can see what devices are connected almost instantaneously.”*

## VA RETROFITS GARLAND FACILITY IN RECORD TIME

VA fast-tracked retrofitting Garland VA Medical Center, a 140-bed capacity shuttered hospital, in a matter of weeks to treat COVID-19 Veteran patients. The rapid deployment of the facility included completing technology installations and IT equipment provisioning to ensure Garland VAMC could begin caring for patients as soon as possible amid the pandemic.

Led by Area Manager Odell Brown, OIT’s IT Operations and Services and End User Operations teams mobilized and

To better understand how they work, imagine the VA network as a large house. Much like a house has multiple entry points—such as front and back doors—digital networks have traditional entry points in the form of network routers. But both networks and houses have non-traditional entrances as well. In a house, these might be windows and chimneys that someone could use to enter undetected. On a network, these could be approved devices that someone hacks to gain unsecured access or unapproved devices connected to the network.

VA can now track which devices are using the network at any time by identifying every connected device and showing details of how it got there. VA can also capture all network traffic to identify devices on the network.

Building on the concept of protecting VA’s digital house, Mr. Hyer used a construction analogy to describe how Forescout and Gigamon fit into VA’s cybersecurity structure. “Forescout and Gigamon are like the foundations of a house,” he explained. “Now that these tools are in place, we can build on them and enhance VA’s cybersecurity infrastructure.”

coordinated critical infrastructure and operations activities to prepare the VAMC for its opening. Opening a facility is no small feat—but opening one during a global health crisis presents its own unique set of challenges.

Mr. Brown and his team used an all-hands-on-deck approach to quickly ramp up operations so VA could begin accepting COVID-19 patients at this location. From supplying equipment like laptops, desktops, and monitors, to outfitting local and

wide area network connections and IT equipment, they ensured every critical system was in place to support VA's clinical staff, during a time when Veterans needed critical care the most urgently.

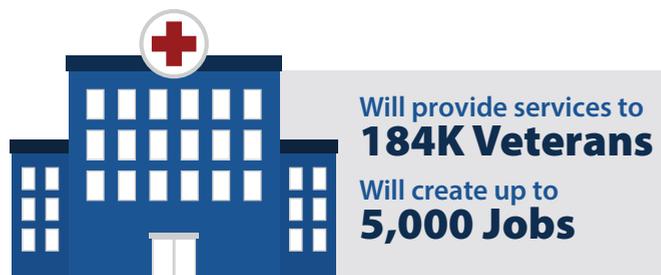
*“Every part of OIT engaged in this effort and has given us outstanding support and service to establish initial operations at the Garland VAMC.”*

“Standing up the hospital within weeks allowed us to respond quickly to area needs and care for Veterans infected with COVID-19,” said Territory 2 Director of Operations, Robert J. Finigan.

## NEW TOOL HELPS VA TRACK AND ANALYZE COVID-19 DATA NEAR REAL-TIME

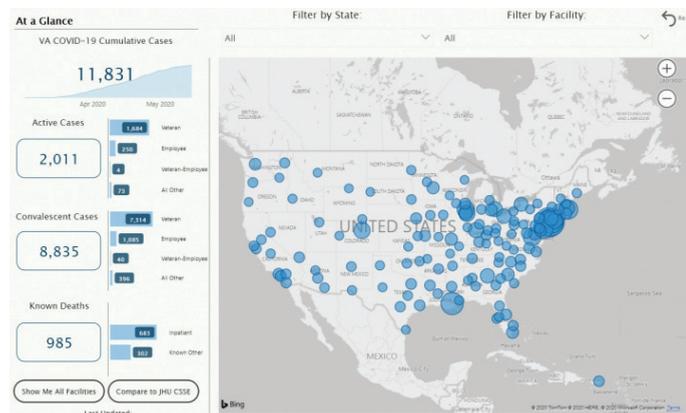
In collaboration with VHA and Microsoft, OIT experts set out to build a summary and tracking tool that would help VHA gain better situational awareness of its patients and resources during the pandemic. The team rapidly built the National Surveillance Tool to meet VHA's needs, and the tool has drawn interest across—and even outside—VA.

The National Surveillance Tool allows for early detection and monitoring of cases, Department-level biosurveillance, and emergency management at the national and local levels. Data feeds cover patient cases, available assets such as ventilators and masks, hospital capacity, and employee status. Most data are updated hourly, giving a near real-time look at VA's posture in response to the pandemic. With this data available at a glance, leaders can make timely and informed decisions, such as when and where to cross-level supplies or personnel. The system can even perform predictive analysis, anticipating future hotspots of COVID-19



The 470,000-square-foot, 100-bed-plus VA Medical Center will eventually create up to 5,000 local jobs, provide Veteran outpatient services, and serve as a specialty care clinic for the 184,000 Veterans living in North Texas. When Garland VAMC transitions from caring for COVID-19 Veteran patients to its original intent, it will offer Veterans another accessible option to receive care in North Texas.

cases and allowing leaders to address emerging needs before they become critical.



The public-facing National Summary page.

Jack Bates, the Director of OIT's Business Intelligence Service Line, credits "a remarkable display of teamwork all around,"

from VHA and OIT to Microsoft as crucial to developing and releasing the tool in such short time.

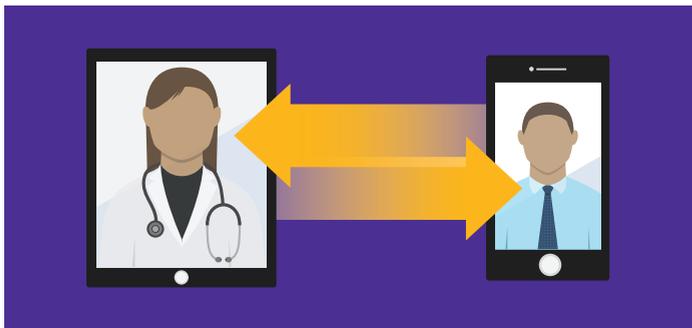
The multi-office team also released the COVID-19 National Summary, an external-facing tracking map which summarizes COVID-19 cases within the VA system, and is publicly available on the [Access to Care website](#). This is VA's single authoritative source of COVID-19 confirmed cases at the facility level. Data refreshes hourly, providing near real-time numbers for Veterans, Congress, states, media, and the public to see and report.

The National Surveillance Tool continues to improve and expand with weekly development releases. Most recently, the team added information related to Veteran community

living centers, which have emerged as hotspots during the pandemic. OIT is working on additional capabilities, such as the ability to sort data by population. The team also supports five other major products related to COVID-19, all of which are newly developed.

With its work on National Surveillance Tool, OIT is helping its partners across the enterprise to address the needs of VA's—and the nation's—response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic. From the Corporate Data Warehouse to the National Surveillance Tool, OIT continues to leverage IT assets and data to deliver innovative solutions for Veteran care and benefits.

## AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION TO SUPPORT EXPANDED TELEHEALTH CAPABILITY



An established leader in telehealth technology, VA has been using real-time virtual medical appointments for several years to connect Veterans with VA clinicians for the care they need, when they need it, no matter where they live. VA's telehealth program has been an essential element in serving our nation's Veterans, making it easier for them to receive care and convey vital information to their medical providers.

The expansion of telehealth and telemedicine technologies remains a key element of VA's COVID-19 response efforts

today. VA Video Connect virtual appointments and other telehealth technologies are playing an important role in flattening the pandemic curve by providing patients quick, easy, and effective access to Health care professionals. In support of VA's Fourth Mission, VA Video Connect allows VA to treat non-COVID-19 patients (and those experiencing mild symptoms) in the comfort of their own homes while limiting unnecessary in-person exposure and keeping beds open in VA medical centers for those most in need.

Nationwide, OIT began deploying more than 50,000 telehealth kits—each containing a laptop, docking station, mouse, keyboard, webcam, headset, and two monitors—to enable VHA clinicians to connect remotely with patients. VA's strong foundational investments in telehealth over the past decade positioned OIT to rapidly expand the delivery of virtual care to support Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the outbreak, OIT has supported a 1,600%-plus surge in Veteran video visits outside a VA facility—from approximately

41k total monthly video visits in January to more than 700k in August. To stay ahead of the growing demand, OIT upgraded the VA Video Connect system's on-premises hardware and expanded the videoconferencing system to the cloud, quintupling telehealth visit concurrent call capacity from 3.4k in February to 17.5k in August. In May alone, OIT's expanded VA Video Connect capacity helped more than 264,000 unique Veteran patients limit exposure to and spread of COVID-19. The number of Veterans using VA Video Connect each month continues to rise: in August, OIT's expanded VA Video Connect capacity helped more than 399,000 Veteran patients limit exposure to and spread of COVID-19. This is 13.8 times the number of Veterans who used VA Video Connect in February (29,711).

*From January 1 to September 30, the expanded VA Video Connect system helped Veterans conduct more than 3.7 million telehealth appointments from their own homes...*

...or another non-VA site, and 98 percent of those telehealth sessions occurred March 1 or later. OIT continues to expand telehealth, supporting more than 3.8 million total telehealth visits for FY20 (compared to just under 295,000 visits in FY2019).

OIT is also helping VA expand its use of tele-critical care. Tele-critical care carts allow all intensive care units (ICUs) in a network to have access to an intensivist-led care team and gives them access to 24/7 specialist expertise. These carts allow tele-critical care teams to monitor and assess patients, alerting the bedside team when they are needed.

OIT also configured dynamic port security for a total of 139 priority tele-critical care sites (previously known as tele-ICU sites) ahead of schedule—and completed the initial 82 VHA priority facilities in mid-June. This capability allows Health care workers to move the carts from room to room without needing IT intervention, and ensuring clinicians can continue to provide seamless care to Veterans. Deploying and connecting more than 250 carts, VA surpassed its original goal to have at least one tele-critical cart for every 10 ICU beds—achieving a 1:8 cart-to-bed ratio (with 1,800 total ICU beds in VA)—and enabled future expansion of the tele-critical care cart functionality.

VA's telehealth successes will continue beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, so that VA can continue to deliver on Secretary Wilkie's prime directive—delivering exceptional customer service to our Veterans. Other agencies have taken notice and expressed interest in leveraging VA's lessons learned. VA is working with the United States Coast Guard and the Department of Defense's Defense Health Agency to help enhance their own videoconferencing and telehealth capabilities.



## ***Working Shoulder to Shoulder***

"With new requirements because of COVID, we never said, "No." We said, "Okay, we have to go figure out how we can."

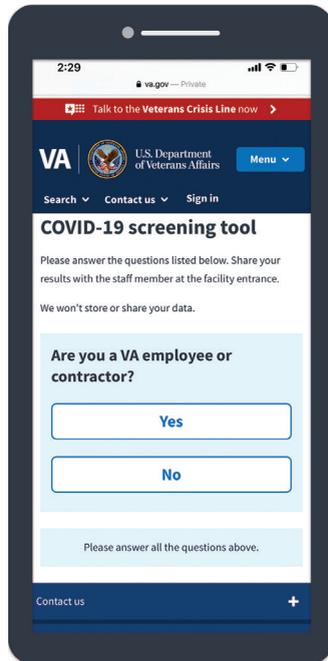
**Robert Finigan - Director of Operations, Territory 2**



**Watch Video**

## OIT LAUNCHES PRE-ENTRY SCREENING TOOL

Many VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) across the country are re-opening their doors and expanding services. To ensure the protection of both patients and staff, OIT collaborated with the Durham, North Carolina VAMC to launch the COVID-19 digital pre-entry screener.



**The tool was developed and launched in just 12 days—an unprecedented timeline made possible thanks to VA’s investment in the modern VA.gov platform.**

The [digital pre-entry screener tool](#) allows Veterans, caregivers, and employees to answer questions on their mobile phones and share their results at VA medical facility entrances. With in-person screening delaying access to care and increasing COVID-19 exposure risk, the digital pre-entry screener helps reduce wait times, ease stress, and lowers exposure risk. “It’s amazing how much difference a simple tool can make when deployed in the right place and at the right time,” says Chief-of-Staff Dr. Kenneth Goldberg. “This was a great way to help our Veterans.”

The COVID-19 digital pre-entry screener was the brainchild of Jacob Goldberg—the son of Dr. Goldberg.

Leaders in OIT quickly saw the potential of this prototype and assigned a team from its Digital Experience Product Office to develop an enterprise-wide version. In keeping with OIT’s agile methodology, the tool was developed and launched in just 12 days—an unprecedented timeline made possible thanks to VA’s investment in the VA.gov platform, which provides a flexible base for quickly delivering new capabilities. Designed in partnership with Veterans and medical center leadership, the team of designers and developers from OIT’s Digital Experience Product Office incorporated feedback from user testing to ensure the tool met Veteran and employee needs. Some of the tool’s features include:

- Clear results
- Quick access to crisis support
- Easy-to-update screening protocols

Charles Worthington—VA’s CTO—applauded the designers, developers, and partners across VA who collaborated to bring this innovative pilot to nationwide deployment in weeks.

*“The pre-entry screening tool is a great example of innovation in action at VA. In this case, staff at a local medical center took the initiative to solve a problem they were facing on the ground, giving our Digital Experience Product Office a template for a nationwide solution that every facility can benefit from.”*

Currently in use in several VAMCs including Lowell, Massachusetts; Columbia, South Carolina; Baltimore, Maryland; and Los Angeles, California, the digital pre-entry screener has delivered over 140,000 screening results to date.

As usage of the tool continues to grow, the Office of the CTO will monitor performance and feedback and will update the tool's features as needed. The development and launch of the

COVID-19 digital pre-entry screening tool is another way VA is reaffirming our commitment to provide Veterans with the best customer service.

**To start using the COVID-19 digital pre-entry screener, VAMCs can simply direct patients and staff to text “screen” to 53079.**

## OIT LAUNCHES NEW VIRTUAL CHECK-IN FEATURE

VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) across the country are expanding services now that onsite patient care can safely resume. To ensure the protection of both patients and staff, OIT, working in collaboration with VHA, recently launched [“I am Here”](#), a new virtual check-in feature.

The new feature allows VA facilities to check patients in remotely while ensuring physical distancing. To use the feature, Veterans at participating facilities can simply text a message to 53079 stating “here” once they arrive in the parking lot of the facility where they have a scheduled appointment. This notifies the care team that the patient has arrived at the facility and is waiting to be called inside for their appointment. The Veteran will then receive an auto-response with a message acknowledging their check-in and an additional response directing them to await further instruction. Finally, the patient will receive a text message once their provider is ready to see them and it is okay to proceed to the appointment.



Designed in partnership with Veterans and medical center leadership, and incorporating feedback from user testing, the feature helps reduce wait times, ease stress, and lower exposure risk while addressing both Veteran and VA employee needs. It allows Veterans to gain confidence in the new reality of increased digital interactions as part of their VA health care experience. Some of the tool's features include:

- Text appointment confirmation and reminders
- Remote check-in
- Digital pre-entry COVID-19 screening registration
- Pre-registration by phone
- Support for Spanish-language messaging
- Support for non-scheduled appointments

These innovations are a testament to OIT staff's ingenuity and commitment to supporting our Veterans during this unprecedented situation.

The “I am Here” check-in feature is active at 60 sites across the country. As usage of the tool continues to grow, OIT will monitor performance and feedback and update the tool's features. The development and launch of the “I am Here”

Virtual check-in tool is one example of OIT's investment in Digital Transformation, innovation, and collaboration. With this tool—alongside our [COVID-19 chatbot](#) and [COVID-19](#)

[Digital Pre-entry screening tool](#)—we're responding quickly to urgent needs to protect and support Veterans and VA employees during COVID-19.

## SOPHISTICATED MONITORING SOLUTIONS IMPROVE VETERAN AND VA CLINICIAN TELEHEALTH EXPERIENCE

VA enhanced several IT systems to stay ahead of the unprecedented surge in the demand for video appointments as record numbers of Veterans and their families opted for virtual medical appointments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these, OIT quintupled the capacity of VA's primary telehealth system, VA Video Connect, to allow more clinicians and patients to conduct remote appointments simultaneously. VHA clinicians now conduct close to 30,000 telehealth video appointments a day, compared to fewer than 2,500 video appointments each day in January and February.



VHA clinicians now conduct close to

**30,000 telehealth appointments per day**

To ensure that VA Video Connect would continue to operate smoothly, OIT created a robust set of new monitoring dashboards that aggregate data from multiple sources to shed light on telehealth system behavior. These new dashboards allow the IT monitoring team to easily gather disparate data and work with IT engineers to investigate and resolve issues within just hours, rather than days. Alongside a real-time view of call and video quality, the dashboards let the monitoring team see call and conference counts, errors and warnings, and calls by caller location. As of early June, OIT's monitoring experts have been using this new tool to examine data from 10 different sources and analyze over 72 million events every day.

The Site Reliability Engineers have been hard at work identifying issues related to capacity, which then inform the engineering team about how to adjust the VA Video Connect system's environment. By leveraging these insights, OIT has reduced connection errors from as many as 1,000 users per day to fewer than 10. Teams also established event thresholds that would trigger alerts as VA Video Connect approached its maximum capacity.

To develop and maintain this robust telehealth dashboard, VA leveraged pre-pandemic experience and strong relationships with industry partners who specialize in aggregating and integrating data.

VA was able to fast track access and deploy the new monitoring system into the cloud, securing it in three weeks instead of the standard six months. This collaboration positively impacted Veterans and the clinicians who provide care. The dashboards created the ability to predict user needs from system trends, mitigate outages or problems for Veterans, and gave VHA's Office of Connected Care more visibility into critical systems.

*"As far as I'm concerned, telehealth saved my life. Telehealth stepped up. I'm very fortunate, and very grateful for them."*

**Army Veteran Daryll Martin on VHA using VA's telehealth capability**



# STRATEGIC SOURCING

## LEVERAGING VENDOR PARTNERSHIPS: VA SURGES REMOTE CAPABILITIES AND DOUBLES NETWORK CAPACITY

As the nation continues to face a once-in-a-century pandemic, and as part of VA's Fourth Mission, VA is now assisting local health care networks in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, following social distancing guidelines, a large portion of VA staff began working remotely in March.

OIT leveraged its vendor relationships to address this immense and sudden demand for remote access capabilities. Prior to COVID-19, remote access user connections of all types numbered around 156,000 across VA. OIT set out to expand the network to enable a seamless and secure transition to a remote-first workforce as COVID-19 cases grew exponentially across the country.

Taking an all-hands-on-deck approach, OIT doubled the available network bandwidth in record time, compressing months of work to under two weeks. The strengthened network ensured the large number of first-time remote users could easily and quickly access their workstations to support VA's COVID-19 response. OIT expanded remote access to support over 240,000 users and is on track to increase that to 500,000.

OIT also expanded the ability for VA employees to securely work from their own PCs, Macs, or tablets. Working from home for the first time, Priya Patel, a psychometrist in North Carolina, marveled that “the experience was as similar and as fast as actually working on my VA desktop at the hospital.”

*These network upgrades helped the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) achieve an incredible feat—processing 10-15% more claims than average.*

As VA staff continue to provide care and benefits during this fight against COVID-19, VA's OIT is committed to not only ensuring all staff have the IT resources they need, but also to rapidly improving, optimizing, and adding technologies that will bring new capabilities to VA's mission post-COVID-19.



**Doubled**  
network bandwidth



Compressed months  
of work to  
**2 weeks**



**\$1.649 Billion**  
in funding memos  
approved by the CIO

# STRATEGIC SOURCING PROVIDES UNPARALLELED SUPPORT DURING COVID-19

As VA responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, OIT's Office of Strategic Sourcing rose to the challenge of ensuring swift delivery of IT equipment to the people and places that needed it most.

Much of the Office of Strategic Sourcing's success can be attributed to early collaboration with strategic suppliers. By identifying critical services and engaging regularly with trusted vendors to assess their readiness, the Office of Strategic Sourcing's Vendor Management Office was able to understand those vendors' supply chains and potential risks that might impact OIT's requirements. Additionally, the office's Acquisition and Category Management division collaborated with the General Services Administration and VA's Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction to obtain federal priority ratings to procure capabilities in a timely manner. The team also leveraged strategic contracts to allow for pre-competition and fair and reasonable pricing.

OIT engaged with vendors aligned to eight unique workstreams—bandwidth, customer experience, data management, equipment and endpoints, IT resources, remote access and telework, telehealth, and contact centers. Historically, the Vendor Management Office conducts about 30 to 35 vendor engagements per month. In the second fiscal quarter alone, they held 185. Additionally, the team established vendor sessions to remove barriers, promote innovation, and build stronger vendor relationships.

To accommodate OIT employees transitioning to remote work, increased telehealth capabilities for patients and clinicians, and expanded services to both Veterans and members of the public, OIT leveraged several vendors to procure laptops and mobile equipment, mitigating potential single-vendor supply chain issues.

Each of these endpoint packages contained a standard laptop, docking station, two monitors, and peripherals. The team also acquired a diverse suite of services and software to meet emergency requirements.

Ensuring these capabilities met federal standards was just as important as getting them into the right hands quickly and efficiently. OSS's Acquisition Compliance and Operations team examined OIT's existing Federal IT Acquisition Reform Act (FITARA) and streamlined faster Chief Information Officer (CIO) approval of acquisitions.

Additionally, the OSS team developed a COVID-19 dashboard to track acquisitions at every stage and funding level.

*To date, 163 funding memos have been approved by the CIO, valued at \$1.649 billion, with 831 contract actions—new requirements, options, modifications, purchase cards, and more—tracked.*



## *Celebrating Women in Tech*

Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology and Chief Information Officer Mr. James P. Gfrerer invited OIT employees to an event recognizing the contributions of Women in Technology.



# IT WORKFORCE TRANSFORMATION

## RAMPING UP IT WORKFORCE TO RESPOND TO COVID-19

In March 2020, OIT was faced with combating the COVID-19 pandemic on the frontlines with business partners while also meeting staff safety and readiness requirements. To address these challenges, OIT quickly assembled COVID-19 leadership workgroups to identify issues and remove barriers. OIT facilitated a remote workforce infrastructure by implementing an improved business model based on a scalable Development Security Operations approach. In doing so, OIT successfully supported a nearly three-fold increase in VA's remote workforce that continued to serve Veterans while remaining safe and helping to flatten the COVID-19 curve.

This updated business model required OIT to step up recruiting efforts and rapidly onboard critical IT hires. Using recruiting resources such as Schedule A and Open Continuous Announcements, managers had direct hiring authority to onboard top talent with specialized IT skills. Current Federal employees with applicable skills could also apply for short-term IT details. To support the national emergency and identify internal talent, OIT leadership strongly encouraged

*"Our providers report that face-to-face video connection is very impactful for Veterans. They need a personal connection in a time of crisis, and now, thanks to our partnership with OIT, we are deploying and refining enhanced tools to help them."*

**Melicia Jordan-Yette, Telehealth Program Manager for VHA's Home Telehealth/Telemedicine service offerings**

supervisors to approve short-term details. Once onboarded, critical IT resources were prepared to join their teammates in the trenches.

## CYBER CAREER PATHWAYS TOOL

[The Cyber Career Pathways Tool](#) helps current and potential IT employees identify, build, and navigate a potential cyber career pathway by increasing understanding of the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to begin, transition, or advance a cyber career. The tool presents a new and interactive way to explore work roles within the [National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education Cybersecurity Workforce Framework](#). It depicts the cyber workforce as five distinct, yet complementary, skill communities. It also highlights core attributes among each of 52 work roles and offers actionable insights for employers, professionals, and individuals considering a career in cyber.

The Cyber Career Pathways Tool is located on the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's [National Initiative for Cybersecurity Careers and Studies](#) website. The Cyber Career Pathways Tool was created and is maintained in partnership with the Interagency Federal Cyber Career Pathways Working Group, led by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Cyber Career Pathways Tool is designed for:

- **Professionals** looking to begin or advance their cyber career through training, reskilling, and upskilling;
- **Employers and managers** recruiting cyber talent, creating position descriptions, guiding employees, procuring training, and conducting workforce assessments; and
- **Students and recent graduates** looking to learn more about the National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education Framework, identify cyber work roles of interest, and identify and pursue training and certifications to prepare for a cyber career.

Users from a variety of backgrounds can use the tool to better understand the cyber workforce as a whole, in addition to the various types of cyber work roles and their relationship to one another.

The Cyber Career Pathways Tool allows users to explore the cyber workforce through the lens of Cyber Communities, expand knowledge of the National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education Framework roles through core Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs), and compare related work roles to gain a better understanding of how to obtain the skills needed to move from one work role to another.

*The Cyber Career Pathways Tool facilitates greater flexibility and adaptability in meeting emerging cyber workforce needs.*



## ***Improving the Veteran Experience***

“We’re looking for opportunities to improve Veterans’ life experience through the application of information technology...”

**Paul Brubaker - Deputy Chief Information Officer, Account Management Office**



**Watch Video**

# OIT'S RESKILLING AND UPSKILLING PROGRAM DRIVES IT MODERNIZATION

IT modernization is a cornerstone of VA's Digital Transformation Strategy, and OIT is leading the way. But no IT modernization effort is complete without an IT workforce transformation to accompany it. This reality has led OIT to pilot a reskilling program for its 8,000 employees.



The Partnership for Public Service and General Assembly joined forces to write “Looking Inward for Talent: Retraining Employees for Tomorrow’s Jobs,” which highlights OIT’s reskilling program. To learn more about VA’s reskilling project, and to hear about how other federal agencies are retraining employees as part of their own modernization efforts, [download the full article](#).

In addition to OIT’s reskilling efforts and in recognition of a changing cybersecurity landscape, it’s essential to train and hire employees with the right qualifications to protect employee and Veteran data. In early 2019, the Federal Cyber Reskilling Program offered Federal employees the chance to participate in cybersecurity training. Recently, VA began reviewing resumes of the program’s first graduates to fill key detail positions.

Designed by the Federal Chief Information Officers Council, the program helps participants build foundational skills in the field of cyber defense analysis, preparing them for re-deployment into the cybersecurity workforce. Participants track their progress through direct instruction, hands-on learning and labs, and regular assessments. Courses cover cyber hygiene skills, incident handling, and coding languages and networking.

Hiring managers interested in finding program graduates to fill detail opportunities earlier this year were able to advertise positions to program graduates interested in open jobs. These kinds of programs give organizations like VA fast-track access to individuals who have completed a formal training program with the federal government, for critical cyber skills, helping to augment a next-generation workforce that can compete and perform in a rapidly shifting cyber field.



## Women in OIT

“I think it’s a fantastic place for women to work...we’re all equal partners.”

**Susan O’Hare - Senior IT Technical Advisor, IT Operations and Services**



Watch Video



# SEAMLESS AND SECURE INTEROPERABILITY



## VA MARCHES TOWARD SECURING RELIABLE, SAFE CONNECTIVITY WITH DOD FOR JOINT ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORD MODERNIZATION

The largest system implementation in VA history is now underway, as OIT, the Office of Electronic Health Record Modernization, and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and other stakeholders are working around the clock to ramp up an interoperable Electronic Health Record solution that aligns systems and data with the Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. Coast Guard. The Electronic Health Record Modernization effort is designed to provide Veterans and medical providers seamless, efficient inter-agency access to Veterans' health records. To achieve reliable connectivity with Veteran's records

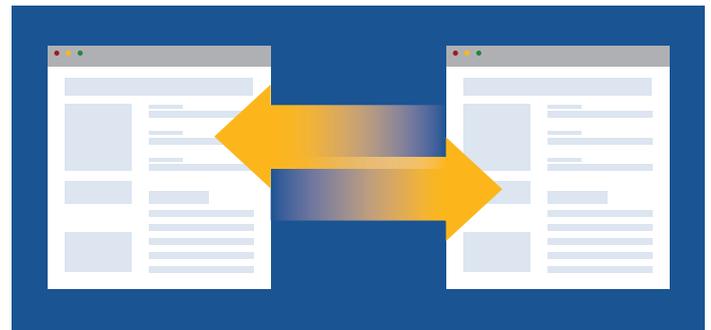
located in DOD systems, OIT is developing a secure cross-agency infrastructure with its DOD partners to ensure that network architecture supports the new Electronic Health Record and improves VA's health care delivery.

Once fully implemented, the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) will provide Veterans a single, integrated health and medical record that will reflect their full service and post-service profile, relieving Veterans of the burden of tracking and managing their information.

## OIT SUPPORTS EHRM ACTIVITIES THROUGHOUT COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Although COVID-19 has impacted VA's normal business operations and diverted many VA staff to focus on COVID-related activities, OIT has still worked consistently during the pandemic to support our partners in making progress on the new, comprehensive, enterprise-wide EHRM system. Promoting a secure, integrated, health data-sharing environment between VA and DOD has remained a top priority for OIT.

Throughout the pandemic, OIT continues sustained interagency collaboration with VA partners on EHRM to transform challenges into quick-turn solutions; established effective integrated tracking and reporting mechanisms to detect system vulnerabilities; and maintained continuous support for EHRM objectives.



## **DEVELOP A JOINT CHANGE CONTROL MANAGEMENT STRATEGY**

OIT was instrumental in identifying a solution to create and share change control requests from DOD and VA using an accessible joint approval system. As soon as work began on the solution, almost 90% of OIT's original change control team resources were allocated to support COVID-19 response. Despite the smaller team, OIT, in collaboration with resources from Office of Electronic Health Record Modernization and Cerner, developed an interim change control management solution.

## **ESTABLISH INTEGRATED TRACKING & REPORTING MECHANISMS**

Establishing connectivity to a larger integrated health network requires a framework for a secure, stable cyber environment that is fully interoperable across data and information systems between VA and DOD. In alignment with the Federal Information Security Management Act and National Institute of Standards and Technology guidance, OIT established a joint framework with DOD that enables network vulnerability scanning and allows for secure access control and data-sharing security standardization for devices and systems.

## **CREATE A DATA VULNERABILITY TRACKING SYSTEM**

Through this joint framework with DOD, OIT recently created a guide that allows for better vulnerability insight and management of systems in partnership with Joint Cyber Operations and Integration Center. Upon completion of vulnerability scans and reporting, the guide is a tool to help system stewards and owners respond and put together mitigation strategies.

## **IMPROVE THE INCIDENT REPORTING SYSTEM**

Tracking incidents in real time is critical for EHRM. The OIT EHRM Help Desk project team developed a report to track all open and closed tickets related to pre-Go-Live EHRM activities. This report gives the Office of Electronic Health Record Modernization team access to a self-service report to help enable incident tracking without having to look across individual ServiceNow profiles for unresolved items. Outside of VA, OIT also worked with Cerner to configure and test a bi-directional testing interface that connects VA's Service Desk with Cerner's Millennium Service Desk. Testing of the bi-directional interface confirms both help desks can communicate and exchange incident tickets, which is critical for EHRM success since both organizations may have a part in resolving incidents. An interface will allow an end user to create a ticket in VA's ServiceNow, which will automatically route to Cerner.

## **MAINTAIN CONTINUOUS SUPPORT FOR EHRM**

VA continues to use lessons learned from DOD and the Defense Health Agency to improve VA's ability to set up systems, develop Plans of Action and Milestones, and review risks in a way that more closely aligns with national standards.

Before the pandemic, VA transitioned to a new governance, risk and compliance tool—Enterprise Mission Assurance Support Service—which provides a robust risk management system that allows VA to better understand risks and document them more appropriately. Given that DOD also uses the tool, both organizations can now participate in a reciprocity process, which allows data and information to be shared within the tool. This provides a connection with

DOD to continue EHRM authority-to-operate and authority-to-connect activities and to accept and track each agency's documents and data.

Despite the diversion of necessary resources, personnel, and tools to support VA's COVID-19 response during the pandemic, OIT's technical advances to support connectivity of the new EHRM solution helped to implement joint Health Information Exchange and the bi-directional interface between the VA and Cerner Help Desks to reduce incident management inquiries.

*The future holds opportunities to continue progress on critical initiatives to support EHRM as the rollout continues in future years nationwide.*

## INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION IN SPOKANE IN 2020

When VA first implements the new Electronic Health Record (EHR) this year at [Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center](#) in Spokane, Washington and the West Consolidated Patient Accounting Center in Las Vegas, Nevada, we will deliver a minimum viable product of the new EHR system. It will mark VA's first deployment of the system to achieve shared health care data across DOD and VA for service members as they transition to Veterans and receive health care and benefits from VA. The solution will include an initial set of functions that provide value by meeting basic user needs while collecting data for future product development.

After deploying at initial sites, VA will roll the EHR solution out to all VA sites in a staggered approach through 2028. Upon completion, the EHR solution will provide a seamless, transparent, central housing of all records in one view for easier and quicker access by the medical staff who treat



Veterans, as well as for ordering prescriptions, making appointments, and handling other tasks directly from the new EHR portal.

# VHA AND OIT PARTNERSHIP DELIVERS CONSULT TOOLBOX ENHANCEMENT IN LESS THAN 10 DAYS

As VA continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, OIT is partnering closely with VHA to ensure that Veterans continue receiving top-quality care. One such successful collaboration enhanced the Consult Toolbox to allow VA providers, clinicians, and support staff to prioritize appointment scheduling during COVID-19. The Consult Toolbox enhancements:

-  Prioritize appointment scheduling for Veterans.
-  Facilitate the return of normal patient care activities.
-  Were completed in less than 10 days, which would normally have taken six months.

Due to the pandemic, all non-critical and non-urgent in-person medical care was suspended to avoid spreading the virus. This resulted in cancellations and delays of thousands of outpatient appointments and elective procedures across VHA. When OIT's business partners in VHA and the Office

of Electronic Health Record Modernization recognized the need to incorporate standardized language into the referral process, OIT served as a critical link to facilitate the COVID-19 enhancements to the Consult Toolbox. OIT immediately began to work with VHA partners to ensure this emergency enhancement could be completed in a compressed timeframe.

In keeping with its agile methodology, OIT team members developed an aggressive timeline that not only met the business need, but also removed potential barriers to deployment.

*The team prioritized the work over everything else, enabling what is typically a 6-month deployment timeline to occur in just under 10 days.*

To accomplish this, OIT leadership expedited the typical software delivery path. The new tool rolled out at seven sites and was monitored for 24 hours, then rolled out nationally and was deployed in record time. This effort could not have been successful without the seven initial sites: Salisbury, Fort Harrison,



## Connecting Patient Data

"A good thing would be to have the patient, the provider, and the patient's [full medical history] all together in a room at the same time."

**Dr. Paul Tibbits - Executive Director, Office of Technical Integration**



[Watch Video](#)

Salt Lake City, Madison, Puget Sound/Seattle, Houston and Tennessee Valley VA Health Care Systems and Medical Centers.

Alongside development and testing, VHA business partners were instrumental in developing and deploying critical training and communications related to the new feature. Through weekly communications calls, staff members learned how to capture COVID-19 patient scheduling information, as well as how to triage and prioritize Veterans with critical needs to ensure they were accommodated first.

Consult Toolbox COVID-19 is assisting VA providers, clinicians, and support staff with tracking, triaging, and grouping new consults and canceled appointments to deliver the most clinically urgent care to Veterans more quickly. And its value won't end after the pandemic has passed; Consult Toolbox COVID-19 will facilitate the return of regular patient care activities when normal operations return.

This accomplishment was an exemplary effort between VHA's Office of Community Care, Office of Veterans Access to Care, National Director of Gastroenterology, Office of Informatics, and OIT to identify and implement a solution that improves care coordination, increases efficiency for appointment scheduling, and ultimately improves the Veteran's experience.

COVID-19 presents many challenges to VA—but also many opportunities. Now more than ever, OIT is working shoulder to shoulder with our business partners to develop and deploy innovative IT solutions. The successful release of Consult Toolbox COVID-19 ensures Veterans continue to have seamless access to the care and services they deserve.



## ***Veterans Serving Veterans***

“When I came to work for VA, it was really because I have a lot of veterans in my family near and dear. My son, my daughter-in-law, and I really wanted to be able to serve VA as best I could.”

**Susan O'Hare - Senior IT Technical Advisor, IT Operations And Services**



**Watch Video**



# 2021 LOOK AHEAD

The pace and demand for digital solutions continues to grow rapidly, especially in this COVID-19 environment, which brings its own unique challenges. VA's Digital Transformation Strategy will help the Department keep pace with these demands, while modernizing the way we work and provide care and services to our nation's Veterans.

Our [Digital Transformation Strategy](#) is an enduring and flexible approach to IT transformation, because as technology and the operating environment change quickly, so do the needs of our employees and the Veterans we serve. This

Digital Transformation will help VA create and maintain IT systems, tools, and technologies that are more robust, and value-driven, enabling a seamless experience that is intuitive to what both the employee and the Veteran need from VA.

## OIT'S 2021 FOCUS WILL INCLUDE:



Exceptional  
Customer Service



IT Modernization



Strategic Sourcing



IT Workforce  
Transformation



Seamless and Secure  
Interoperability

**Exceptional Customer Service:** Improving the customer experience is VA's prime directive. We serve our internal customers—Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery Administration (NCA) employees—so they have tools needed to better serve Veterans. For them, faster access to IT support, including 24/7 chat options as well as device-as-a-service and Windows Virtual Desktop allow for easy account set up and maintenance for employees. We will also continue to use tools like Human Centered Design, which facilitates collaboration between VA employees and Veterans to co-design innovative tools that enable a seamless, unified Veteran experience.

**IT Modernization:** We will provide greater access to applications and data, as well as cost avoidance by continuing to move applications to the cloud and creating a “supply depot” for managed services to scale in times of need. To prioritize our IT investments, support modernization, and align IT funding to VA's biggest priorities, we are standing up an Investment Review Board. We will also support rolling out VA's Electronic Health Record Modernization to more sites, providing a single, seamless clinical health record from active duty to Veteran status.

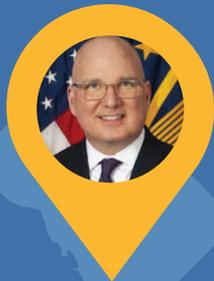
**Strategic Sourcing:** OIT will look for ways to continue to drive value to VA and obtain the right IT materials, services, solutions at the best value. OIT is dedicated to working with VBA, VHA, and NCA to procure solutions that enhance the Veteran experience. We will proactively engage with business partners to maintain trusted vendor and supplier relationships, ensuring timely software, hardware, and service delivery.

**IT Workforce Transformation:** OIT will become an employer of choice for IT workers, and will boost recruitment of professionals with next generation IT skillsets. As we identify emerging skills and automate processes, we will quickly organize new talent (e.g., data scientists, machine learning experts, cyber experts, product managers, and DevSecOps engineers) around emerging enterprise-wide needs. OIT will cultivate customer-centered product managers focused on measurable outcomes through a teamed approach rather than project managers with a scope, risk, and budget lens. We are equally committed to ensuring current employees receive the training and support needed to enhance their capabilities and advance VA's Digital Transformation.

**Seamless and Secure Interoperability:** We will focus on balancing security, rapid delivery, and interoperability to optimize the VA clinician and the Veteran experience. We use a layered defense-in-depth approach to information security to protect the data Veterans have entrusted to us. This approach will help us continue to defend against inbound threats through vulnerability scanning, event log monitoring, and robust assessments to achieve a proactive, strengthened VA security posture.

OIT knows VA's customer service starts with us. We are committed to supporting our business partners as we work toward a shared purpose—to create the best experience for all Veterans—through VA's Digital Transformation.

*Our Veterans deserve an exceptional customer experience, and at OIT, It Starts With Us.*



### ***A Cause Bigger Than Yourself***

*"To me, there's really no higher calling than to ensure that we make good on Abraham Lincoln's promise to care for the Veterans and their families who've done everything possible to preserve our union."*

**Paul Brubaker - Deputy Chief Information Officer, Account Management Office**



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