



## **Automate GI Bill Benefits Initiative-Integrated Governance**

Automate GI Bill Benefits Initiative-Integrated Governance Model Case Study

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Automate GI Bill Benefits Initiative Program Management Office

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Information and Technology

## **Executive Summary**

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the second largest Federal department and has over 278,000 employees. Among the many professions represented in the vast VA workforce are physicians, nurses, counselors, statisticians, architects, computer specialists, and attorneys. VA comprises a Central Office (VACO), which is located in Washington, DC, and field facilities throughout the Nation administered by its three major line organizations: Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery Administration.

Services and benefits are provided through a nationwide network of 153 hospitals, 956 outpatient clinics, 134 community living centers, 90 domiciliary residential rehabilitation treatment programs, 232 Veterans centers, 57 Veterans benefits regional offices, and 131 national cemeteries.

In June 2008, Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008. This legislation updated GI Bill provisions and amended Title 38 of the United States Code to establish a program of educational assistance for members of the armed forces who served on or after September 11, 2001. It provides educational benefits to eligible Veterans or qualifying dependents for undergraduate and graduate level degree programs, vocational training, technical and professional certification courses, and one-time certification examinations. On January 4, 2011, the President signed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 into law (PL 111-377). Among other things, PL 111-377 expands eligible education programs to include apprenticeships, on-the job training, flight training, and non-college degree programs. It also provides veterans with a housing stipend when taking courses through long distance learning and allows veterans to use their benefits to pay for national tests, licensure, and certification tests.

Education Service (EDU), a program within VBA, with support of the Office of Information and Technology (OIT), implements this program. The primary offices for adjudicating Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are the Atlanta, Buffalo, Muskogee, and St. Louis regional offices, which are managed by the VBA's Office of Field Operations (OFO).

This case study discusses the challenges in identifying and creating the appropriate governance structure for the Automate GI Bill Benefit Initiative (CH33), determining which processes were appropriate, and expediting requests and actions to meet quick deadlines.

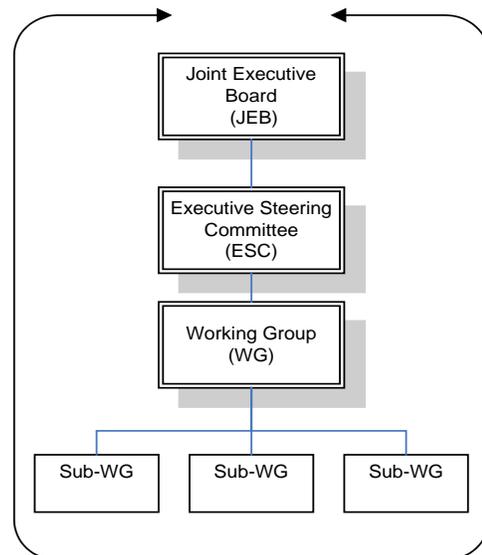
## Challenge

Among the multiple stakeholders for CH33 there were (and some cases still are) many different VA governance structures and redundant processes. Many of the processes required 60 to 90 days for decisions or were serial gated processes. With less than nine months to develop and implement a solution to pay claimants under the new law, any delay in decision-making could cause a day-for-day slip in the schedule. Additionally, in an organization as large and geographically dispersed as the VA, it is very difficult to maintain an integrated project team (IPT) of a manageable size that is fully empowered to make tactical decisions. In order for CH33 to be successful, it was necessary to create a single integrated governance structure that would eliminate redundant processes, expedite processes when appropriate, and empower the IPT and selected IPT members to make programmatic decisions.

## Solution

To address the governance issue, VBA and OIT created an integrated governance structure. This new structure has three tiers: Joint Executive Board (JEB), Executive Steering Committee (ESC) and the Working Group (WG or IPT). The JEB membership is composed of the Senior Executives at the organizational level of VBA and OIT. The ESC membership is composed of the Executives at the program level of VBA and OIT, and the WG is mainly composed of subject matter experts from VBA and OIT program offices. The WG meets twice a week (formerly on a daily basis), and the ESC and JEB meet once a week and bi-monthly, respectively. Additional meetings are convened on an as-needed basis. Sub-WGs have been formed and empowered during various stages of the development life cycle under the WG, allowing for a dynamic governance structure that can meet the ever-changing needs of the program as well as the rapid development/deployment tempo.

Within this structure the WG identifies processes that pose a risk to the program's success, whether that is because of its redundant nature or extended time frames. If such a risk is identified, it is documented along with a proposal for which actions should be taken and put forward for decision. The frequency at which the groups meet allows for a quick turn around on most decisions, and as the governance structure does not mirror the organizational structure, there are fewer layers to navigate for a decision.



Several other factors empowered this governance structure and enabled it to be successful:

1. The Automate GI Bill Benefit Initiative is one of 16 VA Transformational Initiatives designated by the Secretary of the VA.
2. Senior Executives are engaged at all levels and actively participate in the governance process.
3. For nearly 18 months, WG members were co-located in a “Collaboration Room” specially built for this project team to inculcate team work and participation and build rapid program maturity.
4. The program implemented an agile development methodology which allowed for greater visibility, eliminated many of the serial gate processes, and reinforced the need for constant communication and collaboration.
5. The CIO vested the authority to the Program Manger to escalate issues immediately to his attention, bypassing all governance processes, in order to gain immediate attention (“Red Flag” escalation process).
6. Program managers were given the monthly opportunity to brief the CIO on the status of development and deployment activities, note program risks and mitigation plans, and request support to ensure program success.

## **Results**

The aforementioned success factors were successfully implemented and continue to function through VA’s current development efforts. As a result of this integrated governance structure, the Automate GI Bill Benefit Initiative has eliminated redundant processes, expedites and executes processes quickly, and empowers IPT members to make and execute decisions.

The best example of the success of the governance structure took place in December 2009. Development had been ongoing since October for the first release of the application. Several requirement discrepancies came to light during an agile development demonstration that had been completed in the last iteration. As a result of these requirements issues, much of the functionality would need to be rewritten. Rather than halting all efforts and pursuing several governance paths, the WG was able to quickly assess the impact and risk and put forward options immediately to the ESC then to the JEB for decision. As a result, the IPT quickly refocused its efforts and released most of the application functionality on schedule and

absorbed the outstanding work into the next scheduled release. Not only were development efforts able to continue, but also the stakeholders were notified early, proper expectations were set, and development and release activities were able to continue to deliver a product that provided benefits to the end user.

## **Lessons Learned**

The following programmatic lessons have been learned and implemented:

- Quickly create and utilize an integrated governance structure and ensure the active stakeholders embrace it as part of the organizational culture.
- Senior Executive participation and the “Red Flag” process increase chances for success and help to avoid last minute failures.
- Maintain constant and consistent stakeholder involvement through meetings and co-location (this is especially important during planning stages).
- Using agile and iterative development/deployment processes allows for greater customer involvement, ownership, and visibility.
- Every project cannot be the number one priority; prioritization and setting expectations are still essential.

Note: Program staff is currently disseminating lessons learned as well best practices to other major initiative staffs and VA, OIT organizations.

## **Related Information**

- <http://www.va.gov>
- <http://www.gibill.va.gov>

## **Disclaimer**

References to the product and/or service names of the hardware and/or software products used in this case study do not constitute an endorsement of such hardware and/or software products.