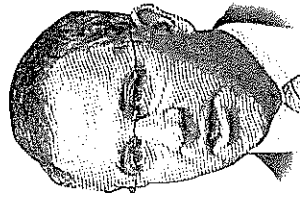


Fragmented IT impedes VA efficiency, service to veterans

When Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans, it forced the evacuation of the Veterans Affairs Department medical center there. Medical records kept on the center's computers had to be downloaded, shipped to the Houston VA medical center and reconfigured there before they could be used. X-ray images were temporarily lost. Without those records, those caring for New Orleans VA patients faced grave challenges.



The medical centers in New Orleans and Houston, moreover, are in the same regional VA health care network. Yet records from one facility had to be reconfigured to be read at another. This shows the risks inherent in a system that has become a regionally managed patchwork of old and new.

The problem at VA — the nation's largest integrated health care system — is partly caused by a lack of central information technology management, and by strong regional health care and benefits divisions.

These divisions tend to go their own way, hurting VA's ability to accomplish its mission of providing for millions of veterans. (VA comprises three major operating units, providing health care, benefits and memorial affairs. Veterans, however, rightly expect to see a single agency, and thus VA has tried to embrace a "One VA" vision.) The 1996 Clinger-Cohen Act established the position of chief information officer in each executive agency to prevent this fragmentation of IT management, but VA didn't establish the position until July 1998 and did not fill it until August 2001.

Since 2000, the House Veterans Affairs Committee has held six hearings on the issue of VA IT. As a subcommittee chairman in both this committee and the House Armed Services Committee, I have pressed for more efficient IT management, automation of benefits processing, and integration between VA and DoD. Four years after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom and 20 years' congressional badgering, these two agencies still cannot share medical records. The Government Accountability Office has testified since 1998 that VA has had numerous serious problems managing its IT programs. Significant VA IT failures have wasted millions of

dollars:

- \$600 million for VETSNET, the automated compensation and pension claims processing system, has been in development for more than a decade.
- \$342 million for CoreFLS, the financial management system in one of VA's busiest medical centers, in St. Petersburg, Fla., failed to do the job.
- \$300 million for HR Links, the failed automated personnel system.

Gartner Consulting, which serves 45,000 clients worldwide, including many Fortune 500 companies, assessed VA's IT organization earlier this year at VA's request, to determine the best option for VA.

Gartner found that "excessive duplication of IT assets and inefficiencies exists within VA IT" and a "lack of underlying principles to bind the organization to a mission."

Many Fortune 500 companies we also consulted agreed with Gartner. Given the dysfunctional nature of the decentralization, Gartner recommended full centralization as the approach that "provides the greatest opportunity to successfully execute One VA mission objectives." Gartner stated that centralization promised to maximize asset use and get results faster than the federated approach, which risked failure because it is

essentially just more of the same.

In response, I introduced the 2005 Department of Veterans Affairs Information Technology Management Improvement Act, HR 4061. The House passed it 408-0 on Nov. 2. This bipartisan bill is co-sponsored by the committee's ranking member, Lane Evans, D-Ill. It would give the VA CIO authority over the department's IT budget and control over IT policy, personnel and assets, fulfilling the intent of Clinger-Cohen.

Implemented properly, centralization would make VA's IT system much more efficient. It would concentrate the oversight of IT development and operations and make them responsive to each business line's requirements while maintaining a consistency within the department's IT organization. Centralization should save more than \$1.7 billion over five years.

While VA's vision is to be "One VA," its IT system is stovepiped, slow and inefficient. HR 4061 would reduce the bureaucracies' ability to impede progress, lead to a true One VA, improve accountability, serve veterans better, and save taxpayer dollars in the bargain.

Rep. **Steve Buyer**, R-Ind., is chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.