

Transforming VA's IT Organization to Better Serve Veterans: Insights from LaVerne Council, Assistant Secretary for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

By Michael J. Keegan



In his second inaugural address, President Abraham Lincoln spoke of the tragedies of the Civil War and society's need to unify and "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan...."

Though much has changed since that time, Lincoln's sentiment remains constant in the mission of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Changes in society, advances in technology, and the aftermath of recent military conflicts only underscore the importance of such a mission and the need to get it right.

In today's technologically complex world, getting it right also means having an exemplary information technology organization to provide the highest level of service to veterans. Significant factors increase pressure on VA to change and adapt, facing shifting veteran demographics as the aging veteran population seeks out and uses benefits at much higher rates. IT is a key enabler that can help VA adapt and change, no small feat for the largest integrated health care system in the country; a benefits-processing organization equivalent to a medium-size insurance company; and one of the largest integrated memorial and cemetery organizations in the U.S.

What is VA's IT strategy? How is VA changing the way it does IT? What about its enterprise cybersecurity strategy? LaVerne Council, Assistant Secretary for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, joined me on The Business of Government Hour to share her insights on these topics and more. The following excerpts from our discussion are complemented with additional research.

What are your duties and responsibilities at the VA?



LaVerne Council: As the Assistant Secretary for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, I'm responsible for about 8,000 employees and 8,000 contractors, 56 percent of those folks are veterans. I manage an appropriation of a little over four billion dollars used to support the IT mission support needs of all VA programs that support veterans.

My objective is changing that veteran's experience using IT. I want to make it easier for the VA staff that run programs to use technology in getting it right and meeting VA's mission. Technology pervades almost every facet of life today: call it the "consumerization" of technology that goes to the heart of increased expectations. Folks have an expectation and we always have to be looking at ways to meet that expectation. In our case, we need to be accommodating the veteran and thinking about what we can do to give them access to their information and make it seamless to them when they come to the VA for benefits.

Regarding your duties and responsibilities, what are some of the top challenges you've faced?



LaVerne Council: A significant challenge is fostering a work culture that sees the value of change. It is vital to remind people why they come to work, the importance of the VA mission, but it is just as important, given the pace of technology, for them to recognize that change is a constant. We have to be open as a culture to change.

The second challenge is making sure we are using all the resources we have available to us wisely, efficiently, and focused on outcomes. One might think, that shouldn't be



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hard. But it is hard if you're not entirely aware of all you have available to you and that you are empowered to use those resources. Therefore, empowering employees is key to our success and is an effort that I am really focused on today.

The third challenge is making sure we are communicating across the enterprise. Communication is everything in my business and it is essential that I'm communicating well, often, and accurately. It's something I think every leader has to do, and in this role it's a requirement.

A comprehensive review of the organizational assessments, strategic plans, and customer and employee feedback reveal other persistent challenges within OI&T. I'll provide a brief overview:

- **Customer Focus:** There is insufficient collaboration between OI&T and customers; lack of service-level agreements is an ongoing problem.
- **Standardization and Quality:** Efficiency is compromised by an aging IT infrastructure, low data quality and lack of integration.
- **Leadership and Organization:** Leadership communication is not as effective as it could be, with key functions duplicated across OI&T and VA.
- **Innovation:** There are too few methods and processes in place that might enable innovation for our customers.
- **Governance:** OI&T is not always measuring what matters, leading to ineffective governance and inability to continuously improve.
- **Project Management:** Current processes are burdened by excessive overhead; consistency and accountability are lacking.
- **Workforce Development:** Insufficient talent management gives us little recourse to combat personnel departures.

Since you took the reins of VA's IT portfolio, you've crafted a new IT strategy. I'd like to talk more about that. Could you outline your vision for the office, but more importantly what your key priorities and strategic goals are?



LaVerne Council: As a political appointee with about an 18-month tenure, the ideal would be to identify one or two priorities, get those one or two things done, and say your good-byes. When I joined the VA, as I started looking at the

organization and thinking about how can we better serve veterans, I had to shift my original approach. Given the crisis situation, I knew I needed to do more than one or two projects. I needed to take this leadership opportunity to transform the department's IT organization.

The IT Enterprise Strategy provides a roadmap for our ongoing transformation. The strategy has a new mission, vision, guiding principles, and strategic goals, and I am proud to share these with you today. Our new mission is to collaborate with our business partners to create the best experience for all veterans. Our vision is to provide a seamless, unified veteran experience through the delivery of state-of-the-art technology. Our guiding principles are to be transparent, accountable, innovative, and team-oriented. The VA plans to achieve our goals through a prioritized set of strategic initiatives across our "Now, Near, and Future" time horizons.

One of your quick wins was establishing an Enterprise Program Management Office (EPMO). Would you describe the mission and purpose of the EPMO? How does it represent the "control tower" for VA's IT efforts going forward?



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Given EPMO's role as the control tower for OI&T, establishing its goals is a crucial step in transforming how OI&T does business. To better streamline our processes, EPMO has four concrete transformational initiatives: managing a single new release process for all partners, establishing tools for time-tracking and request intake, developing an Enterprise Change Calendar, and building the Veteran-focused Integration Process (VIP).

EPMO has already produced results. The VIP is a project-level based process that replaces the Project Management Accountability System (PMAS). VIP creates a new, lean process for work delivery within OI&T that prioritizes veterans' needs by streamlining activities that occur at the project, program, and portfolio levels. Since its inception, VIP has taken the development process down by 88 percent. It focuses on doing rather than merely documenting, with a reduction of artifacts from over 50 to just 7, plus the Authority to Operate and the shift from a six-month to a three-month delivery cycle. What's more, VIP establishes two



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critical decision points as part of the project and product phases to determine if a project is viable and if a product is ready for production release. We condensed seven release calendars into one and streamlined the release process from as many as ten review groups to a single group.

There is a serious level of accountability in the process, for instance, ensuring that our cyber-security needs are met upfront versus in the back end. The EPMO will also manage our IT dashboard that will be publicly available. People can see exactly what we’re doing, how we’re doing, how well we’re doing, and the resources we’ve allocated to development.

I would like to talk about cybersecurity for the largest medical system in the U.S. and the second largest federal agency. Would you elaborate on VA's Enterprise Cybersecurity Strategy and its five strategic goals? What critical questions does it seek to answer and how?



LaVerne Council: OI&T is facing the ever-growing cyber threat head on. The first step in our transformation was addressing enterprise cybersecurity. I issued a 90-day mandate to get this done; we did it in 60 days. We did it with employees across eight new domains including privacy and medical cybersecurity. We delivered an actionable, far-reaching, cybersecurity strategy and implementation plan for VA to Congress on September 28, 2015, as promised.

We designed our strategy to counter the spectrum of threat profiles through a multi-layered, in-depth defense model enabled through five strategic goals:

- **Protecting Veteran Information and VA Data:** We are strongly committed to protecting data. Our data security approach emphasizes in-depth defense, with multiple layers of protection around all veteran and VA data.
- **Defending VA's Cyberspace Ecosystem:** Providing secure and resilient VA information systems technology, business applications, publically accessible platforms, and shared data networks is central to VA's ability to defend VA's cyberspace ecosystem. Addressing technology needs

and operations that require protection, rapid response protocols, and efficient restoration techniques is core to effective defense.

- **Protecting VA Infrastructure and Assets:** Protecting VA infrastructure requires going beyond the VA-owned and VA-operated technology and systems within VA facilities to include the boundary environments that provide potential access and entry into VA by cyber adversaries.
- **Enabling Effective Operations:** Operating effectively within the cyber sphere requires improving governance and organizational alignment at enterprise, operational, and tactical levels (points of service interactions). This requires VA to integrate its cyberspace and security capabilities and outcomes within larger governance, business operation, and technology architecture frameworks.
- **Recruiting and Retaining a Talented Cybersecurity Workforce:** Strong cybersecurity requires building a workforce with talent in cybersecurity disciplines to implement and maintain the right processes, procedures, and tools.

This strategy is a major step forward in VA's commitment to safeguarding. We are working to close key actions in response to oversight recommendations, thus eliminating our label as a material weakness in VA. In addition to publishing our strategy, we have:

- Established eight domains to address findings from Office of Inspector General FISMA audits and improve cybersecurity posture
- Fully funded Continuous Readiness in Information Security Program (CRISP) efforts
- Conducted penetration testing with multiple parties

As part of CRISP, our Enterprise Cybersecurity Strategy Team has created a detailed Material Weakness Plan and is on track to eliminate our material weaknesses by the end of 2017.

In addition, we have a large legacy issue that we need to address. VA is increasing our spending on security to \$370 million, fully funding and fully resourcing our security capability. In addition, we are investing over \$50 million to create a data-management backbone.

VA and DoD share millions of health records today. I'd like to discuss efforts to pursue interoperability. What has the Joint Legacy Viewer done to enhance interoperability between VA and DoD?

 **LaVerne Council:** In the third quarter of FY 2015, the departments maintained data for 7.4 million unique correlated patients and unique DoD patients registered in the Master Veterans Index. Over the past year, VA has also seen rapid growth in utilization of the Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV). JLV is a read-only web-based health record viewer that allows both VA and DoD to see a veteran or service member's complete health history from both departments, integrated on a single screen. It provides a standards-based, integrated, chronological view of real-time electronic health record information from all VA and Department of Defense (DoD) facilities where a patient has received care as well as from VA external partners. It also meets 2014 NDAA Section 713 (b) (1) criteria for interoperability with DoD. We expected to have something like 35,000 users. We are well over that number—more than 138,169 VA JLV users, growing by thousands more weekly.

However, sharing data is only the first step in interoperability. Shared data needs to be used to provide better health care and benefits services to veterans. I am happy to report this is happening, and we are learning a lot from our users in the field, which is helping us iteratively refine and improve our new products.

Regarding interoperability, how does the new enterprise Health Management Platform (eHMP) build on the JLV and what role does the Veterans Health Information Exchange program (VLER Health) play in your efforts to expand interoperability?

 **LaVerne Council:** All of the great capabilities we have developed in JLV with our DoD partners will be carried forward into our new eHMP. The platform will improve organization, display and search of patient data, and will give clinicians the ability to compute data within the platform. Clinicians will also be able to write notes and order lab/radiology tests; promote team-based management and communication; consult with others via improved communication and tracking; and create customizable workspaces to improve clinical workflow. Over the next two years, we will roll out eHMP, but this is not a

“one-and-done” solution. There isn't such a thing in the world of technology, and there are certainly no shortcuts to be taken when the mission is to provide a truly veteran-centric healthcare experience. We are looking beyond just enhancing electronic health records to developing a comprehensive digital health platform that can better support veterans across the health continuum. The JLV moves us closer to that goal, and eHMP will move us closer still.

In all of our interoperability efforts, VA is working closely with the DoD/VA Interagency Program Office and the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology to ensure correct national standard codes are used for describing our health information data.

With so much going on, how are you strengthening the department's IT capital investment process to ensure that the investment that you're making is mission-aligned and cost-justified. How does your buy-first strategy factor into your effort?

 **LaVerne Council:** This is a very important question. We need to understand the implications of every dollar we spend and any new capital investment we pursue. Software is like a child. You have it and you will pay for it for the rest of its life. Before we undertake a project, the EPMO asks for a business case. We're asking the right questions at the beginning of the process. We are also pursuing a buy-first strategy that leverages existing commercial solutions first before building internally. There's too much custom development. We really need to take advantage of some of the best solutions that are out there.

Dollars, people, and time are all finite, so we need to make sure when using these resources they lead to the best outcomes possible. ■

To learn more about VA's Office of Information & Technology, go to <http://www.oit.va.gov/>

 To hear *The Business of Government Hour* interview with LaVerne Council, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.

 To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org, right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.

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