VA Digital Modernization is Foundation of COVID-19 Response

The agency’s IT transformation initiative allowed VA to effectively adapt services around the demands of the pandemic.

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The Department of Veterans Affairs' preexisting IT transformation initiatives helped the agency more effectively respond to the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, noted agency leaders at the GovernmentCIO Media & Research House Oversight and VA Digital Modernization event Wednesday.
Deputy Chief Information Officer Dominic Cussatt noted that VA began to overhaul its services in large part due to the immense scope of its responsibilities to America’s veterans and the nation as a whole.

“VA is a very large enterprise — we serve up to 20 million veterans, and have over a 400,000-person workforce," Cussatt said. "We’re also the backup health care system in the United States and can even act as a backup to the Defense Department during times of crisis to handle patients. It’s a big mission with high stakes, and we take IT support to this mission very seriously."

Cussatt emphasized that the goal of VA’s broader digital modernization push was ultimately practical, with an endpoint focus on improving the day-to-day experience of VA customers. This resulted in using newfound technical applications to facilitate and expand the delivery of existing VA services, resulting in a foundational tie to the agency’s essential mission.

“What we want to do is not IT for IT’s sake, but IT that is going to create a positive impact for veterans, for their lives, their care and for their families,” Cussatt said.

The agency’s considerable investment in a broad-reaching IT transformation program has paid considerable dividends during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in allowing for continuity of services that would have otherwise been limited or interrupted altogether by the abrupt changes.

“In terms of COVID, we think this IT modernization and subsequent digital transformation set us up nicely to be able to withstand the demands of COVID-19 and how we had to move to a virtual workforce and support telehealth and telecounseling," Cussatt said. "Because we had all these steps in place, we were able to transition quite nicely."

In examining the agency’s rapid deployment of a COVID-19 response, VA Office of Information Technology Chief of Staff Susan Perez found that preexisting infrastructure development allowed for a particularly agile and comprehensive shift to remote work as well.
“Right away we knew to take this divide-and-conquer approach so we could leverage all the great things we’d put in motion with our strategic plans. We also had some good lessons in testing ourselves in advance ... and we were able to scale very quickly so that not only our typical workforce would be okay to work in that remote posture. But we scaled so that if we had every employee that needed to go into a remote posture, we could support it,” Perez said.

Much of this continuity of services and allowance for an exponential increase in remote work was enabled by the VA’s cloud migration program, which permitted an unprecedented scope of dispersed access.

“Throughout the course of that, we moved VA to the cloud. We were one of the biggest entities in government that really pushed a move to the cloud," Cussatt said. "We’ve moved hundreds of applications and services to the cloud. Having that instance enabled us to very quickly scale into the cloud and develop that capacity we needed."

Ultimately, digital modernization push has its foundation in both the expansion of services, as well as building resiliency and ensuring veterans have access to care irrespective of circumstance or national crisis.

“We wanted to make sure that we weren’t just throwing money at the problem. We wanted to think about what was going to position us to weather this storm," Cussatt said. "It’s not just about this pandemic response. There are natural disasters that occur, homeland security issues that secure. VA has no choice but to be up and ready 24/7. We’ve got to provide health care, we’ve got to save lives, we’ve got to take care of people’s families."