

VA Office of Inspector General

OFFICE OF AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS



Veterans Benefits Administration

*Review of
Alleged Failure of the
National Work Queue
To Perform in
Production*

August 10, 2017
16-01401-295

ACRONYMS

NWQ	National Work Queue
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OI&T	Office of Information and Technology
PMO	Project Management Office
VARO	Veterans Affairs Regional Office
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VBMS	Veterans Benefits Management System

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Highlights: Review of Alleged Failure of VBA's National Work Queue To Perform in Production

Why We Did This Review

In November 2015, the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) received an anonymous Hotline complaint alleging that the VA National Work Queue (NWQ) did not perform in a production environment because VA did not test the system to specification. In addition, the complaint claimed that the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) Release 9.1 deployment prevented the processing of 4,000 disability claims.

What We Found

We did not substantiate that NWQ failed to perform in a production environment. At the time of the allegation, NWQ was still in testing and was not processing claims. Moreover, we noted that seven of eight VA Regional Office (VARO) pilot sites reported that NWQ functionality worked when they first started using it to process disability claims in February 2016. One site reported that claims did not automatically route from NWQ into employee queues on the first day. Overall, VARO pilot sites reported favorable experiences with NWQ.

We determined that VA tested NWQ functionality to specification. We reviewed applicable VBMS development artifacts that supported NWQ functionality to include system deployment requirements, configuration control records, test plans, and test cases. From February through June 2016, we noted that the average time for the actual NWQ claims distributions was one hour and 57 minutes; better than the four-hour performance standard.

We did not find that NWQ functionality had a negative effect upon disability claims processing. Specifically, we noted that none of the eight pilot sites reported lost disability claims resulting from the NWQ implementation. At the time of the allegation, NWQ was not yet used to process claims. We did not find that VBMS Release 9.1 had a significant adverse effect on claims processing, such as preventing the processing of 4,000 disability claims.

To evaluate the merits of the allegations, we communicated with VBMS Project Management Office leadership, Regional Office representatives who participated in the NWQ pilot deployment, and key personnel from the Veterans Benefits Administration and the Office of Information and Technology.

What We Recommended

We did not substantiate the allegations that VA's NWQ did not perform in a production environment. We did not find instances of inadequate system testing or that the deployment of VBMS Release 9.1 had a significant adverse effect on claims processing. Accordingly, we made no recommendations.

Agency Comments

Management concurred with the report.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Larry M. Reinkemeyer".

LARRY M. REINKEMEYER
Assistant Inspector General
for Audits and Evaluations

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INTRODUCTION

Objective

We conducted this review to determine the merits of a Hotline complaint alleging that VA's National Work Queue (NWQ) did not perform in a production environment. We evaluated whether VA tested the functionality to specification and whether NWQ functionality had a negative effect upon disability claims processing. In addition, we evaluated whether Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) Release 9.1 had a significant adverse effect on claims processing.

Allegation and Background

In November 2015, the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) received an anonymous Hotline complaint alleging that NWQ did not perform in a production environment because VA did not test the system to specification. At the time of the allegation, NWQ was in testing and was not used to process claims. Consequently, we evaluated whether the implementation of NWQ functionality, in February 2016, had a negative effect upon disability claims processing. The complainant also claimed that the VBMS Release 9.1 deployment prevented the processing of 4,000 disability claims. We therefore evaluated whether that release had a significant adverse effect on claims processing.

We noted that the complaint was submitted after the deployment of VBMS Release 9.1 in October 2015. Following this release, VBMS users nationwide reported multiple issues, such as long load times, error messages, blank application pages, and latency. We reviewed VA help desk incident tickets associated with Release 9.1 and other documents to understand the issues VBMS users experienced after the deployment of this release. According to VA's root cause analysis, the issues were due to poorly performing VBMS-Core database queries on the database host servers. Also according to the analysis, corrective actions in the days following the release resolved the negative performance effects to system users.

VBMS is a web-based, electronic, claims processing solution designed to assist in eliminating the claims backlog and to serve as the technology platform for quicker, more accurate claims processing. NWQ is a specific functionality of the VBMS Core component. NWQ is a paperless workload management tool designed to improve the Veterans Benefit Administration's (VBA) overall processing capacity, assist with eliminating the disability claims backlog, and facilitate processing all claims within 125 days with improved accuracy. NWQ prioritizes and distributes the claims inventory at a national level and further standardizes disability claims processing. According to a VA FY 2016 Budget Fact Sheet, the NWQ electronic work queue will automatically direct claims across all VA Regional Offices (VARO) "to efficiently match claim demand with available expertise and processing capacity regardless of" VARO jurisdiction.

According to a VBMS business specification, NWQ is designed to assign disability claims nationally to any VARO that is in a position to work the claim. Upon receipt of a claim, NWQ is assigned permanent jurisdiction over the claim. NWQ then assigns temporary claim jurisdiction to the applicable receiving VARO. When VARO management completes its task, the system removes the temporary claim jurisdiction, and the claim returns to NWQ.

In the OIG's report, *Follow-up Review of the Veterans Benefits Management System*, VA management stated that the target completion date for NWQ deployment was November 2015, subject to business priority and funding.¹ VBMS release 9.1 included enhancements to support subsequent NWQ pilot testing. VBA implemented NWQ in a staggered rollout, beginning with the pilot VAROs in February 2016 and expanding to all remaining VAROs by May 2016.

¹ VA OIG Report No. 13-00690-455; September 14, 2015.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding **VA's National Work Queue Performed in a Production Environment**

We did not substantiate that NWQ failed to perform in a production environment. Specifically, we noted that seven of eight pilot sites reported NWQ functionality worked when they first started using it within a production environment. One site reported that the claims did not automatically route from NWQ into employee queues on the first day. Overall, VARO pilot sites reported favorable experiences with NWQ.

We determined that VA tested NWQ functionality to specification. During our evaluation, we reviewed applicable VBMS development artifacts that supported NWQ functionality to include system deployment requirements, configuration control records, test plans, and test cases. We did not find that NWQ functionality had a negative effect upon disability claims processing. Specifically, we noted that none of the eight pilot sites reported lost disability claims or unintentional data alterations resulting from the NWQ functionality. We did not find that deployment of VBMS Release 9.1 had a significant adverse effect on claims processing. At the time of the allegation, NWQ was in testing and was not used to process claims.

What We Did

To address the allegations, we communicated with VBMS Project Management Office (PMO) leadership and key personnel from VBA and the Office of Information and Technology (OI&T) to better understand the NWQ application and its development history. We reviewed VBMS artifacts for requirements development and testing to gain an understanding of the development and testing processes. In addition, we reviewed configuration management records in order to understand the scope and timeline for NWQ-related software releases.

We also reviewed NWQ distribution run time summary data in order to determine whether the application was meeting performance requirements.² The NWQ functional requirement is to complete claims distribution runs in less than four hours so that VAROs can start claims processing. We queried VARO representatives who participated in the NWQ pilot deployment in order to understand their experience with the application, particularly with their observations of performance and effect on disability claims processing. We reviewed VBMS help desk tickets for work queue issues during the NWQ pilot. We also reviewed VA Release 9.1 help desk tickets and other documents to gain an understanding of VBMS-related system user issues and

² The process of distributing claims from the National Work Queue to Regional Offices.

determine whether the release had a significant adverse effect on claims processing.

**System
Functionality**

We did not substantiate that NWQ failed to perform in a production environment. Specifically, we noted that NWQ functionality performed in accordance with business requirements within the production environment. In addition, we noted that pilot VARO representatives reported several NWQ favorable outcomes:

- More claims have been processed than previously.
- NWQ has forced sites to improve internal processes.
- NWQ provides more flexibility to work claims in multiple stations.
- NWQ deficiencies were corrected in an expeditious manner.

We also observed that NWQ metrics from the February 2016 pilot through June 2016 showed that claims distribution run times met business requirements for timeliness. In addition, NWQ pilot VAROs reported that for seven of the eight sites, NWQ did work when the sites first started using NWQ to process claims within production. One pilot site reported that NWQ did not automatically route claims from NWQ into employee queues on the first day as intended. Consequently, VARO personnel manually assigned disability cases on that day as they had done prior to NWQ deployment. In October 2016, all eight pilot sites reported having had favorable experiences with NWQ.

**Adequate NWQ
Testing
Performed**

We did not substantiate the allegation that VA did not test NWQ functionality to specification. We determined that development and testing were documented in accordance with set standards, testing was relevant to evaluating NWQ functionality, and that the VBMS Configuration Control Board authorized the deployment decisions. System development records indicated that NWQ functionality was in development since June 2014. OI&T deployed VBMS Release 9.1 in October 2015. The release included enhancements to support the upcoming NWQ Pilot. In February 2016, OI&T implemented NWQ functionality to support actual claims processing for the eight pilot VARO sites as part of VBMS Release 10.0.

To evaluate whether VA conducted adequate testing of NWQ functionality, we reviewed VBMS test plans, test cases, and test execution records for NWQ-related releases in order to understand the objectives and outcomes. We noted that a key performance measure for evaluating NWQ functionality was the claims distribution run time as documented in a business specification document. For NWQ run times to meet requirements, distribution jobs must be completed in less than four hours so that VAROs can initiate claims processing.

To evaluate performance, we reviewed NWQ distribution run time data from the VBMS PMO, which provided claims distribution run times from February through June 2016. Specifically, we noted that the average time for the actual NWQ claims distributions during that period was one hour and 57 minutes, better than the four-hour performance standard. On the occasion that claims distribution runs were not complete, NWQ teams manually assigned the disability claims to claims processors. Four sites reported that claims processing performance had improved with NWQ deployment.

*Claims
Processing Not
Adversely
Affected by
NWQ
Functionality*

We did not find that NWQ functionality had a negative effect upon disability claims processing. Among the eight pilot sites queried, no VARO representatives reported lost disability claims or unintentionally altered claims data due to NWQ functionality. We noted that one site reported a significant problem with the NWQ distribution process. Specifically, the VARO reported that the legacy claims, those not initially established in VBMS but subsequently converted to electronic claims, were not identified or distributed to claims processors in a timely manner. However, the VARO reported that this particular problem was resolved in July 2016. One pilot site also explained that one benefit of NWQ is that it has forced users at different VAROs to agree to best practices, because one office's "mistake" will become evident during subsequent processing.

We reviewed VBMS help desk tickets for work queue issues during the pilot and did not find evidence that NWQ functionality was having an adverse effect on processing claims. We also reviewed post-release documents and did not find evidence that the VBMS Release 9.1 deployment had a significant adverse effect on claims processing.

*What We
Recommend*

We did not substantiate the allegations that VA's NWQ failed to perform in a production environment. We did not find instances of inadequate system testing or that the deployment of VBMS Release 9.1 had a significant adverse effect on claims processing. Accordingly, we made no recommendations.

Appendix A Scope and Methodology

Scope We conducted our work from May through June 2017. The scope of our review included determining applicable criteria and obtaining sufficient and credible evidence in order to address the allegations.

Methodology We communicated with VBMS PMO leadership and key personnel from VBA and OI&T to better understand the NWQ application and its development history. We reviewed VBMS artifacts for requirements development and testing to gain an understanding of the development and testing processes. We reviewed configuration management records to understand the scope and timeline for NWQ-related software releases. We also reviewed NWQ distribution run time summary data to determine whether the application was meeting performance requirements.

We reviewed VBMS help desk tickets for work queue issues during the NWQ pilot. We also reviewed post-release documents to determine whether the deployment of VBMS Release 9.1 had a significant adverse effect on claims processing. We queried VARO representatives who participated in the NWQ pilot to understand their experience with the application, particularly with their observations of performance and effect upon disability claims processing. At the time of the allegation, NWQ was in testing and was not being used to process claims. Consequently, we evaluated whether the implementation of NWQ functionality, in February 2016, had a negative effect on disability claims processing.

Fraud Assessment The review team assessed the risk that fraud, violations of legal and regulatory requirements, and abuse could occur during this audit. The team exercised due diligence in staying alert to any fraud indicators. We identified internal controls relevant to our objective that had potential risk for fraud or other illegal activities. For each risk, we assessed the probability of occurrence. In the course of the review, we observed for control weakness and illegal activity indicators but we did not identify control weaknesses. We did not observe indications of fraud or other illegal acts during this review.

Data Reliability We obtained NWQ distribution run time data from the VBMS PMO in a spreadsheet format. We assessed the reliability of the provided data. While we did not independently obtain the source run time data, our analysis of the data was consistent with the reported experiences of pilot site VARO representatives. Therefore, we determined that the likelihood of significant errors or incompleteness in the data was minimal, that the use of the run time data would not lead to an incorrect or unintentional message, and that the provided data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our analysis and findings.

**Government
Standards**

We performed limited testing that provided support for the conclusions in this report. We conducted this review in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*.

Appendix B Management Comments

Department of Veterans Affairs Memorandum

Date: June 13, 2017

From: Under Secretary for Benefits (20)

Subj: OIG Draft Report—Review of Alleged Failure of the National Work Queue to Perform in Production (2016-01401-CT-0073)—VAIQ 7770032

To: Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations (52)

1. This is in response to your request for VBA's review of OIG Draft Report: Review of Alleged Failure of the National Work Queue to Perform in Production.
2. VBA appreciates the opportunity to review the draft report, concurs with the findings, and provides no comments.
3. Questions may be referred to Christine Ras, Program Analyst, at 461-9057.

(Original signed by)

Thomas J. Murphy
Acting

For accessibility, the format of the original memo has been modified to fit in this document.

Appendix C **OIG Contact and Acknowledgments**

Contact	For more information about this report, please contact the Office of Inspector General at (202) 461-4720.
Acknowledgments	Michael Bowman, Director Richard Wright George Ibarra

Appendix D Report Distribution

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