



Digital Technology Helps Provide Education Benefits for Minnesota Veterans

State of Minnesota – Minnesota IT Services

CATEGORY:

State CIO Office Special Recognition

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Executive Summary

Governor Tim Walz declared November 2019 to be Military Family Month in Minnesota, honoring the men and women that have risked their lives in service to the state and country. State government is working to ensure these families have access to the services and resources to which they are entitled.

The [Minnesota Veterans Application Tracking System \(VATS\)](#), is a joint project between the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT). Through the [Minnesota GI Bill](#), veterans, service-members, and eligible spouses and children have access to a maximum benefit of \$10,000 to use for higher education, on-the-job training or apprenticeship programs, or to reimburse fees for licenses, certification, or admission tests.

VATS transformed the way veterans in Minnesota apply for and receive education benefits through the Minnesota GI Bill. Since July 2019, 2,600 veterans have successfully used VATS. To better access these education benefits, MNIT worked with MDVA to create VATS. Through the [Application Portal](#), users benefit from a modern experience that streamlines information sharing of applicants and manages the need of Minnesota veterans as well as institutions of higher education.

“The VATS-Education module is an amazing example of how technology can be utilized to create better outcomes for Minnesotans, especially for our Veterans,” said Minnesota IT Services Commissioner Tarek Tomes. “Veterans are not only entitled to these education benefits; they are entitled to be able to access those benefits in the most efficient way possible.”

One of MNIT’s priorities is to modernize aging technologies, and VATS has now replaced multiple manual, paper-based processes and an existing 15+ year old application that was expensive and difficult to support. With VATS-Education in place, there are now automated workflows for approvals, appeals, and denials, and MDVA staff can access the system to make decisions on benefits from wherever they may be. Veterans can submit applications online, and with a master/single database information can be accessed across all education programs and services.

With consolidated electronic case notes, a weeks-long application process for reimbursement of tuition can be completed within a single day. VATS was built with flexibility in mind, so the application can easily accommodate changes like adding a new benefit type, business policy or process, or making modification to comply with legislative mandates. Dynamic reporting provides granular reports and audits.

“The new VATS-Education system allows MDVA to have a better relationship with Minnesota veterans, allowing them to understand the process for their application for continuing education benefits,” says a member of the project team from MNIT partnering with MDVA. “For our business partners at MDVA, the new application also provides a better workflow management tool so that veterans can receive their benefits faster.”

EXEMPLAR

The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) administers the Minnesota GI Bill Program (MNGI Bill), [Minnesota statute §197.791](#) that was established in 2007. The [MNGI Bill](#) provides eligible Minnesota veterans, service-members, and family members up to \$10,000 for higher education, on-the-job training (OJT), or license and certification reimbursement. **Minnesota has over 308,000 veterans, 17,000 reservists, and 2,500 active-duty members.** Many of these men and women attend higher education, seek employers with OJT programs, or they need to gain or retain a license or certifications to remain productive members of society. The Minnesota GI Bill provides a pathway for Minnesota’s veterans to realize full-time, living- wage employment.

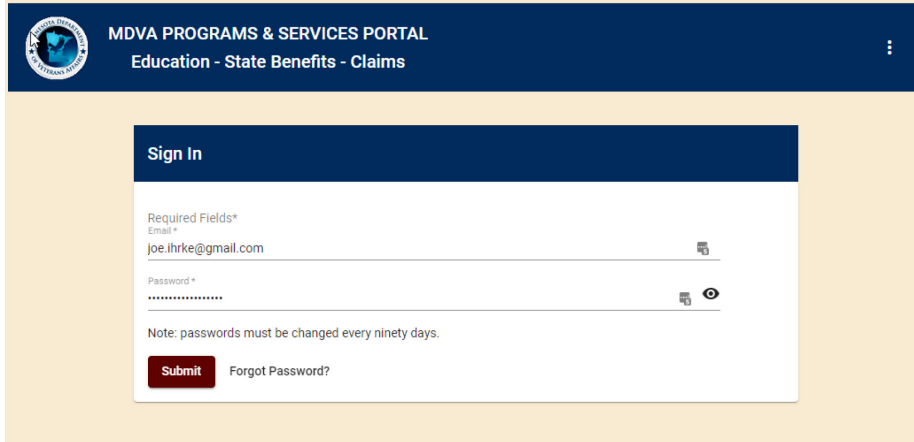
Initially, the MNGI Bill provided benefits to qualified applicants who were attending higher education. The benefit is set up as a last dollar tuition payment tied to the applicant’s financial aid package. MDVA partnered with the Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) to assist with applicant applications, calculations, monetary allocations, and reconciliation of residual funds. The OHE financial aid calculator and applicant application met the basic needs of a single-source program. Over the years, MDVA expanded the program to include OJT and licensure and certification (L&C). OHE retained the higher education applicant database, and MDVA retained the OJT and L&C applicant database. **The MDVA database was on spreadsheets and in paper file folders. MDVA found it challenging to reconcile multiple databases, housed at partner agencies, to ensure statutory requirements.** In the summer of 2017, MDVA Education and Employment Division partnered with the Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) project managers and developers to establish the Veterans Application Tracking System (VATS).

Foundationally, VATS combined databases to ensure statutory requirement limits are upheld, provide applicants a secure, streamlined, online experience to apply and check the status of applications, and deliver MDVA staff a smooth and efficient user interface portal to accurately process claims. Finally, VATS is tied to the Minnesota account system, State-Wide Integrated Financial Tools (SWIFT), for accurate, timely payments to beneficiaries.

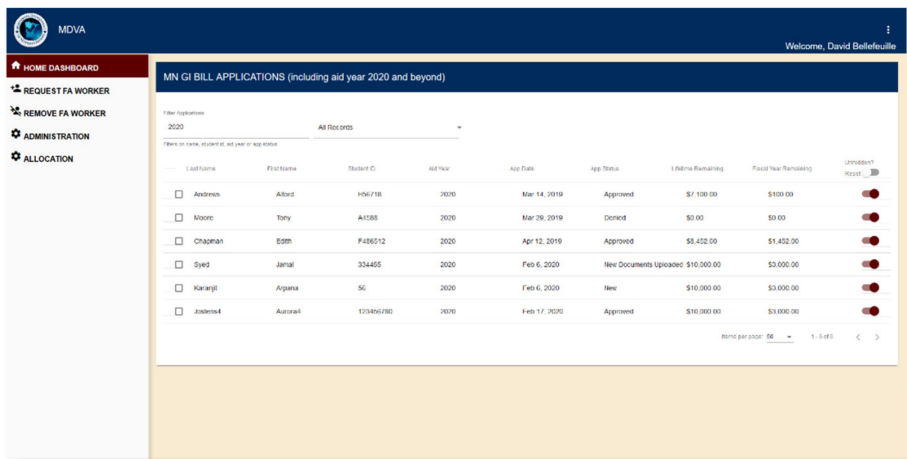
The MNGI Bill has three opportunities for veterans to utilize their benefit: Higher education, OJT/apprenticeships, and licensure/certifications. The VATS applicant port provides the gateway for veterans to access their benefit. The VATS development project launched in October 2017 and was completed in June 2019. MDVA developed and released the OJT/apprenticeship first in September 2018, then the license/certification portal in January 2019. Finally, the Higher Education portal went live in February 2019.

CONCEPT

Prior to the implementation of VATS, applicants filled out paper forms, MDVA staff processed the paper forms and tracked payments and status in a spreadsheet. All payments were completed through a labor-intensive, manual process. Now, veterans go to the MDVA homepage, create a secure account, and apply for the desired benefit.



Veterans use the dashboard (shown in the following below) to upload supporting documents, receive secure communications, and check the status of their claim.



MDVA staff receive online tasks, verify documents, send notifications, generate case notes, approve applications, and complete payments through the VATS staff portal.



VATS has streamlined a tedious, paper process for applicants, staff, and the state accounting system. MDVA can now process applications and submit payments the same day an applicant applies.

The Veterans Application Tracking System was developed by the State of Minnesota developers, business analysts, business owners, and project managers. The development software is [.NET Core](#), which is a free and open-source software platform developed by Microsoft. The user interfaces, secure login, portals, and applications are developed in an Angular UI framework. The development strategies, interfaces, and functionality can be discussed, demonstrated, and provided to other states. MDVA staff are eager to share and transfer design concepts, methodology, rationale, and budget with other state directors.

The secure VATS portal, which provides veterans streamlined access to their benefit, was developed and delivered for \$1.2 million. All VATS components are housed within state agencies and the data is stored on secure, state servers. Maintenance and upgrade releases are completed by state developers, keeping the costs low. The state of Minnesota is not required to keep outside vendor relationships for maintenance releases and there is no worry that the technology will become outdated.

The application and program is promoted through MDVA outreach to veterans and their families, and to partner stakeholders in higher education. Promotions include online information, [LinkVet Live Chat](#) assistance available on the [MDVA website](#), representatives who are available for consultation, and the [MN GI Bill pamphlet](#).

SIGNIFICANCE

The MNGI Bill portal is accessed by 120 institutes of higher learning financial aid professionals to assist in the calculations of the MNGI Bill higher education benefit. The financial aid portal allows for partner organizations to create a secure account, review applicants specific to their institution, complete calculations and awards, and request annual allocations to their institution. The external-facing portal was developed through financial aid staff input, focus groups, user acceptance testing, and suggestions for enhancements.

Prior to the launch of the VATS financial aid portal, our partners on the institutes of higher learning were using notepads, excel spreadsheets, hand-held calculators, and calendar reminders to perform the benefit calculations. The embedded logic in the VATS calculator removes calculator ambiguities and irregularities, ensuring veterans receive their proper entitlement. Financial aid staff process claims more efficiently through their user-centric interface which saves resource time and promotes confidence in award amounts.

Partnered with MNIT, MDVA developed the VATS to streamline the application process and create an interactive user experience for applicants, processors, and outside stakeholders. Before VATS, applicants were required to complete a paper application and fax or mail with their supporting documents. MDVA staff tracked all the claims and payments on a spreadsheet. Making payments was a labor-intensive paper process, requiring routing slips and multiple signatures. With the recent implementation of VATS, applicants can now create an account on the MDVA homepage, complete the interactive application upload their supporting documents, and submit for review. The applicant can easily apply from a desktop computer, tablet, or handheld device. Applicants can log in and check the status of their application, upload additional documents, or apply for another benefit. MDVA staff process the applications, communicate with the applicant, review supporting documentation, and determine eligibility through the MDVA portal. VATS innovation removes the tedious paper process to make

payments and replaces it with the MDVA payment module. With a direct connection to SWIFT, the payment module creates a series of assigned tasks to complete benefit payments to beneficiaries. Payments are made individually or in a series of multiple invoices. The streamlined process from application through direct payments ensure veterans are receiving their benefit on time and without a requirement of any paper.

IMPACT

Since the initial live date in September 2018, there have been 2,298 applications received, with \$3.774 million disbursed to eligible veterans (as of October 2019).

Fall 2019 represents the first semester our financial aid partners are utilizing VATS to process calculations and award benefits. Financial aid staff report less overpayments, underpayments, and errors made through VATS than from previous methods of awarding benefits. They also report the time savings and confidence VATS provides them in their complicated task to award veterans their earned education benefits.

On average, each paper application took staff three to four hours to manually verify completeness, generate email requests for supporting documents, enter applicant information in a spreadsheet and the state-wide financial system, complete internal finance paperwork, and generate a payment. The automated VATS system narrowed the process time down to a matter of minutes. As of October 31, 2019, MDVA has received 1,330 applications that have been processed through VATS.

VATS eliminated the need to partner and enter into an inter-agency agreement with another state agency to process applications. MDVA reconciles all applications and funding saving the agency \$100,000.

MDVA staff report the time-savings and efficiency VATS provides from the manual paper application process. On average, veterans are receiving their awards ten days earlier, and with less errors, through the direct interface from VATS to the state payment system.

Minnesota's veterans seek many avenues to become productive members of society. Through the VATS portal, applicants can easily access their MNGI Bill benefit for higher education, OJT/apprenticeship training, or licensure/certifications. Veterans create a secure account through the VATS applicant portal, complete the application, and submit supporting documentation. MDVA staff verify applications, military eligibility, residency status, and supporting documents relating to the training program, license, or exam. Communications to the applicant and case notes are automatically generated, lifetime and fiscal benefits are calculated, and payments get submitted to the state accounting system. Veterans can check the status of their application through the applicant portal or reach out directly to MDVA staff member who is assigned to their case. VATS design centers on the veteran experience in mind, so applicants know precisely the status of their claim, the next steps, and when a payment is rendered on their behalf. Veterans are assured that their data privacy is secure through state-of-the-art security measures, secure transmissions, and integrity-driven account requirements.

In a practical sense, VATS was designed in a way to incorporate client services from all divisions within MDVA. The vision is to ensure Minnesota is assisting veterans through their life-cycle of earned benefits, for veterans to experience a seamless application process without the requirement of resubmitting supporting documentation for one or more of the multiple benefits available through MDVA.

MDVA's long-term solution for an agency-wide application tracking system rests with VATS. Future enhancements to VATS include an array of opportunities to interact with Minnesota veterans:

- Veteran disability and compensation claims
- State Soldier Assistance Program application
- County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) portal
- State Cemetery applications
- Minnesota Veteran Home application

At the current time, MNIT and MDVA are conducting the project to implement VATS-Claims, and will be refactoring VATS-Benefits in 2021. The goal is to provide continuous improvements that keep the systems current, and provide ultimate service to Minnesota's brave veterans.