JUN 23 2014

The Honorable Harold Rogers
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The enclosed report responds to section 713(j) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014 (Public Law 113-66). This report discusses the interoperability achieved on January 1, 2014, between the Department of Defense's (DoD) Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) and the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) automated claims processing system, the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS).

For each newly separated or discharged Service member, DoD produces a digital Service Treatment Record (STR) and archives it in the HAIMS repository. Upon initiation of a disability benefits claim within VBMS, an electronic request is sent through a secure interface to retrieve the STR required by VA claims adjudicators. Use of electronic STRs to initiate paperless disability benefits claims is expected to help streamline the claims adjudication process and to reduce the likelihood of new claims from being added to the VA's disability claims backlog.

A similar letter is being sent to the Chairpersons of the other congressional defense committees and of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

Thank you for your interest in the health and well-being of our Service members, veterans, and their families.

Sincerely,

Jessica L. Wright
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Ranking Member

**PERSONNEL AND
READINESS**

The Honorable Howard P. "Buck" McKeon
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

JUN 23 2014

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The enclosed report responds to section 713(j) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014 (Public Law 113-66). This report discusses the interoperability achieved on January 1, 2014, between the Department of Defense's (DoD) Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) and the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) automated claims processing system, the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS).

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Sincerely,

Jessica L. Wright
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member

PERSONNEL AND
READINESS

JUN 23 2014

The Honorable Jeff Miller
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

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Sincerely,

Jessica L. Wright
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable Michael H. Michaud
Ranking Member

PERSONNEL AND
READINESS

JUN 23 2014

The Honorable Barbara A. Mikulski
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Madam Chairwoman:

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Sincerely,

Jessica L. Wright
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable Richard C. Shelby
Vice Chairman

PERSONNEL AND READINESS

JUN 23 2014

The Honorable Carl Levin
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

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Sincerely,

Jessica L. Wright
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Ranking Member

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

JUN 23 2014

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Sincerely,

Jessica L. Wright
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member

Report to Congress

**Interoperability of the Department of Defense (DoD)
Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) and the
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS)**

**In response to
Section 713(j) of the National Defense Authorization Act
for Fiscal Year 2014**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As required by section 713(j) of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 (P.L. 113-66) (NDAA FY 2014), this report discusses the interoperability achieved on January 1, 2014, between DoD's Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) and the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) automated claims processing system—the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS)—to enable the secure electronic retrieval of disability benefits claimants' certified DoD Service Treatment Records (STRs) by Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) claims adjudicators.

DoD is committed to helping VBA prevent incoming disability claims from increasing their claims backlog[1] by ensuring complete, electronic STRs are available for all newly separating Service members[2]. The DoD STR, which captures a static record of a Service member's medical history from his or her period of military service, is instrumental in providing the healthcare evidence VBA requires to establish a Service connection for a disability claim. The STR certification process requires that the final military treatment facility (MTF) for each military Service member—including the National Guard and Reserve members—verify the completeness of each Service member's STR at the point of separation from military service. Certification greatly reduces the likelihood that loose or late flowing medical documentation will create delays in claims processing or result in claim denial due to lack of evidence[3].

To meet the goal of making electronic STRs available from January 1, 2014, forward, DoD adapted HAIMS, an existing solution with robust scanning and archival capability, and accelerated on-going program activities to field this solution by December 2013. DoD also deployed high capacity scanning equipment and trained authorized personnel to manage the STR scanning and upload process at Service designated scanning sites, called Central Cells.

The December 2013 deadline was established to enable the Departments to synchronize the completion of the deployment of HAIMS to support provision of an electronic STR to VBA with

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[1] It should be noted that DoD analysis performed in February 2013, using a random sample of backlogged claims provided by VA, determined that less than 4 percent of claims backlog is due to the need for information on the claimant from DoD.

[2] The phrase "newly separated Service member" refers to those separated or discharged after January 1, 2014.

[3] A key performance metric for STR certification is the reduction in the amount of loose and late flowing medical documentation (LFD) sent separately from the transfer of the official STR to VA. At the end of FY 2013, the number of LFD was 155,000 documents, a 96 percent decrease from the baseline of 3,252,000 in FY 2009.

the completion of the rollout of VBA's VBMS version 6.0. New functionality in VBMS 6.0 allows VBA claims processors to electronically request and receive STRs from HAIMS.

To make the HAIMS archive of certified STRs accessible to VBA, the Departments collaborated on the development and implementation of an interface through which disability claimants' STRs can be securely retrieved. A DoD and VBA team worked together to identify, develop, and implement the required interface to enable VBMS to capture STRs archived in the HAIMS repository. Based on VBA's functional requirements, configuration changes were made to the VA Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) Data Access Service (DAS) to support the secure query, retrieval, and intermediate storage of the STR. VLER DAS provides a joint infrastructure and architecture for secure electronic sharing of medical, benefits, and administrative information among DoD, VBA, and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) systems accessed by authorized users, including VA and DoD clinicians and benefits staff members.

Within DoD, using the new processes to generate an electronic certified STR, authorized personnel electronically assemble all available elements of the newly separated or discharged Service member's DoD STR—including scans of paper-based records generated in Adobe PDF and digital content from the Service member's DoD electronic health record (EHR) exported to Adobe PDF—and archive the data as a single record in the HAIMS repository. As a byproduct of the optical character recognition (OCR) performed during the scanning process, digitized versions of paper-bound documentation are often clearer and more easily read than the originals. Once archived in the HAIMS repository, the complete electronic STR is digitally available for retrieval by VBA should the Service member file a disability claim with VA.

Today, when a newly separated or discharged Service member or Veteran files a disability benefits claim, a VBA claims adjudicator establishes a claim in VBMS on behalf of that individual and VBMS initiates an automated request for the STR stored in the HAIMS repository. The claims adjudicator receives an automated status alert when the STR is available in the claimant's electronic folder within VBMS to support the claims process. As of June 1, 2014, the Service Central Cells processed 52,000 STRs, archiving them electronically within the HAIMS repository. VBA successfully retrieved 1,952 STRs for use in adjudicating disability claims filed by new Veterans.

This achievement is a key stepping stone in VBA's Transformation Plan, which is focused on moving away from paper-bound manual processes to improve the service delivered to Veterans, their families and survivors. VBMS is aiding VBA in its efforts to move away from paper-based claims processing to gain processing speed that can be achieved within a digital claims processing environment. Initiation of paperless disability benefits claims within VBMS using complete electronic STRs retrieved from the HAIMS repository is expected to accelerate the claims adjudication process. Moving forward, the Departments continue to collaborate on refinements and enhancements to the electronic STR creation and retrieval processes.

INTRODUCTION

As required by section 713(j) of the NDAA for FY 2014 (P.L. 113-66), this report discusses the interoperability achieved on January 1, 2014, between DoD's HAIMS and VBA's automated claims processing system—VBMS—to enable the secure electronic retrieval of disability benefits claimants' DoD STRs by VBA claims adjudicators.

DoD is responsible for providing VBA with Service members' information to enable accurate and fair claims adjudication. STRs are an important part of that information in that they provide the necessary military service related healthcare evidence needed to reach a decision of a Service connection for a VA disability claim.

To enhance existing STR-related processes and to better align those processes with the VBA transition to a digital environment for claims processing, the Departments have focused their joint energies on identifying and instituting targeted improvements affecting future claims. The Departments focused their efforts on ensuring the completeness of STRs, establishing the capability to digitize and electronically archive STRs, and automating access to those archived, digitized STRs.

As a result of these efforts, on January 1, 2014, DoD began archiving certified electronic STRs for newly separated Service members in the HAIMS repository, where they are retrievable by VA in a digital format through an automated request process initiated in VBMS. As of June 1, 2014, DoD archived 52,000 separating Service members' STRs in the HAIMS repository and VBA successfully retrieved 1,952 for use in adjudication of new disability benefits claims.

DEFINING THE SERVICE TREATMENT RECORD

As determined by the VA/DoD Benefits Executive Council (BEC) Medical Records Working Group (MRWG), chartered in 2008 to oversee the STR life cycle and ensure accurate, complete STRs are available for benefits adjudication, STRs must include the following: contents of the Service member's medical folder and dental folder containing records of care generated by TRICARE and contract care providers; and a completed DD Form 2963, the STR Transfer or Certification Form.

For those personnel who separated or were discharged before January 1, 2014, a hard copy of the file was sent to the VA Records Management Center (VARMC). The STR included medical and dental documentation that persisted in hard copy format as well as a hard copy print out of care documentation captured in DoD's EHR. Today, when an STR stored in the VARMC is requested by VBA for use in claims adjudication, it is scanned directly into VBMS to make it accessible electronically.

For newly separated or discharged Service members, DoD produces a digital STR comprised of scans of paper-based medical and dental records and digital content from the Service member's DoD EHR. The digitized STR is then archived within the HAIMS repository where it can be retrieved electronically should the Service member file a disability claim.

Under current requirements, STRs must be made available to VA no later than 45 working days after a Service member separates or is discharged. The goal is for STRs to be digitized and made available within the HAIMS repository within 36 hours of receipt by the Service's Central Cell.[4]

ADDRESSING RECORD COMPLETENESS THROUGH STR CERTIFICATION

The DoD STR certification process requires that the final MTF for each military Service member—including the National Guard and Reserve members—verify the completeness of each Service member's STR at the point of separation from military service.

The DoD STR certification process begins with a thorough review of known paper-based and electronic DoD record systems as directed by DoD Instruction 6040.45, "Service Treatment Record (STR) and Non-Service Treatment Record (NSTR) Life Cycle Management". The certifying MTF compiles the components of the separating Service member's STR then completes DD Form 2963 (STR Transfer or Certification Form), signifying that no further medical or dental records exist and that the STR for the Service member is complete as of the date of certification. In the event that additional documentation is discovered after an STR is certified, DoD makes the information available for use in potential claims processing.

Certification is a key step in reducing the likelihood of increases in the VA claims backlog and the length of time required for claims processing. The certification assures VBA that all medical records generated in service have been made available to VBA and greatly assists in fulfilling the requirement within the Veterans' Claims Assistance Act under which VA must generally assist claimants by obtaining all records potentially relevant to a compensation claim. STR certification increases the number of Fully Developed Claims received by VA, which significantly reduces the time required to make a claim ready for decision.

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[4] The Army Medical Department and Air Force Medical Service have co-located Service Central Cells in San Antonio, Texas. The Navy Medicine Records Activity stood up an interim solution for its Central Cell, comprised of a contract scanning facility in Chantilly, Virginia augmented by four Navy facilities in the continental United States. In FY 2014, the Navy plans to release a competitive solicitation for its long-term Central Cell solution.

LEVERAGING HAIMS TO DIGITIZE AND ARCHIVE THE STR

DoD leveraged HAIMS, a clinical solution in which the Department had already invested, for the purpose of making STRs electronically available to VBA. The DoD enterprise-wide implementation of HAIMS, due to be completed in June 2014, provides Military Health System (MHS) healthcare providers with global visibility and access to essential healthcare artifacts and images throughout the continuum of care. Using HAIMS, MHS providers scan, import, register, search, and view various documents and images associated with a patient. DoD leveraged the existing scanning and storage capabilities in HAIMS to establish the capability for the Services to convert and archive the elements of the paper-based STR into an electronic format that the VBA's existing electronic claims management system, VBMS, can accept.

DoD accelerated on-going program activities to field HAIMS to Service STR processing sites by December 2013 in order to meet the goal of making electronic STRs available in the HAIMS repository from January 1, 2014, forward. This deadline was established to ensure HAIMS could support electronic STR availability upon completion of VBA's rollout of VBMS version 6.0 in December 2013. VBMS aids VBA in its efforts to move away from paper-based claims processing to gain processing speed that can be achieved within a digital claims processing environment. In December 2013, VA reported that more than 75 percent of VBA's existing claims inventory is processed electronically. VBMS 6.0 enhanced existing features and added new functionality to allow claims processors to electronically request and receive STRs from HAIMS. These enhancements to system capabilities are expected to increase the production and quality of VBA claims decisions.

Once certified by the MTF, the paper STR is sent to the Central Cell within 30 days of the Service member's separation or discharge. The authorized staff at the Service's Central Cell receives and tracks all incoming STRs and performs document preparation, including metadata tagging required for successful scanning and upload into HAIMS. If the MTF does not certify the STR, the Central Cell will certify the record. The digitized STR—comprised of scans of paper-based records in Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) and digital content from the DoD EHR printed to an Adobe PDF file—is submitted into HAIMS repository and made available to VA as a single record. The Department has found that the optical character recognition (OCR) performed during the scanning process often produces digitized versions of paper-bound documentation that are clearer and legible than the originals.

Based on rates of separation and discharge, DoD expects Army to scan and upload 12,000 STRs per month; estimates for Air Force and Navy are 5,500 and 6,400 STRs per month respectively.

INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION ON SYSTEM INTERFACE DEVELOPMENT

To make the HAIMS archive of certified and digitized STRs accessible to VBA, the Departments collaborated on the development and implementation of an interface through which disability claimants' STRs can be securely retrieved. A DoD and VBA tiger team worked together to identify, develop, and implement the required interface to enable VBMS to locate and transfer STRs archived in HAIMS.

Based on VBA's functional requirements, the DoD and VBA team made configuration changes to the VA VLER DAS to support the secure query, retrieval, and intermediate storage of the STR. VLER DAS provides infrastructure and architecture for secure electronic sharing of medical, benefits, and administrative information among DoD, VBA, and VHA systems accessed by authorized users, including VA and DoD clinicians and benefits staff members.

As a result of the Departments' collaborative efforts, on January 1, 2014, the process for the provision of the STR at the time of separation or discharge was successfully migrated from a paper-based process to the use of an electronic solution.

STR UPLOAD AND RETRIEVAL PROCESS

Within DoD, using HAIMS, authorized personnel upload and appropriately associate the DoD STR with the newly separating or discharged Service member. First, a Service Central Cell staff member locates the patient in HAIMS by entering the patient's demographic information. Once the patient is located, the staff member uses the "acquire asset, import new" function to upload an element of the STR. Mandatory metadata is entered for each uploaded element. This metadata includes author name, date document created, and document type.

Once a scanned document has been verified in the validation queue, the staff member uploads the documentation into HAIMS by selecting the import icon and then clicking "close batch."

After all STR parts are uploaded or scanned into HAIMS, the separating Service member's asset list will reflect all the related documentation that is available in the HAIMS repository. After confirming that all parts of the STR have been uploaded successfully, the staff member uploads the STR Certification Memo (DD Form 2963).

The STR is now available for retrieval by VBA from the HAIMS repository.
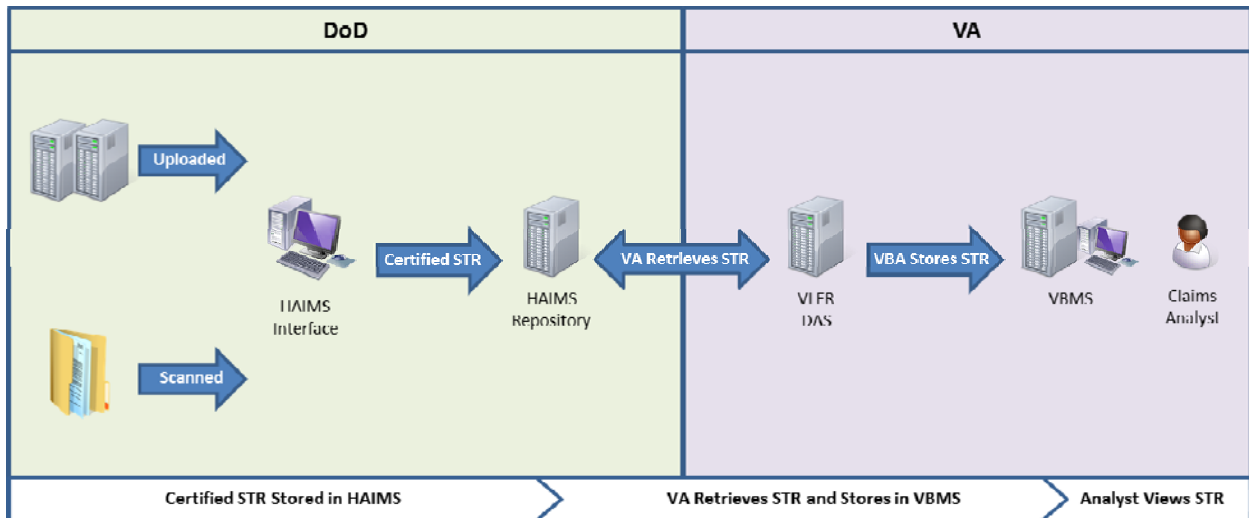
Figure 1: STR Archiving and Retrieval

Using VBMS, VBA claims adjudicators in 56 VA Regional Offices throughout the United States establish incoming claims on behalf of disability claimants. Once a claim is established, VBMS initiates an automated request for the separated Service member or Veteran's STR. VLER DAS manages the secure query, retrieval, and intermediate storage of the STR. This joint solution provides the infrastructure and architecture for secure electronic sharing of medical, benefits, and administrative information among DoD, VBA, and VHA systems accessed by authorized users, including VA and DoD clinicians and benefits staff members.

Throughout the automated STR request process, status messages are issued by VBMS to enhance the claims adjudicator's awareness of the availability of required documentation and assist in preventing unnecessary delays in claims processing. A suspense date is set and tracked for each STR request. Failover capabilities have also been put in place. For example, should a technical error occur that prevents an initial request from being processed, the STR request is resent automatically up to five times, once every 24 hours. When the STR has been located and retrieved, VBMS alerts the claims adjudicator via an STR Status Message that the STR documents have been loaded into the claimant's electronic folder within VMBS and are ready for viewing. (See Appendix B for system screen captures of the processes described above.)

The Departments continue to collaborate on oversight efforts, refinements, and enhancements to maximize the efficiency of STR certification, upload, retrieval and capture processes. The Departments are working together to implement a measure that determines the level of compliance with DoD policy requiring that certified, complete STRs are uploaded into HAIMS within 45 working days after separation. The Departments are also exploring how existing document "tags" can be leveraged to help reduce the claims adjudication timeline. This analysis is in the early stages.

CONCLUSION

As a result of efforts described in this report, DoD has successfully implemented the capability to digitize and electronically archive complete certified STRs in standard formats and to make those STRs available to approved STR consumers, such as VBA, upon a Service member's separation or discharge. As of June 1, 2014, DoD's Service Central Cells digitized and uploaded to the HAIMS repository 52,000 complete certified STRs for newly separated Service members; VBA successfully retrieved and imported 1,952 of those STRs into its automated claims processing environment to adjudicate incoming claims.

This accomplishment plays a key role in VA's transition to a digital claims processing environment to improve claims processing speed. Initiation of paperless disability benefits claims within VBMS using complete electronic STRs retrieved from the HAIMS repository is expected to help reduce the time required to gather required evidence and to improve the quality of that evidence. Further, electronic access to the STR is expected to aid in preventing claims for newly separated or discharged personnel from being added to the disability claims backlog. Moving forward, DoD is committed to ongoing collaboration with VA to enhance the efficiency of STR processes with the goal of further improving service delivery to Veterans, their families and survivors.

Appendix A: Acronyms and Abbreviations

BEC MRWG	VA/DoD Benefits Executive Council Medical Records Working Group
HER	electronic health record
FY	fiscal year
HAIMS	Health Artifact and Image Management Solution
MHS	Military Health System
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
PAD	Patient Administration Department
PL	Public Law
STR	Service Treatment Record
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VBMS	Veterans Benefits Management System
VHA	Veterans Health Administration
VLER DAS	Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record Data Access Services

Appendix B: Overview – STR Upload and Retrieval Process

	VA

eves STR → **VLER DAS** → VBA Stores STR → **VBMS** — **Claims Analyst**
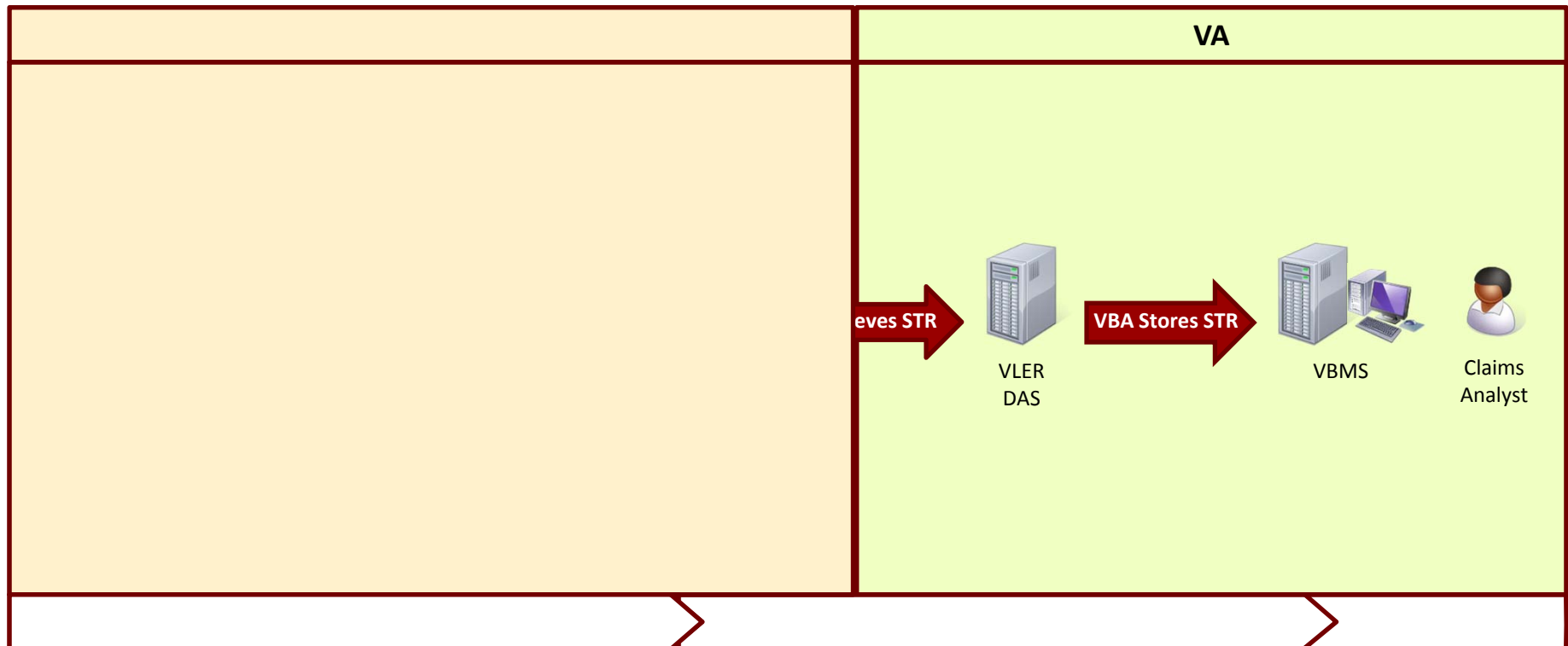
- The process for digitizing a Service member's STR and making it retrievable by VBA claims adjudicators begins with authorized DoD personnel scanning paper-based elements of a newly separating Service member's STR. The digitized STR, comprised of the scanned information and existing digital content from the Service member's DoD electronic health record, is submitted into the HAIMS repository and made available to VA as a single record.

- When a separated Service member or Veteran files a claim, a VBA claims adjudicator establishes a claim in VBMS on behalf of that individual. The system initiates an automated request for the STR and—when the record has been located and retrieved—alerts the claims adjudicator that the STR is available to support the claims process.

Patient Search in HAIMS

- User locates a Patient in HAIMS by entering Patient's demographics.

Uploading Assets into HAIMS

- User can upload a Service Treatment Record (STR) part for the separating Service Member into HAIMS i.e., STR AHLTA.

Entering Metadata for the Asset

- User completes mandatory metadata for each upload, i.e., Author Name, Date Document Created, Document Type.

HAIMS Scanning Workflow
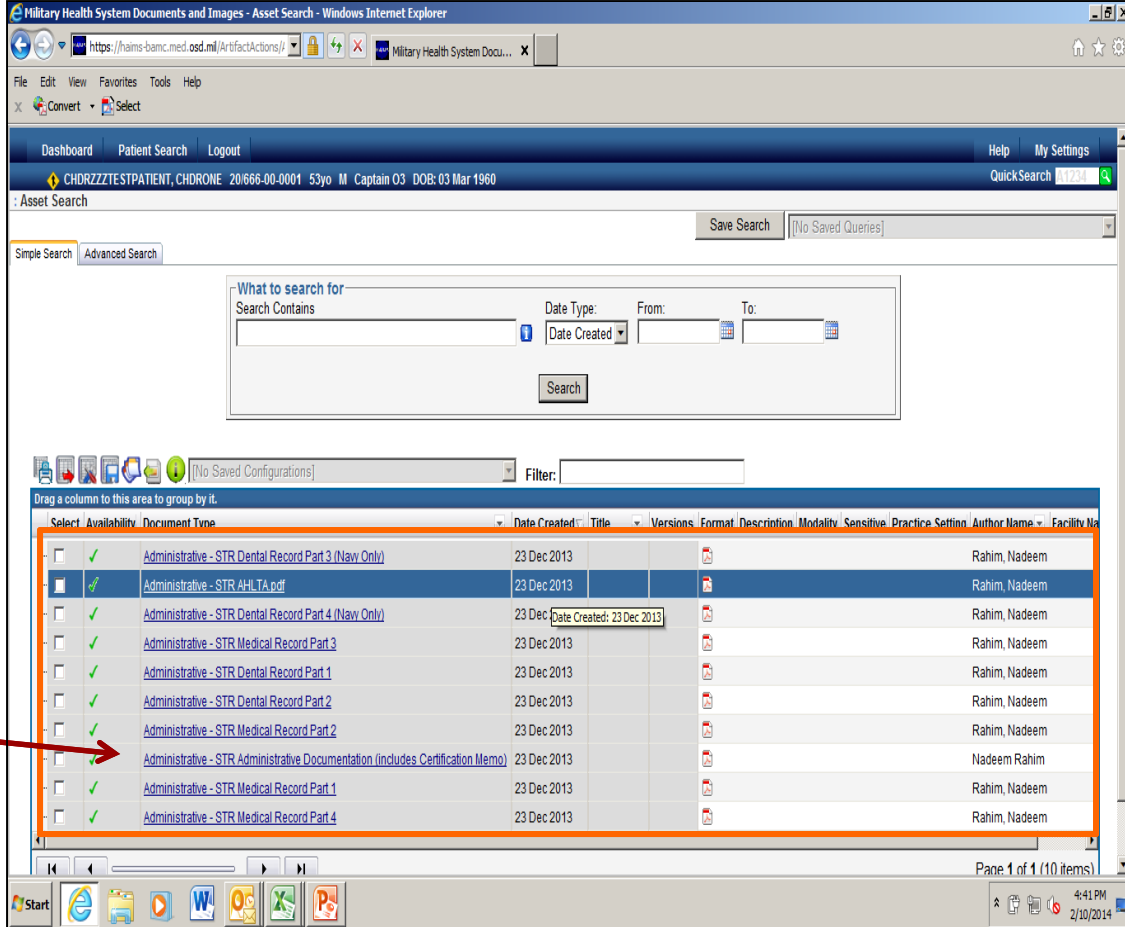
- Once a scanned document has been verified in the Validation Queue it can then be imported into HAIMS by clicking on the "Import" button and then clicking on "Close Batch".

Validating Patient's Assets

- After all STR parts are uploaded or scanned into HAIMS, Patient's asset list shows all the assets related to this patient.

- Once a user confirms that all parts of the STR are available in HAIMS, user will then upload STR Certification Memo.

Note: Service Member's Treatment Record is now available for VBMS retrieval

VBMS View – Viewing Uploaded STRs in the eFolder

- When you receive the STR Status Message that the STRs have been uploaded successfully, navigate to the eFolder to view the documents.
- The STR Administrative Documentation (includes Certification Memo) is the form completed by DoD verifying that the existing documents that were uploaded into the eFolder are certified.
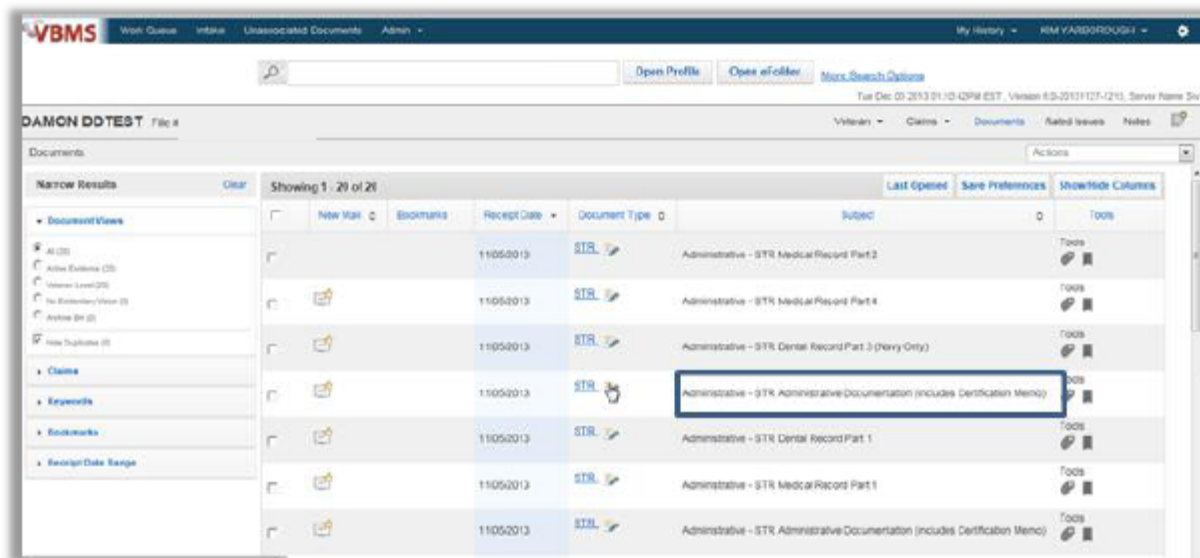
# VBMS View —Viewing Uploaded STRs in the eFolder

- Once uploaded into the eFolder, you may see multiple entries categorized by "parts" to represent each section of a paper STR. This example shows Administrative-STR Medical (Dental) Part 1, 2, etc.

- Compensation Service will provide a fast letter that will address working with the multiple STR sections, and loose and late flowing documents.
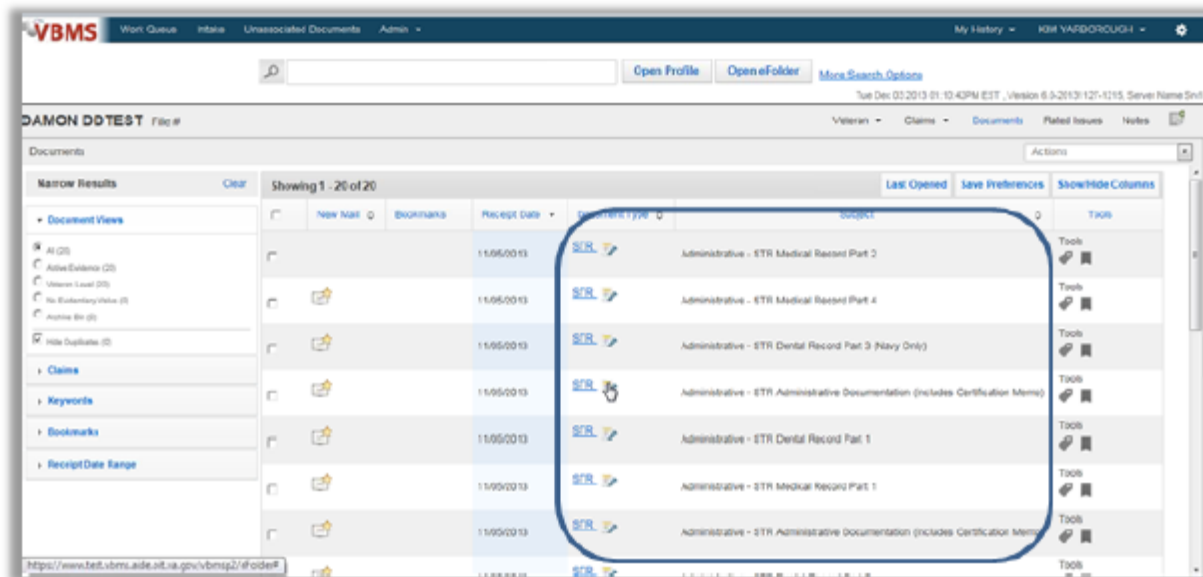
VBMS View – Reviewing the Status of an STR Request

- To view the status of a STR Request, navigate to the Development Plan.

- Under the Development Plan, select Obtain STRs to review the status of the STR Request.

- The green check mark next to the Obtain STRs task will be shown to demonstrate the task has been completed.
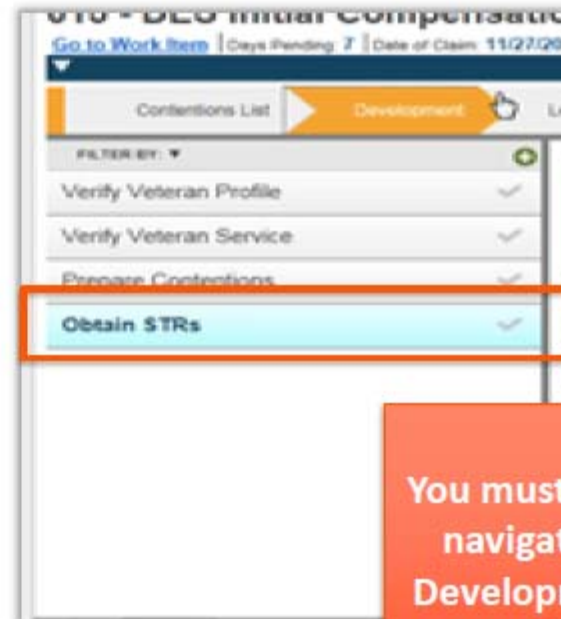
You must manually navigate to the Development Plan to see the status of an STR Request.

VBMS STR Status Messages

- One of the following status messages will be displayed:
  - Success when Request is Received

  - Success when eFolder Upload Occurs

  - Veteran Already Subscribed

  - Warning: STR Request Expired

  - Error: Veteran Not Found

  - Error: Internal Server Error

VBMS STR Status Message – Success Message

- The Success message shows the STRs have been requested, the date, the status, and the suspense date.

Success When VBMS eFolder Upload Occurs

- This success message generates as soon as the first document is uploaded into the eFolder.
- You may see that the message states ,"Additional STR documents may still be in the process of uploading into the eFolder."
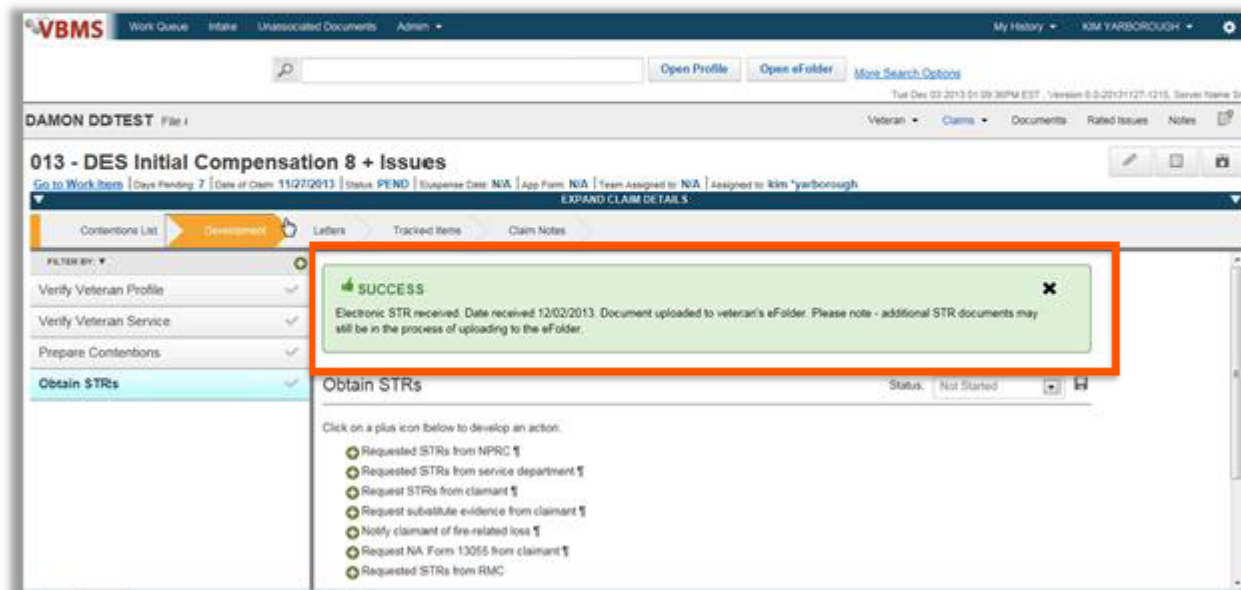
VBMS Status Message – Veteran Already Subscribed

- This message shows that the Veterans STR's have already been uploaded to the eFolder.
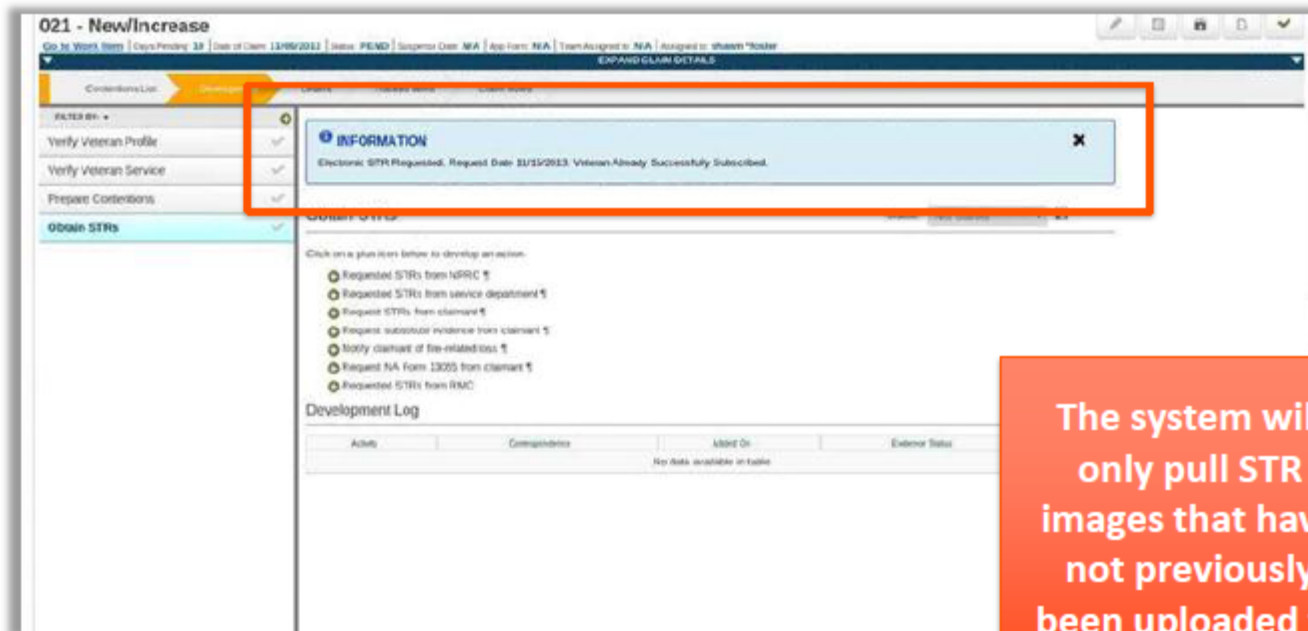
The system will only pull STR images that have not previously been uploaded to VBMS.

# VBMS Status Message – Warning STR Request Expired

- The STR Request Expired Status shows that the Suspense Date for the STR Request has expired. This message will display showing the time from which the automated request went through to the suspense date.

- The suspense date is automatically set when the STR Request is completed.
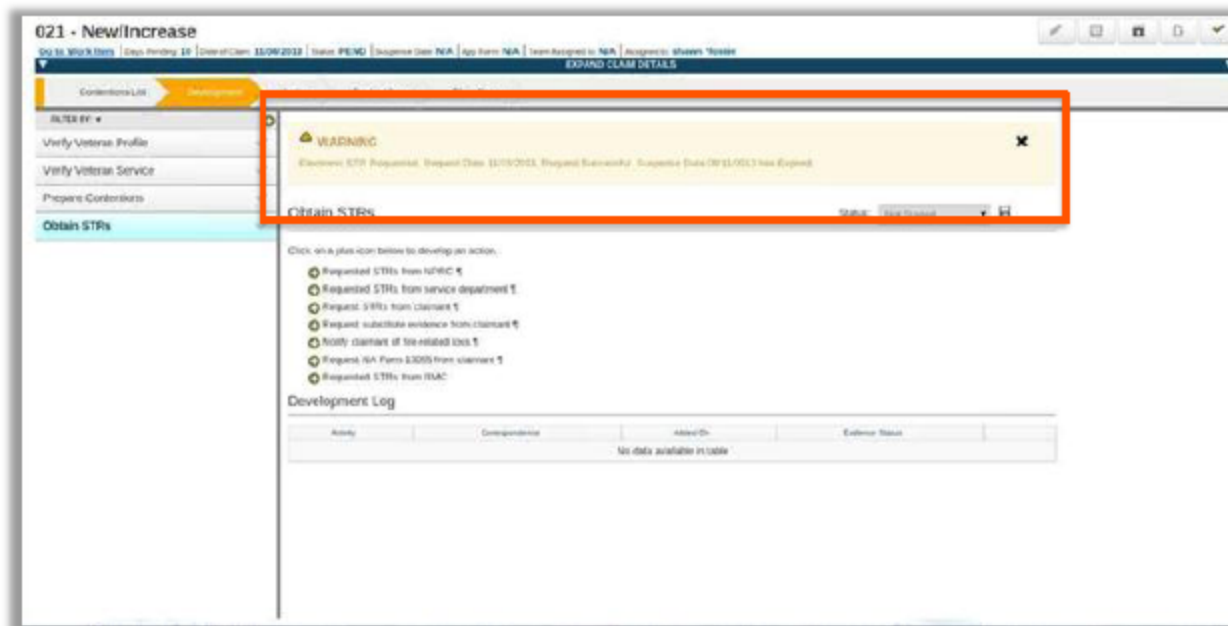
VBMS Error Message – Veteran Not Found

- The Veteran Not Found Error Message occurs when the initial request goes to VLER and the Veteran is not found.
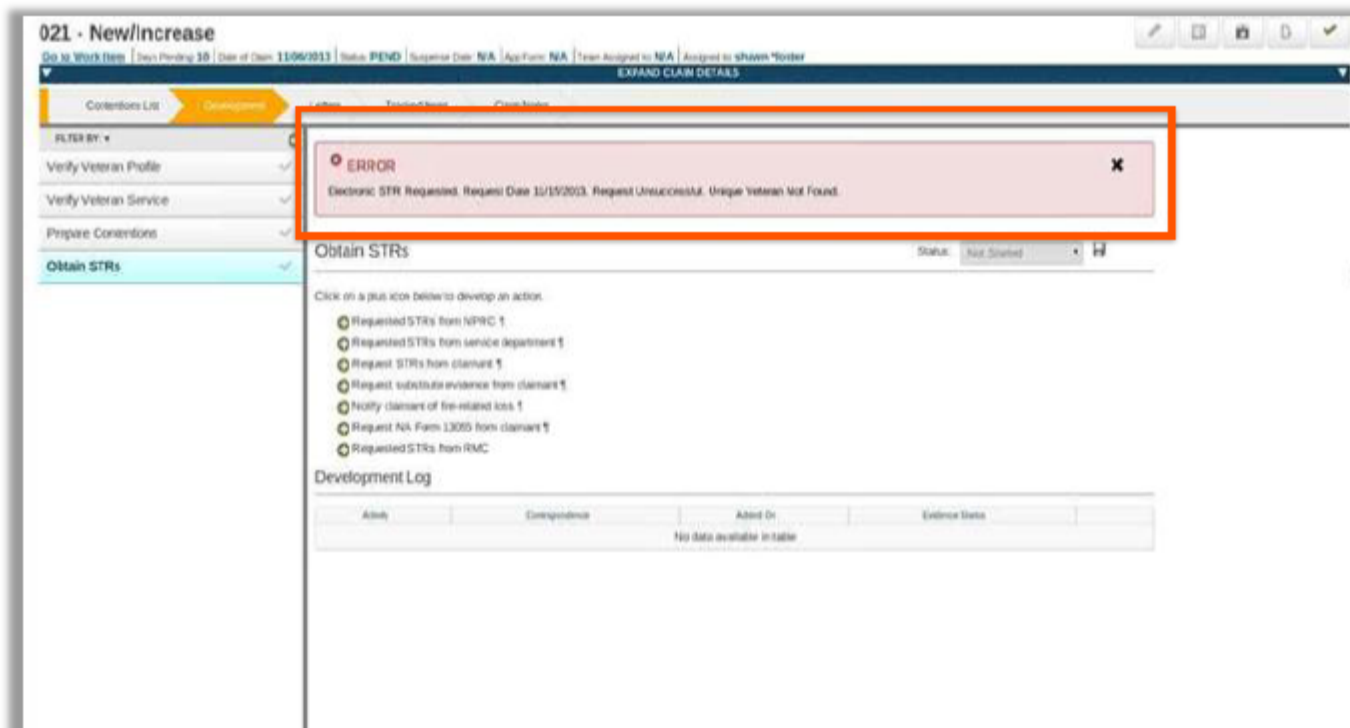
VBMS Error Message – Internal Server Error

- This message will generate if there is an Internal Server Error within VLER resulting in an unsuccessful request.
- The system will automatically complete 5 default retries. Each retry will occur once every 24 hours.