

When Preparedness Meets Opportunity

James Gfrerer

Chief Information Officer (retired)
Department Veterans Affairs



One of my favorite sayings is “luck is where preparedness meets opportunity or in this case “where it meets a threat”, declared James Gfrerer.

Like a lot of other federal agencies, VA is on its modernization journey. And without the steps taken in the past 2-3 years, there’s no way we would have weathered this pandemic. At the core of VA efforts is thinking differently and using your experiences to address the challenges you are going to confront, Mr. Gfrerer declared.

“A great example is about 10 years ago when we were asked whether we could just drop one of our 4 Trusted Internet Connection (TIC) gateways during an Eagle Horizon exercise. At the time there was an audible gasp in the room that we would drop a TIC gateway. But in March when we were stress testing in our environment in real time we dropped three of the four gateways.

We did that because we had to really put the pressure on our gateways and infrastructure and get those metrics over to our infrastructure carriers. Because VA is unlike many agencies, (VA is largely an on-premise agency, delivering care, benefits and memorial services) this was a major shift in terms of workforce and how we delivered.”

VA was able to quickly stress test and engage with our vendor partners and get those upgrades.

“And when people started to trickle back in especially in DC in June, the response was ‘wow IT really came through for us.’ – almost like a surprise”, he recounted. “The story I keep telling in the Department is those gains are perishable

and that we need to continue to modernize, continue to upgrade our infrastructure and invest.”

VA also dramatically increased its telehealth capabilities. Pre-pandemic VHA was doing 2,400 telehealth appointments daily. Today VA is doing on the order of over 40,000 – a 1,500% increase.

“All of that was supported by IT. We helped the smaller vendors expand their on-premise infrastructure and we doubled it by putting it in a cloud environment that was done all through our team — a

tremendous effort that everyone on our team is proud of.”

The result is 38,000 more vets are able to receive that type of real time service in their own homes.

Success is also closely tied to being organized. “We used the ‘team of teams’ approach to organize 10 different teams; we put someone in charge to focus the efforts and we

were able to deliver fast on the capabilities, noted Mr. Gfrerer. “I was worried back in March as to how to support 60,000 teleworkers, but we did by showing resilience and working through the problem sets.”

Priorities

All priorities are in support of our business and mission essential functions across our diversified line of health benefits, memorial services and other ancillary activities, Mr. Gfrerer explained.

First is the continuation of our digital transformation journey.

“We are leveraging the power of information through our corporate data ware-

“And while technology is disrupting both VA and its industry partners, it is disrupting in a good way, with opportunities for automation, application performance monitoring, IT service management, using emerging technology around AI and machine language.”

James Gfrerer

house. For example, our national surveillance tool really provides the VHA with that single source of truth across the entire integrated health care systems to inform the decisions of leadership and share them with the Covid task force as well.”

Mr. Gfrerer added that moving forward, you are going to more of the app economy coming to VA and around VA.gov. Our veterans want to use those mobile apps and we are working to accelerate that.

And while technology is disrupting both VA and its industry partners, it is disrupting in a good way, with opportunities for automation, application performance monitoring, IT service management, using emerging technology around AI and machine language.

“We are going to look to take advantage of that disruption and get more efficient. There has been great work by the CIO Council on that infrastructure and software needed in our digital transformation.” ■