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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

November 12, 2004

The Honorable Steve Buyer
Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives

Subject: *Electronic Government: Responses to Subcommittee Post-Hearing
Questions Concerning the Department of Veterans Affairs' Use of Smart
Card Technology*

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter responds to your October 15, 2004, request that we answer questions relating to our testimony of October 6, 2004.¹ In that hearing, we discussed the adoption and use of smart cards among federal agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Your questions, along with our responses, follow.

1. *From what you have observed, do you believe that only one single sign-on application [should] be used by VA system-wide, or is it possible that the VBA and VHA might have different solutions?*

On the basis of our observations to date, we are not yet able to offer a position on whether and how VA should incorporate a single sign-on capability² in its overall implementation of smart card technology. Our work thus far has generally included reviews of project documentation describing the department's early actions toward implementing its Authentication and Authorization Infrastructure Project, such as its initial limited deployment of One-VA ID smart cards. However, we have not yet had an opportunity to fully assess all key components and phases of this project, including any plans that VA has for using a single sign-on capability departmentwide or within its specific administrations.

2. *Does the VA have a planned timeline for bringing both smart card and single sign-on capabilities to the entire VA?*

¹GAO, *Electronic Government: Smart Card Usage is Advancing Among Federal Agencies, Including the Department of Veterans Affairs*, GAO-05-84T (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2004).

²Single sign-on involves using one authentication method to verify the identity of a user while granting access to multiple applications and services.

During our study of VA's adoption and use of smart cards, the department provided documentation on the Authentication and Authorization Infrastructure Project that identified its planned timeline for implementing the One-VA ID smart card. For example, the timeline called for prototype testing of the smart card during pre-implementation from May through August 2004, followed by limited production at selected VA facilities in the United States beginning in October 2004, and the issuance of 500,000 cards with public key infrastructure (PKI) credentials to VA personnel by January 2006. However, based on our work thus far, we are not yet able to state whether VA also has a planned timeline for bringing a single sign-on capability to the department. While VA's chief information officer noted the department's interest in using this authentication method during the October 6, 2004, hearing, the documentation that VA provided to us did not include a timeline for accomplishing this.

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In responding to these questions, we relied on previously reported information and agency documentation describing VA's planned activities to adopt and use smart card technology that was compiled in support of our October 6, 2004, testimony. We did not verify the information that VA provided. VA officials reviewed a draft of this letter and agreed with our responses. We performed our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards during October and November 2004.

Should you or your office have any questions on matters discussed in this letter, please contact me at (202) 512-6240 or Valerie Melvin, Assistant Director, at (202) 512-6304. We can also be reached by e-mail at koontzl@gao.gov and melvinv@gao.gov, respectively.

Sincerely yours,



Linda D. Koontz
Director, Information Management Issues

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