LYN SCHULTES: Hi everyone. We're going to give folks just another minute or so to join, and then we'll get started.

[AUDIO OUT]

LYN SCHULTES: Thanks, everyone, for joining. We're giving everyone just one more minute to join with us, and then we'll get started. Thanks for your patience.

[AUDIO OUT]

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Hello everyone. Welcome and thank you for joining us today for the VA Mobile Health Discussion series. Today's topic is the 311VET app. My name is Lyn Schultes, and I be your moderator. You have the option to listen in either via your computer or phone. If you want to use your phone, please dial 201-479-4595, and the meeting ID is 29258062 pound.

This information is pasted into the chat feature on the lower right-hand side of your screen. If the chat box is not visible to you, click the blue chat bubble located at the bottom right of the screen, and the chat box should appear. Please know that your phone lines are muted, but if you're experiencing any technical difficulties also use that chat function to let us know, and someone will be in touch.

Today, our presenters are Devin Fomberg, who is a program analyst with the Veterans Relationship Management, and Keith Carr, who is a project manager for Evoke Research. To respect everyone's schedules, we'll keep this moving so that our session ends on time. If you have any questions for our presenters, please use the chat feature, and we will get to them as time allows. If we don't get to your question, don't worry, we'll send out an email following this webinar with any relevant answers.

Also please note, with us today we have Gene O'Donnell. He is the Director of Partnerships and Syndication for ChaCha Search, Inc. He's on hand to help answer any technical questions you may have.

As a reminder, if you would like to participate in the conversation on Twitter, please the hashtag VAMobileHealth. And finally, if you would like to download today's presentation,

please copy the link featured in the chat box. And with that, I will turn this over to Devin to get us started.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Thank you so much, Lyn. As Lyn said, my name is Devin Fomberg. I work for Veterans Relationship Management, which is currently under the Veterans Benefits Administration, but soon to be moving to the Veteran Experience Office, so we're excited about that.

So today we wanted to kind of give you just a background on a mobile app that we have developed called 311VET. So essentially we identified a problem, which was that Veterans and dependents didn't have a lot of general information-- didn't know general information on benefits and services, or they didn't know where to find it. So there are either too few places to find information, or too many, maybe, and it was difficult to get their specific questions answered. And on top of that, you can call a call center, but as we move forward and our Veterans get younger, they're more interested in a website, in mobile applications and using their phones to do everything.

So with that, came up with the idea for 311VET, which was actually created through a partnership between VRM and the VA Center for Innovation, or VACI. So what is 311VET? It is an interactive Q&A service. So it provides general information about benefits.

And the way that it works is that we as the VA provide 311VET with some information from some external facing websites and some various resources, and they will go through and if the question is already in the database of general questions-- for example, what is disability compensation, or where is the closest medical center to a certain zip code? That might be something that's already in the database, and the answer is provided immediately.

If the question is not found in the database, we also have a team of human guides that will actually go through those resources and find the answer. And it's been about I think under three minutes, so you'll get a response. If they ask the question, it's seamless. You don't know the difference if you get an immediate response from the database or an automated response, or if a human guide went ahead and answered it.

And there are also two different ways that you can use 311VET. So you can download it as an app, or you can text the 311VET number and get a text response. You can go ahead to the next slide.

So this is just what 311VET can answer. So like I said, it's general information. So what does

this acronym mean, or what is the post-9/11 GI Bill? That kind of thing. And we also-- at least in the initial phases-- it was more benefits focused rather than the health side, but I'll talk a little bit more about that as we move on. You can go on to the next slide.

So it cannot answer specific questions. We do get some questions into the app like, am I eligible for this, or can you look up my claims information? It does not do that. Our human guides do not have access to our internal systems. They only have access to external facing resources.

And also it does not answer questions outside of the scope. So sometimes you can see questions like who won the Dodgers game last night? While I'm sure they could find that answer readily, that is outside the scope, so that is not included in 311VET. You can go to the next slide.

So like I said previously, there are two ways to use 311VET. This right here is an example of what the app might look like. So there are two different types, for iPhone and Android. And basically you just type the question in, and you can respond.

And something that is very cool about this is it's not just one and done. So you submit a question, and if a human guide picks that up and you have a follow up question, it's conversational. So they can respond, and the human guide will know what the previous question was so that you can have a conversation if it's a multi-part question.

And also, if it is a situation where it's going to take a couple minutes, you don't have to actually sit there and wait for it. The 311VET service will send you a notification when your answer is ready. You can go to the next slide.

And this is an example of the second type. So all you have to do is send a text message to 311838-- or 311VET-- in plain language, and it's the same process. S And it will answer your benefit-related questions. And both of these are available 24/7/365-- so anytime, anywhere, you can access this information using 311VET. You can go to the next slide.

And also, this is kind of a cool feature as well. So you have the option to be updated on new things happening. So you can send a text or use the app to sign up for alerts based on everything listed here-- new, benefits, career.

And so over on the right-hand side of the slide, you have an example. So New, Seeking Employment. So it'll tell you if there's a job fair for Hiring Our Heroes and other various events

kind of like that, and any updates to benefits information, or any news about the VA. You can actually sign up for those via the app or via text.

KEITH CARR: Devin, this is Keith.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Hi Keith.

KEITH CARR: Actually, so far it's only the text-- the SMS texting service-- that allows you to subscribe to the alerts. Yeah.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Can't do that by the app yet.

KEITH CARR: We'd like to do it that way, but so far it's just a texting service.

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Great.

DEVIN FOMBERG: And Keith is going to jump in at any time to help me out. But, yeah, we can go ahead and stop for questions. This might be a good place.

LYN SCHULTES: Yeah, thanks Devin and Keith. Just a reminder to everyone, if you do have questions, please submit them via the chat feature at the right-hand side of the screen, and we will have our presenters answer them as they come up. Devin, back over to you.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Thank you. I just wanted to give a little information on the pilot. A little background on Keith and I. I recently took this over about two months ago, but Keith has been on this almost since the inception. So he does have more historical context than I do, so I welcome him jumping in at any time.

So here we go. Pilot status. So the app is actually available. You can download it in the iTunes app store or Google Play, and it's still considered a pilot, because we did limited, specifically targeted advertising.

We did use Facebook, Twitter, and the Google Store. And we've made a limited number of announcements, and we kind of targeted them to certain geographic areas to keep the user base kind of small, because this is a learning experience. I see we have some questions so, Lyn, I didn't know if you wanted to go ahead and get into those really quickly.

LYN SCHULTES: Sure. We've had a couple come through. One from Jane asking when this service started and how many human navigators there are.

[AUDIO OUT]

DEVIN FOMBERG: That's a really good question. I'm going to throw that over, actually, to Keith. I don't know if we know exactly how many human guides there are, but Keith might have a better idea.

KEITH CARR: Yeah, I think it varies. The guides thus far during the pilot are actually employees of the vendor rather than the VA, so since this is still in pilot, those numbers of folks have been a little bit variable. As we get out of the pilot phase and hopefully go forward, then we can envision that actually these would be VA employees and a substantial army of folks, hopefully, that can be the back end for this function.

It's been under development since 2013, and the pilot actually got turned on-- it was last fall, November-ish, and so it's been going for more than half a year now. What else could we say about that, Devin? It is definitely a pilot.

I know you're going to talk about the status and the future vision and so forth, but the question has also come up as to why it's been a little bit quiet or why we haven't really trumpeted it too much. And really, the simple reason is that it has been a pilot of limited scope, easing into it to try to make sure that the resources can handle the traffic and so forth.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Right, absolutely. And also, we do want to keep it small, because this is an opportunity for us to learn how we can improve it in the future. So nothing's perfect when we first release it. And so we do have a couple lessons learned, but I'll get into those in a little bit. Lyn, did we have other questions?

LYN SCHULTES: Yeah, we have one more question from Michelle, and she asked, what are the most frequently asked questions that are you guys are getting through the app?

DEVIN FOMBERG: So I have reviewed I guess a small-- relative to the entire corpus of questions-- only a small number that have come in, but for the most part we do get a lot of-- and this is one of our lessons learned is we really tried to focus it more on benefits saying, hey, this is a general benefits app. But Veterans and dependents, as I think we all know, don't consider the differences between VBA, VHA, and NCA. When we say benefits, they think education and all that VBA offers, everything Health offers, and everything that the National Cemetery Administration offers. So while I think we better equipped our guides to answer benefits-related questions, we have been getting a lot of health care related questions.

A lot of those are just, hey, where is the closest VAMC to me? We get a lot of questions about the different types of health care. But at the same , time, we do get a lot of questions about disability compensation. What is disability compensation, what is this percentage, how much is this percentage disabled? You know, how much money would I get? How do I add a dependent, things like that, that are very basic.

But I would say probably-- I had to send out a list to all of our business lines, and I think Compensation Service probably had the biggest job there, just because it is a complicated benefit. So I think that we get a lot of disability compensation questions, just general. And then a lot of health related questions like, what am I eligible for, what is this type of health care, kind of thing. Keith, I don't know if there's anything else that has jumped out at you.

KEITH CARR: I don't know, Devin. I think you've covered it. It's a good nutshell encapsulation there.

LYN SCHULTES: Great. We have one additional question from John. He mentioned that he's been using this service for a couple months and was wondering if this is part of the pilot program or if that's a separate service.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Sure. So essentially, why we call it a pilot is because we have not advertised it nationwide-- my understanding-- and Keith, you can jump in and correct me if I'm wrong. But we wanted to keep it to-- so anyone can download it. It's just been specifically targeted towards certain user groups so that we can keep it small, so that we can have our lessons learned in that smaller group, so that when we do nationwide roll this out, that hopefully we've worked out a couple of kinks. Keith, anything else?

KEITH CARR: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. It's It started up to be a project of limited duration, very much of an experiment. Try to get a handle on what kind of capabilities it could deliver and how useful it would be seen. And so as it has panned out, now that we've been doing it for half a year, it's been quite well received.

So pilot status is something that perhaps shouldn't continue, but perhaps it should go into sustainment. But all along so far, it was envisioned as being turned off at some point. So that's why we say pilot. It was very much experimental and prototype approach.

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Great. And, Devin, we have a couple more questions coming through. Do we want to stay paused and answer those, or keep moving forward and a pause at a later time?

DEVIN FOMBERG: I'm OK with answering the questions now. We don't have too many slides left. And I'm actually

covering a lot of my material in the questions, so it's fine. We can continue with questions.

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Great. Well, we have another one that's come through from Michelle. She says, we have challenges within our sites and especially with our [INAUDIBLE] Telephone Care Program with having knowledge management systems to the degree you have described. Is there the potential to share the database of answers systemwide so that other programs can benefit from the gathered information?

[AUDIO OUT]

DEVIN FOMBERG: So, again, it's interesting, because all the information that 311VET has pulled is from the resources that we have given them. So I have no problem sharing, , probably, some of the health-related questions, and we can definitely get together offline about that. But it's just very interesting.

One of the issues that we found is that we have constantly changing policies, and benefits are changing. Something that comes to mind on the VBA side is education. And so there really isn't a good way to ensure that all the information is up to date, so we're kind of having that problem too.

And I think we're going to in the future integrate some of our more-- we have a live manual for compensation benefits that's constantly updated that we're going to hopefully share with our vendors and be able to allow them access to that. We can definitely get with you, Michelle, and talk to you about what we have. But, again, everything is very basic and pulled. And these guides are really good at searching and finding the answers, so we can definitely work with you to see if that would be useful.

LYN SCHULTES: OK, great. And then we have one additional question that's come through from Jerry asking, even if this is in pilot stage, is this something that they can promote to our Veterans now?

DEVIN FOMBERG: Yeah. So I will say we talked a little bit about our lessons learned. We do want to promote it to our Veterans now. Obviously, now that the pilot is kind of coming to a close, we'll have to go through our leadership and make sure they're comfortable with that.

But I think that we have identified a couple of improvements we would like to make before we advertise it nationwide. For example, as I said earlier, some of our knowledge management repositories-- we'd really like to open those up to 311VET. Because our benefits in all of our

systems are very complicated, and it's kind of difficult for Veterans to navigate. And it's difficult sometimes, even, for the human guides to really interpret that.

That's one of the things that we would like to improve on, as well as adding more resources for health and cemetery information. So I think those are a couple of things that we'd like to accomplish before we go nationwide, but hopefully that won't be too big of a list. So I'm hoping it will be very soon that we get to advertise this nationwide. Keith, anything else to add to that?

KEITH CARR: Well, we can just highlight the numbers a little bit here that you've got on the slide. We did have a few announcements that went out over the social media channels. So there was no particular restriction on who was allowed to use it or enlisted to be a guinea pig, so we can did get more than 2,100 users. Actually, I'm not sure what the current number is, but it's above 2,000.

And the couple of times that we advertised on Facebook, it went a little bit viral. People were sharing the download link for the app, for example, and liking it. So at any moment now when we are comfortable with going forward again with broadcasting its availability, I think it's going to probably explode. Every time we did one of the announcements over Facebook or Twitter, we saw a real big spike in usership, so we're going to have to ramp up and make sure that everybody is braced to accept the widening of the audience that way.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Right. We need to make sure that we have enough human guides if that's going to happen. So just a couple tweaks, probably, that need to happen, and maybe some good planning, but we do hope to advertise it nationwide within the near future.

LYN SCHULTES: Great. One additional question from Maria. She asks if Veterans can check on the status of their claims using the 311 app.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Hi Maria. No they can't. This is just general, and our human guides don't have access to our internal applications, and there's no PII. We hope-- sometimes they do receive it-- people asking what the status of their claim and they send their social, which is very trusting.

But, no, they don't have access to that information. And as we move forward, within VRM, we are looking at more opportunities for mobile apps like this, and hopefully more secure ones so that you can actually do that-- like a mobile e-benefits type of an app, moving forward. So that would be a possibility, but it is not a possibility with 311VET.

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Great. Just a reminder to everyone, if you do have questions, please continue to submit

them via the chat box. Otherwise, , Devin, we can keep moving ahead.

DEVIN FOMBERG: I think Keith went over the numbers, so you can go to the next slide, which is just kind of a wrap up. And the philosophy that we're moving towards as an agency, which is we're improving the Veteran experience, and we have to change our paradigm. So as our Veteran population-- they're young, they're getting out, and they want everything right at their fingertips like it says here. VA information and services, anytime, anywhere.

And as a millennial myself, I like my USAA app. When I want to transfer funds or pay a bill, I want to be able to do that while I'm on the bus. I don't want to have to wait until I get to a computer.

So we do need to think differently about how Veteran service members and their families access everything. So we hope that in the future-- as I said, we're going to explore options for additional mobile apps. Hopefully we can move forward with 311VET, and create more and more apps that are helpful that will actually be focused on the Veteran experience and designed with that human aspect in the middle of it. And all, of course, with the goal of best serving our Veterans.

So that was all that we had for slides, so we're more than happy to take more questions if anyone has any.

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Well, we'll give folks just a minute if anyone has any questions. And then, if not, we'll wrap things up shortly.

KEITH CARR: You know, Devin, it occurs to me, one of the best ways to explain 311VET is just encourage people to go try it out. Just get it. You can find it in the iTunes App Store, the Apple App Store, or the Google Play App Store, and you can also use it through the texting capability on a smartphone. So it's a sort of self explanatory, and nothing succeeds like success. So when you see it in action, you get a good idea of what it can do.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Great. Thank you, Keith. I almost forgot the most important part. As we said, we have been doing limited advertising but, especially for this group, if you do want to go on and download it, it's available, and we welcome any feedback that you have for us that we can take back to our vendor and try to improve it. So please do.

I do see a question from a Pat. Is this a free app? And it sure is. It's free both on iTunes and

Google Play App Store.

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Last call for questions. If anyone has any additional questions, please submit them now.

[AUDIO OUT]

LYN SCHULTES: Devin or Keith, any last thoughts before we wrap things up?

DEVIN FOMBERG: I think I'm good. Just again, the best way, like you said, to prove the success of it is to actually check it out yourself. So please feel free to download it.

And you can contact us with any feedback that you might have, because we're always open to that. Keith? Anything else from you?

KEITH CARR: If you'd like to do that and leave feedback, there is actually an email address that we've set up for that, and it's listed in the app itself. It's on the About page. You can see the VA email address there for feedback, so it would be great to hear from people who have ideas about it.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Yes. Absolutely. Thanks, Keith.

LYN SCHULTES: OK. Great. Well, thank you, everyone, for joining us today. I do know that some folks have had some trouble accessing the link which contains the slides to this presentation, so we will make sure to email the slides out to everyone after this presentation. And don't hesitate to reach out with any additional questions.

Also, a link to a survey will be sent to you today. If you can please take just a couple brief moments to take the survey and let us know what you thought of today's presentation and what topics you'd like us to cover in the future.

So thank you to Devin and Keith, our presenters today. And just a reminder to everyone that the next VA Mobile Discussion Series webinar is going to be held on August 28 with Dr. [? Seminara, ?] who will be speaking about the Burn Pit Registry. So please join us then again, and thank you for your time today.

DEVIN FOMBERG: Yes. Thank you, everyone. Have a good one.