



Highlights of [GAO-09-762](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Disability benefits available through the Social Security Administration (SSA) can be an important source of financial support for some wounded warriors, and Congress has mandated that the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) help them learn about and apply for such benefits. GAO was asked to determine: (1) how many wounded warriors have applied and been approved for SSA benefits and the extent to which they are receiving benefits from across the three agencies; (2) what steps DOD, VA, and SSA have taken to inform wounded warriors about SSA benefits, and the challenges that confront this process; and (3) steps taken by all three agencies to facilitate the processing of wounded warrior disability claims. Focusing on those wounded since 2001, GAO reviewed policy documents, contacted DOD and VA medical facilities, surveyed wounded warriors, and analyzed administrative data.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that SSA move ahead with its consideration of a legislative proposal on retroactive benefits, VA work with SSA to improve outreach to veterans on SSA benefits, and DOD work with SSA to meet SSA's need for timely medical records. In their comments on our draft report, SSA and VA agreed with our findings and recommendations and noted actions they plan to take to address our recommendations. DOD did not provide formal comments.

View [GAO-09-762](#) or key components. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

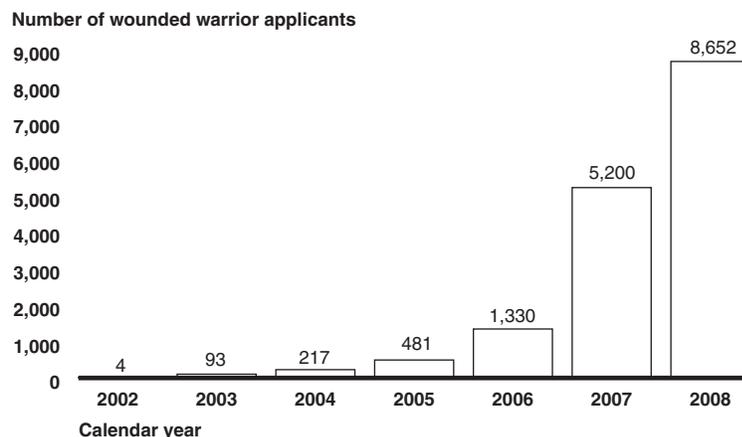
SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY

Additional Outreach and Collaboration on Sharing Medical Records Would Improve Wounded Warriors' Access to Benefits

What GAO Found

As of December 2008, about 7,600 of the 16,000 wounded warriors who have applied for SSA disability benefits since 2001 have been approved. The majority filed their applications since 2007. Also, a sizable minority of approved claimants filed long enough after injury that they lost some retroactive benefits; SSA is considering a legislative proposal to change the retroactive period for wounded warriors. Among wounded warriors receiving DOD or VA disability benefits, 4 percent were receiving SSA benefits. In addition, more than 6 percent had applied but were not receiving SSA benefits; some still had claims pending. Those with higher disability ratings from DOD or VA were more likely to receive SSA benefits.

Number of Wounded Warrior Applicants for SSA Disability Benefits



Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

To varying degrees, SSA, DOD, and VA have increased outreach to help wounded warriors learn about and apply for SSA disability benefits. Since 2007, SSA has increased its outreach to DOD and VA medical facilities and has tailored benefit information for wounded warriors. DOD—and to some extent VA—have incorporated SSA information into their case management practices as well. Locally, DOD and SSA staff have worked together to reach servicemembers, but collaboration has been less common at VA hospitals. Meanwhile, there are challenges to reaching and working with this population. Many of the wounded warriors may not be ready or able to hear about SSA benefits early in their recovery. Also, brain injuries and mental health disorders can impede many wounded warriors' ability to absorb outreach information and complete the benefit application.

With help from DOD and VA, SSA has been able to expedite processing of wounded warrior claims. SSA has established a nationwide policy requiring its offices to give priority to wounded warrior claims. For their part, DOD helps SSA identify claimants who are wounded warriors, and VA has expedited the transfer of its medical records and histories to SSA. However, DOD's paper-based transfer of medical records to SSA is slow, which can prolong the process by weeks or months, according to claims processing staff.