

Highlights of [GAO-12-153](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers Aid and Attendance (A&A) benefits to individuals who need regular assistance and the attendance of another person or Housebound benefits to individuals who are substantially confined to their homes. These benefits, which increase recipients' monthly disability compensation or pension payments, are called enhanced compensation or enhanced pension, respectively—collectively referred to as enhanced monthly benefits. This report describes (1) characteristics of enhanced monthly benefit recipients; (2) how the benefits help veterans obtain needed services, and the associated difficulties they face in obtaining these services; and (3) VA's efforts to educate veterans and their family members about the availability of the benefits. GAO's work included analyzing VA case-level demographic data from fiscal years 2000 to 2010 on enhanced monthly benefit recipients, conducting facilitated focus groups with veterans and their family representatives, and interviewing VA headquarters and regional officials on VA's outreach efforts for enhanced monthly benefits, as well as reviewing relevant federal laws and regulations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA conduct more focused outreach to better educate potential recipients about enhanced monthly benefits. VA agreed with the recommendation and described a number of actions it would take or explore to address it, such as including more detailed information in its printed material on enhanced monthly benefits.

View [GAO-12-153](#) or key components. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

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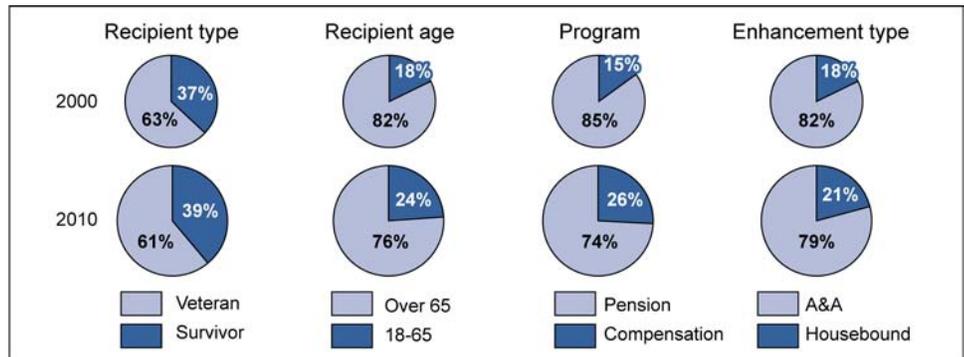
VA ENHANCED MONTHLY BENEFITS

Recipient Population Is Changing, and Awareness Could Be Improved

What GAO Found

According to VA data during fiscal years 2000 to 2010, most enhanced monthly benefit recipients were veterans, over age 65, and receiving the A&A enhancement as part of their pension benefit. The recipient population is changing, however. In particular, the percentage of enhanced monthly benefit recipients age 65 or younger increased from 18 percent to 24 percent over the decade. Also, the percentage of recipients paid benefits under the disability compensation program increased from 15 percent to 26 percent. The cost of enhanced monthly benefits has increased from \$124 million in fiscal year 2000 to \$409 million in fiscal year 2010; however, VA does not know what portion of these costs was paid specifically for A&A and Housebound benefits. VA maintains data on enhanced monthly benefit recipients' total payments but does not separately identify the amount awarded as an A&A or Housebound benefit. VA officials stated that under its current system, separately tracking the costs of these benefits would be complicated and difficult.

Characteristics of Enhanced Monthly Benefit Recipients, Fiscal Years 2000 and 2010



Source: GAO analysis of VA data, fiscal years 2000 and 2010.

Enhanced monthly benefits helped veterans obtain services to perform everyday living activities in different ways, but high service costs and limited service availability in some areas can make it difficult to acquire the services. Benefit recipients GAO spoke with said that they used their benefits to pay for in-home services by private providers, offset lost income from family members who provided care for them, or defray the costs of an assisted living facility. However, obtaining services from private providers can still pose difficulties for some recipients because of the generally higher cost of services in large urban areas or the limited availability of services in rural areas.

VA conducts a number of outreach activities to educate veterans and their family members about available benefits; however, a large number of elderly veterans may not be aware of their potential eligibility for enhanced monthly benefits. A VA study found that of pension recipients—who are mainly elderly veterans—62 percent might be eligible for enhanced monthly benefits but only 22 percent received them, which the study primarily attributed to lack of awareness about the benefits. VA's outreach efforts may not be sufficient to inform elderly veterans about enhanced monthly benefits because outreach activities do not typically focus on these benefits, some printed material lacks information on eligibility and application requirements for these benefits, and the extent to which regional offices conduct elderly outreach varies, among other reasons.