

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-709](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Enrollment is generally the first step veterans take to access VA health care, thus timely and accurate processing of enrollment applications is critical to help ensure eligible veterans obtain needed care.

The Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016 included a provision for GAO to examine VA's oversight of patient access to care. This report examines (1) VHA's processes for enrolling veterans for health care benefits and (2) its related oversight. GAO reviewed federal laws, regulations, and VHA policies and procedures. GAO also interviewed officials from HEC and 6 of VHA's 170 VAMCs selected to provide variation in factors such as number of enrollment applications processed and geographic location; reviewed actions to resolve a randomly selected, nongeneralizable sample of pending enrollment applications from these 6 VAMCs; and interviewed HEC and VAMC officials on oversight of enrollment processes.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VHA (1) define the responsibilities of VAMCs in resolving pending enrollment applications; (2) define oversight responsibilities to help ensure timely application processing and accurate enrollment determinations; (3) develop procedures for collecting reliable data system-wide to evaluate the timeliness of application processing; and (4) clarify its 5-day timeliness standard. VA concurred with all of GAO's recommendations and identified actions it is taking to implement them.

View [GAO-17-709](#). For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov.

September 2017

VA HEALTH CARE

Opportunities Exist for Improving Implementation and Oversight of Enrollment Processes for Veterans

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) implementation and oversight of enrollment processes need improvement to help ensure the timely enrollment of veterans for health care benefits.

VHA frequently did not meet timeliness standards: VHA studies conducted in 2016 revealed that enrollment staff frequently did not process veterans' enrollment applications within the timeliness standard of 5 business days. These issues were found both at VHA's Health Eligibility Center (HEC)—the central enrollment processing center—and at local VA medical centers (VAMC) that also process enrollment applications. In response to an audit recommendation, HEC officials said they have begun prioritizing workload to help meet the timeliness standard. Additionally, the overall time needed to process enrollment applications may increase when staff need to place applications in a pending status, as pending applications require additional information, such as military service information, for staff to make enrollment determinations. However, none of the six VAMCs GAO reviewed had a specific policy for how to resolve pending applications. GAO found that VAMC enrollment staff had not resolved more than half of the pending applications GAO reviewed at these six VAMCs, some of which had been pending for more than 3 months at the time of the review. Although HEC developed new procedures for its enrollment staff to use when resolving pending applications, these procedures were not communicated to VAMCs. Officials from the VAMCs GAO reviewed said that they had not received guidance on these procedures and were confused about whether they would continue to have a role in this process. In the absence of HEC communication with VAMCs, there may be inefficiencies in resolving pending applications. VHA, through HEC, is assessing efforts to improve the timeliness of enrollment application processing and the accuracy of enrollment determinations.

VHA lacks a standardized oversight process and reliable data to monitor enrollment processes system-wide: Although HEC officials said they are responsible for oversight of enrollment processes system-wide, VHA has neither sufficient policies that delineate this role nor procedures that document key oversight activities that should be conducted. For example, policies do not describe the oversight activities HEC should conduct to help ensure the accuracy of enrollment determinations system-wide. Further, VHA does not have reliable data for overseeing the timeliness of processing enrollment applications at VAMCs, which process 90 percent of the applications system-wide. Officials from the six VAMCs in GAO's review and HEC also had varying interpretations of how to measure the timeliness standard. For example, officials from four of the six VAMCs said the standard was met when enrollment staff entered an application into their local system, irrespective of whether an enrollment determination was made. In contrast, HEC officials said the measurement encompasses the time needed to make an enrollment determination, including any time the application was pending. Without reliable data that are consistently measured, VHA cannot accurately oversee the timeliness of application processing system-wide, or assess the extent to which VAMCs face challenges in implementing enrollment processes. To improve oversight, VHA, through HEC, recently implemented an effort to review the accuracy of some enrollment determinations.