

# HEALTH CARE

*The Health Care team (HC) leads GAO's efforts in supporting congressional oversight of the many federal agencies and programs that tangibly affect the lives and well-being of all Americans. Programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)—administered by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)—finance health care services for the nation's elderly, disabled, and low-income individuals and children. The Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Defense (DOD) are the sources of medical care for the nation's veterans and armed servicemembers, including their dependents. Public health agencies are charged with overseeing the development and regulation of safe and effective medical technologies, as well as preparing for and coordinating responses to naturally occurring disease outbreaks and bioterrorist attacks. Collectively, these federal health care programs' expenditures represent approximately one-quarter of all federal spending. Ensuring that these programs provide access to quality care, protect the public's safety, and remain fiscally sustainable is one of the greatest challenges facing Congress and the President in the 21st century.*

## Our Work

HC conducts its work in Washington, D.C., and field offices across the country, including Atlanta, Chicago, and Seattle. We are responsible for providing analyses, recommendations, and policy options to Congress and executive branch officials to help better meet the needs of our aging and diverse population. Specifically, we examine and evaluate the following departments and agencies: Department of Health and Human Services, including CMS, the National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among others; VA's Veterans Health Administration; DOD's TRICARE; and the Food and Drug Administration. Our work at federal health departments and agencies examines not only their achievement of program goals but also their management, information systems, human capital, and financial operations.

Typically, we assist Congress in assessing

- reforms, financing, and operations associated with Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP;
- trends and issues in private insurance coverage;
- actions and options for improving VA's and DOD's health care services;
- effectiveness of federal programs to protect the public's health, including their ability to detect and respond to naturally occurring disease outbreaks and bioterrorist attacks;
- state and federal strategies for financing and overseeing the delivery of chronic and long-term health care; and
- state experiences in providing health insurance coverage to low-income populations.

### KEY CONTACTS

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## *Accomplishments and Key Projects*

Some of our recent accomplishments include

- assessing the effects of Medicare’s methods of setting payments to hospitals, physicians, nursing homes, and other providers, and recommending modifications that preserve or promote beneficiary access and increase program efficiency;
- examining management of the Medicare fee-for-service program, including its decentralized administration through a network of contractors;
- analyzing VA’s delivery of services—including vocational rehabilitation and employment and health care to those with post-traumatic stress disorder—to servicemembers seriously injured in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- examining DOD’s oversight of its civilian health care provider networks and recommending evaluations of beneficiary complaints and improved collection of provider survey data as ways to better oversee these networks;
- examining issues surrounding the availability and safety of prescription drugs sold over the Internet and the business practices of certain Internet pharmacies, which alerted Congress to potential risks facing consumers;
- assessing federal capacity to respond to naturally occurring disease outbreaks and bioterrorist attacks, which assisted Congress and the administration in restructuring public health preparedness and response capabilities; and
- identifying significant shortcomings in efforts to protect nursing home residents from abuse and to ensure that home health beneficiaries receive quality care.

Key ongoing projects include

- examining the need for potential modification to Medicare payments, medical liability policies, or future health workforce subsidies;
- reviewing Medicare’s processes for covering new procedures and medical devices;
- analyzing pharmaceutical pricing and practices to assess the effects on federally funded health care programs such as Medicare and Medicaid;
- determining the extent to which states monitor access to care and utilization of services for Medicaid and SCHIP eligible children;
- evaluating DOD’s management of its health care delivery system, focusing on the physician network and claims processing;
- assessing key drivers of premium growth in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program and comparative efforts of other major public and private employers to contain cost growth in employer-based health insurance coverage;
- evaluating state and local preparedness to respond to naturally occurring disease outbreaks and bioterrorist attacks; and
- analyzing policy options to respond to growing financial pressure on federal and state budgets to provide appropriate, high-quality, long-term care services.