GAO Highlights

June 22, 2016

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Sustained Management Attention Needed to Address Numerous IT Challenges

Why GAO Did This Study

VA relies on IT to meet its mission and effectively serve the nation's veterans. Over the past several years, the department has expended billions of dollars to manage and modernize its information systems. However, VA has experienced challenges in managing its IT, raising questions about the effectiveness of its IT operations. GAO has previously reported on a number of the department's IT initiatives.

This statement summarizes results from key GAO reports issued between 2010 and 2014 highlighting IT challenges that have contributed to GAO's designation of VA health care as a high risk area. It also describes additional challenges that GAO more recently identified in 2015 and 2016 that are related to increasing the electronic exchange of VA's health records with those of DOD, development and use of VBMS, and the department's modernization of its health care claims processing system.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made numerous recommendations to VA to improve the modernization of its IT systems. Among other things, GAO has recommended that VA address challenges associated with its efforts to modernize its electronic health record system to increase interoperability with DOD, develop goals and metrics as a basis for determining the extent to which VA's and DOD's modernized electronic health records systems are achieving interoperability, address shortcomings with VBMS planning and implementation, and develop a sound written plan for deploying its modernized claims processing system. VA has concurred with these recommendations and has some actions ongoing.

What GAO Found

In February 2015, GAO designated Veterans Affairs (VA) health care as a high-risk area based on its concerns about the department's ability to ensure the quality and safety of veterans' health care in five broad areas, one of which was information technology (IT) challenges. Of particular concern at that time was the failed modernization of an outpatient appointment scheduling system, suspended development of a system that was to electronically store and retrieve information about surgical implants, and the extent of system interoperability— the ability to exchange information—with the Department of Defense (DOD), which present risks to the timeliness, quality, and safety of VA health care.

Subsequent to the designation of VA health care as high risk, GAO completed evaluations that identified additional IT management challenges at VA.

- In August 2015, GAO reported on VA's efforts to achieve electronic health record interoperability with DOD and noted that (1) the two departments had engaged in several near-term efforts to expand interoperability and (2) VA and DOD had moved forward with plans to separately modernize their electronic health record systems. However, of significant concern was that VA (and DOD) had not identified outcome-oriented goals and metrics that would clearly define what it aims to achieve from its efforts. GAO recommended that VA develop goals and metrics, among other things. VA concurred with the recommendations and stated that it has initiated actions in response.
- VA had made progress in developing and implementing its Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), with deployment of the initial version of the system. However, in September 2015, GAO reported that the development and implementation of the system was ongoing and noted three areas that could benefit from increased management attention: cost estimating, system availability, and system defects. The report also noted that VA had neither conducted a customer satisfaction survey nor developed goals for improving the system. GAO recommended that VA develop a plan with a time frame and a reliable cost estimate for completing VBMS, establish goals for system response time, minimize the incidences of high and medium severity system defects for future VBMS releases, assess user satisfaction, and establish satisfaction goals to promote improvement. VA agreed with the recommendations and noted steps it was taking to address them.
- Due to recent increases in utilization of VA care in the community, the department has had difficulty processing claims in a timely manner. In May 2016, GAO reported that VA officials and claims processing staff indicated that IT limitations, manual processes, and staffing challenges had delayed claims processing. The department had implemented interim measures to address some of the system's challenges, but did not expect to deploy solutions to address all challenges, including those related to IT, until fiscal year 2018 or later. Further, VA did not have a sound plan for modernizing its claims processing system, which GAO recommended it develop. The department concurred with this recommendation and stated that it intended to address the recommendation through the planned consolidation of its care in the community programs.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**