

Highlights of [GAO-19-720T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

VA operates one of the largest health care delivery systems in the nation and provides billions of dollars in benefits and services to veterans and their families. However, VA faces serious and long-standing problems with management challenges and veterans' access to health care and disability benefits. These issues contributed to GAO's decision to list several areas involving VA on GAO's High-Risk List, including managing acquisitions, managing risk and improving veterans' health care, and improving and modernizing VA's disability programs.

This testimony discusses (1) human capital challenges facing VA and its components, (2) GAO recommendations addressing some of those challenges, and (3) how those challenges are related to a broader set of government-wide human capital problems.

This testimony is based on GAO's work on VA issued since 2017, as well as GAO's work on government-wide strategic human capital management issued since July 2014. To conduct these studies, GAO reviewed key agency documents and government-wide employment data and interviewed knowledgeable agency officials and managers, as well as subject matter specialists.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has designated 40 of its prior recommendations to VA as priorities for implementation. Twelve of these priority recommendations are aimed at strengthening VA's human capital management efforts. To date, VA has implemented six of these priority recommendations, but needs to take additional action on the other six. GAO will continue to monitor VA's progress in implementing these recommendations.

View [GAO-19-720T](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff, (202) 512-2757, [GoldenkoffR@gao.gov](mailto:GoldenkoffR@gao.gov).

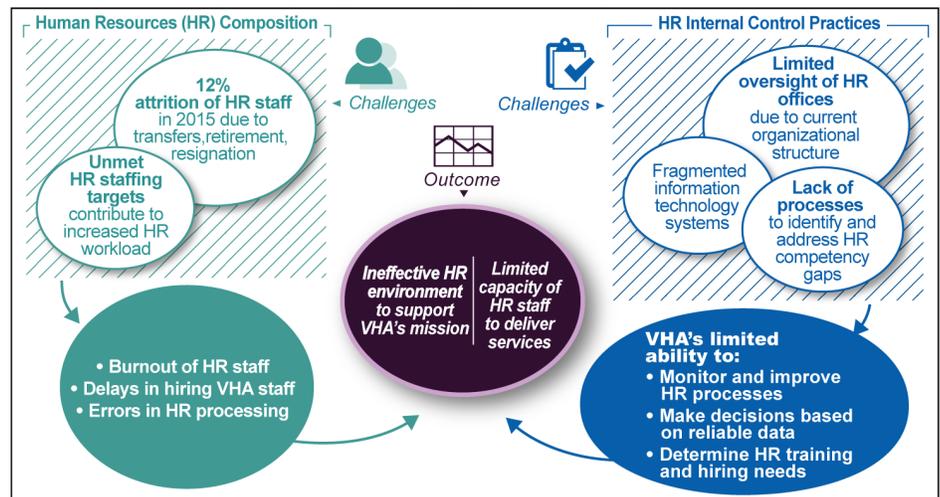
# VETERANS AFFAIRS

## Sustained Leadership Attention Needed to Address Long-Standing Workforce Problems

### What GAO Found

Serious human capital shortfalls are undermining the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) ability to provide veterans with quality and timely services. Over the past two decades, GAO has identified major challenges with VA human capital practices. For example, in March 2019, GAO found large staffing shortages, including physicians and registered nurses, at the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) 172 medical centers. In December 2016, GAO found that high attrition, increased workload, and burnout among VHA's human resources (HR) staff, along with ineffective internal controls to support its HR operations, have impeded VHA's ability to serve the nation's veterans (see figure).

### A Lack of Human Capital Capacity Is Affecting VHA's Ability to Deliver Services to Veterans



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data. | GAO-19-720T

Continued leadership attention to addressing GAO's recommendations could help VA better execute its mission. GAO has made numerous recommendations to VA, 40 of which were designated as priorities because they could significantly improve VA's operations. Twelve of the 40 were aimed at strengthening VA's human capital management efforts. Of these, six have been address. However, VA still needs to take additional actions on the other six, such as developing a modern and effective performance management system. Beyond these priority recommendations, VA can use key talent management strategies that GAO has identified for acquiring, incentivizing, and engaging employees and thus be more competitive for a high-performing workforce in a tight labor market.

Some of the challenges facing VA are part of a larger set of human capital issues affecting government as a whole. Although Congress, the Office of Personnel Management, and individual agencies have made improvements in recent years, human capital management in general remains a high-risk area because of mission-critical skills gaps within the federal workforce. Structural issues impede the ability of agencies to recruit, retain, and develop workers, including outmoded position classification and pay systems, ineffective recruiting and hiring processes, and challenges in dealing with poor performers.