



VA HEALTH CARE

Steps Taken to Improve Practitioner Screening, but Facility Compliance with Screening Requirements Is Poor

Highlights of [GAO-06-544](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In March 2004, GAO reported on gaps in VA's requirements for screening the professional credentials and personal backgrounds of health care practitioners ([GAO-04-566](#)). GAO found that VA's requirements did not ensure thorough screening of VA practitioners. VA concurred with four recommendations GAO made to improve practitioner screening.

GAO was asked to determine the extent to which (1) VA has taken steps to improve practitioner screening by implementing GAO's recommendations and (2) VA facilities are in compliance with VA's practitioner screening requirements. GAO reviewed VA's current practitioner screening policies to determine if gaps remain, interviewed VA officials, and sampled about 60 practitioner files at each of seven VA facilities selected based on size and geographic location.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA expand its oversight program to include a review of VA screening requirements for all types of health care practitioners and that VA standardize a method for documenting the review of fingerprint-only investigation results. VA agreed with GAO's findings and concurred with the recommendations. VA further stated that it will provide an action plan on how it will implement the recommendations at a later date.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-544.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie E. Ekstrand at (202) 512-7101 or ekstrandl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

VA has taken steps to improve health care practitioner screening by partially implementing each of four recommendations made in GAO's March 2004 report; however, gaps still remain in VA's practitioner screening requirements. In response to two of GAO's recommendations, VA expanded its screening requirements for all VA applicants to include a verification of all state licenses and national certificates and requires facility officials to query the Healthcare Integrity and Protection Data Bank (HIPDB), which contains information on individuals involved in health care-related civil judgments and criminal convictions and licensing and certification actions. VA, however, has not yet expanded these screening requirements to apply to all health care practitioners currently employed at VA facilities, as GAO recommended. In response to the third GAO recommendation, VA issued a policy in August 2005 that requires individuals who previously were exempt from receiving any level of background investigation to have, at a minimum, their fingerprints screened against a criminal history database. As of October 19, 2005, 37 VA medical facilities had not fully implemented this new requirement because they had not obtained or installed the necessary electronic fingerprint equipment. Since then VA has made progress; as of February 1, 2006, 2 medical facilities had not installed the equipment. Finally, VA has partially implemented GAO's fourth recommendation to conduct oversight of its facilities' compliance with VA practitioner screening requirements; however, GAO found the oversight does not address all of the facility compliance issues GAO previously identified.

GAO found poor compliance with four of the five selected VA practitioner screening requirements at the seven VA facilities visited in 2005. None of the seven facilities had a compliance rate of 90 percent or more for all five screening requirements GAO reviewed. Two facilities that had implemented VA's fingerprint-only background investigations—a relatively new form of background investigation—did not comply with VA's requirement to document that the results of the fingerprint check against a criminal history database had been reviewed and used to make a decision on the individual's suitability to work at a VA medical facility.

Facilities' Rates of Compliance with Select VA Screening Requirements for Health Care Practitioners (2005)

Screening requirements	Facility compliance with screening requirements						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Conducting background investigations	○	○	○	○	●	○	○
Position risk level determined (VA Form 2280)	○	○	○	●	●	○	○
Querying HIPDB	○	○	○	●	●	○	○
Completing employment checklist	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Verifying license, certification, or both	●	●	●	●	○	●	○

○ Indicates a compliance rate of less than 90 percent
 ● Indicates a compliance rate of 90 percent or greater

Source: GAO analysis of VA facility files.