FEDERAL DISABILITY PROGRAMS

More Strategic Coordination Could Help Overcome Challenges to Needed Transformation

What GAO Found

SSA and VA have taken some initial steps to recognize a more modern concept of disability, but both agencies still encounter challenges in fully assessing an individual’s capacity to work and in addressing claims processing problems. SSA and VA have revised some eligibility criteria to reflect medical advances and to support beneficiaries’ efforts to return to work and achieve self-sufficiency. However, their revisions to eligibility criteria fall short of fully incorporating a modern understanding of how technology and labor market changes should impact eligibility for disability benefits and return-to-work rates remain low. The low return-to-work rates may be due, in part, to the timing in which certain supports are offered to beneficiaries. However, the timing of services are constrained by several factors, including program design, laws, and the agencies’ limited span of authority over benefits and services offered by other agencies. Finally, although SSA and VA are taking steps to address management challenges, both agencies continue to experience delays in processing disability claims and persistent backlogs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that Congress, in consultation with key agencies and other stakeholders, consider authorizing an entity consisting of leaders from appropriate federal agencies to develop a cost-effective federal strategy that would integrate services and support to individuals with disabilities. The agencies reviewed our report and provided technical comments.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-635. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.