ADAPTIVE SPORTS GRANT PROGRAM

VA Has Taken Steps toward Better Grantee Selection and Oversight, but Additional Actions Needed

What GAO Found

From December 2013 through September 2014, VA developed implementing regulations, announced availability of funding, and selected grantees—ultimately awarding 69 grants from a pool of 161 applications to receive funding under its adaptive sports grant program. VA selected grantees in three steps, including (1) eliminating non-qualifying applications, (2) scoring and ranking qualifying applications using nine criteria, such as strength of the proposed program concept, and (3) a final step that included, among other things, eliminating unnecessary costs from proposed budgets. VA officials said limited available time necessitated the use of a standard federal grant application form rather than one tailored for the program. Because the form did not include some information needed to assess applications—such as the roles of partner organizations—VA asked for narrative attachments. These attachments varied greatly in length and detail which VA officials said made their review quite labor intensive. In addition, some applications did not contain needed information. For example, 3 of the 16 grant files reviewed by GAO did not contain documentation of the grantee’s financial management capabilities. VA customized its application form for fiscal year 2015, and VA officials said this led to a substantial improvement in the application process.

VA developed a grant monitoring approach for fiscal year 2014 grants that relied on quarterly and annual reports from grantees (containing information on financial and sports activities), site visits, and remote auditing of selected grantees. In the sample of 16 grant files reviewed, GAO found grantees generally complied with VA’s quarterly reporting requirements. VA has improved the quarterly report template so that it requests information on time spent on direct personal interaction with participants. Through June 2015, VA provided GAO with reports of 8 visits covering 9 of its 69 grants. However, VA did not initiate a remote audit until August 2015. The agency developed a draft grant monitoring plan in the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2015, but the plan does not specify the number or frequency of site visits and remote audits. This omission risks the possibility that none will be performed in some years, or performed very late in the year, thus missing an opportunity for prompt detection of the misuse of funds.

The grants supported a variety of sports activities and afforded participant benefits such as socialization and improved personal independence, according to the participants, coaches, and grantee officials GAO interviewed. The 69 grantees in fiscal year 2014 planned activities that encompassed many different adaptive sports, with cycling, boating, and snow skiing among the most common. Overall, the allotment for administrative costs in grantees’ budgets was about 5.7 percent of the total $8 million awarded in fiscal year 2014—below the statutory maximum of 7.5 percent. However, some grantee officials expressed concern about a significant no-show rate. VA officials confirmed that no-shows are a problem, and stated that they had shared information with some grantees about ways to reduce no-shows. However, they have not systematically gathered and disseminated such techniques to all grantees, which could promote higher attendance rates and maximum benefit of federal dollars.

Why GAO Did This Study

VA’s adaptive sports grant program distributes $8 million annually to organizations that provide sports activities for veterans and service members with disabilities. The U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) played an intermediary role from fiscal year 2010, when the program was implemented, through 2013. USOC received funds from VA and subgranted them to selected grantees. VA is now responsible for selecting grantees and program administration. Congress included a provision in statute for GAO to review VA’s program management.

GAO reviewed (1) how VA selected grantees to provide activities for veterans and service members with disabilities; (2) how VA monitors grantees’ use of funds; and (3) what programs and activities were supported with fiscal year 2014 funds, and what is known about its benefits. GAO reviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 16 of the 69 grant files accounting for about $3.7 million of the $8 million awarded in fiscal year 2014; and interviewed VA officials, as well as grantees and adaptive sports participants during site visits to adaptive sports events in three states, selected in part to ensure regional diversity.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA (1) specify the number and frequency of annual site visits and remote audits, and (2) systematically identify and disseminate techniques for reducing no-shows. VA concurred with both recommendations.

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