VA HEALTH CARE

Actions Needed to Improve Newly Enrolled Veterans’ Access to Primary Care

What GAO Found

GAO found that not all newly enrolled veterans were able to access primary care from the Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and others experienced wide variation in the amount of time they waited for care. Sixty of the 180 newly enrolled veterans in GAO’s review had not been seen by providers at the time of the review; nearly half were unable to access primary care because VA medical center staff did not schedule appointments for these veterans in accordance with VHA policy. The 120 newly enrolled veterans in GAO’s review who were seen by providers waited from 22 days to 71 days from their requests that VA contact them to schedule appointments to when they were seen, according to GAO’s analysis. These time frames were impacted by limited appointment availability and weaknesses in medical center scheduling practices, which contributed to unnecessary delays.

VHA’s oversight of veterans’ access to primary care is hindered, in part, by data weaknesses and the lack of a comprehensive scheduling policy. This is inconsistent with federal internal control standards, which call for agencies to have reliable data and effective policies to achieve their objectives. For newly enrolled veterans, VHA calculates primary care appointment wait times starting from the veterans’ preferred dates (the dates veterans want to be seen), rather than the dates veterans initially requested VA contact them to schedule appointments. Therefore, these data do not capture the time these veterans wait prior to being contacted by schedulers, making it difficult for officials to identify and remedy scheduling problems that arise prior to making contact with veterans. Further, ongoing scheduling errors, such as incorrectly revising preferred dates when rescheduling appointments, understated the amount of time veterans waited to see providers. Officials attributed these errors to confusion by schedulers, resulting from the lack of an updated standardized scheduling policy. These errors continue to affect the reliability of wait-time data used for oversight, which makes it more difficult to effectively oversee newly enrolled veterans’ access to primary care.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VHA (1) ensure veterans requesting appointments are contacted in a timely manner to schedule one; (2) monitor the full amount of time newly enrolled veterans wait to receive primary care; and (3) issue an updated scheduling policy. VA concurred with all of GAO’s recommendations and identified actions it is taking to implement them.