

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-105](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2012, there were over 250,000 bargaining unit employees at VA, and these employees spent about 1.1 million hours performing union representational activities on official time, according to an OPM report. The ways in which VA manages its human resources, including the use of official time, have received increased scrutiny in recent years. GAO was asked to review the amount of official time used by VA employees as well as the amount of space designated for representational activities.

This report examines (1) the extent to which VA tracks official time, (2) what is known about the amount of designated space used for union representational activities at selected VA facilities, and (3) the views of VA managers and union officials on the benefits and challenges of employees using official time.

GAO reviewed VA's fiscal year 2014 and 2015 data on official time—the most recent data available; analyzed information on designated union space and held group interviews with VA managers and union officials at a nongeneralizable sample of five VA facilities selected based on the number of bargaining unit employees and other factors; and interviewed officials at VA, OPM, and from national unions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to VA including that it provide consistent guidance and training on how to record official time in VATAS and that it take steps to collect more reliable data from facilities. VA agreed with GAO's recommendations and stated that it would take action to address them.

View [GAO-17-105](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov.

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UNION ACTIVITIES

VA Could Better Track the Amount of Official Time Used by Employees

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) cannot accurately track the amount of work time employees spend on union representational activities, referred to as official time, agency-wide because it does not have a standardized way for its facilities to record and calculate official time. Specifically:

- *Recording official time*—VA uses two separate time and attendance systems that capture official time differently. VA's new system (VA Time and Attendance System, or VATAS), which VA began rolling out at some facilities in 2013, has specific codes to record official time, but the older system does not. The inconsistent recording of official time raises questions about VA's ability to monitor its use, but VATAS could help to standardize this process. In rolling out the new system, which VA expects to complete agency-wide in 2018, VA has provided inconsistent training and guidance on how to use the codes in VATAS. While VA has taken steps to provide better training and guidance on recording official time, GAO recently found that timekeepers at two of three selected facilities where VATAS has been rolled out were still not using the codes. Without consistent guidance and training, personnel may not know how to properly record official time in the new system.
- *Calculating official time*—VA provides its facilities with a range of options for calculating the amount of official time used. VA annually collects and compiles these data agency-wide using the Labor-Management Relations (LMR) Official Time Tracking System—separate and distinct from VA's time and attendance systems. In calculating official time, facilities may use records, estimates, or other methods, which results in inconsistent data. VA officials told GAO that all facilities will eventually be able to rely on VATAS time and attendance records to calculate official time when submitting data in the LMR system. The full implementation of VATAS will provide VA with an alternative to using the LMR system to collect and compile more reliable official time data. Without reliable data, VA cannot monitor the use of official time agency-wide or share reliable data with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), which reports on the government-wide use of official time.

At all five selected VA facilities, designated space for representational activities comprised less than 1 percent of the overall square footage at each location, according to GAO's analysis. VA does not collect or track data from individual facilities on the amount of space designated for representational activities. Union officials at three of the five facilities GAO visited said that limited space for representational activities made it difficult to provide privacy for employees. A VA official said that certain VA facilities may have space constraints depending on where they are located and the number of veterans served, for example.

At most selected VA facilities, VA managers and union officials GAO interviewed cited similar benefits of employees using official time, such as improving decision-making and resolving problems. However, they had differing views on challenges associated with employees' use of official time, such as when and how much official time may be used.