Limited Progress Made to Address Concerns That Led to High-Risk Designation

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken action to partially meet two of the five criteria GAO uses to assess removal from the High-Risk List (leadership commitment and an action plan), but it has not met the other three (agency capacity, monitoring efforts, and demonstrated progress). Specifically, VA officials have taken leadership actions such as establishing a task force, working groups, and a governance structure for addressing the issues that led to the high-risk designation. VA provided GAO with an action plan in August 2016 that acknowledged the deep-rooted nature of the five areas of concern GAO identified: (1) ambiguous policies and inconsistent processes; (2) inadequate oversight and accountability; (3) information technology challenges; (4) inadequate training for VA staff; and (5) unclear resource needs and allocation priorities. Although VA's action plan outlined some steps VA plans to take over the next several years, several sections were missing analyses of the root causes of the issues, resources needed, and clear metrics to measure progress.

To address its high-risk designation, additional actions are required of VA, including: (1) demonstrating stronger leadership support as it continues its transition under a new administration; (2) developing an action plan to include root cause analyses for each area of concern, clear metrics to assess progress, and the identification of resources for achieving stated outcomes; and (3) implementing GAO’s recommendations, not only to remedy the specific weaknesses identified, but because they may be symptomatic of larger underlying problems that also need to be addressed. Until VA addresses these serious underlying weaknesses, it will be difficult for the department to effectively and efficiently implement improvements addressing the five areas of concern that led to the high-risk designation.

Managing Risks and Improving VA Health Care

Also of concern are the more than 100 open recommendations GAO has made between January 2010 and February 2017 related to VA health care, almost a quarter of which have been open for 3 or more years. Since February 2015, GAO has made 74 new recommendations relating to the areas of concern.

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