VA MEDICAL CENTERS

VA Should Establish Goals and Measures to Enable Improved Oversight of Facilities’ Conditions

What GAO Found
Veterans Health Administration’s (VHA) medical centers conduct regular inspections of the settings in which patients receive health care services, called the “environment of care”, to identify maintenance and repair needs. These inspections also help ensure compliance with accreditation standards requiring, among other things, that utility systems operate properly and that areas are clean and in good repair. The main three steps in the process associated with these inspections are shown below. In addition to the environment of care inspections, VHA conducts other periodic assessments of facilities’ major systems, such as plumbing and air conditioning.

The Three Main Steps of the Environment of Care Inspection Process

1. **Identify possible facility condition deficiencies**: Multiple inspectors conduct weekly environment of care inspections to assess facility condition.
2. **Address and repair open deficiencies**: Medical center staff are required to repair deficiencies within 14 business days.
3. **Track deficiency status and completion**: Inspection team inputs deficiencies into the inspections database and creates work orders to aid in oversight of the process.

Source: GAO analysis | GAO-19-21

VHA inspections routinely identify deficiencies reflective of an aging infrastructure—VHA’s buildings are on average 55 years old. This situation in turn is leading to workload and staffing challenges in addressing maintenance and repair needs. For example, according to VHA’s 2017 data, medical centers reported conducting approximately 11,000 total inspections for the year that resulted in about 128,000 identified deficiencies. Most of these deficiencies were closed within 14 business days, as required by VHA. However, nearly 30,000 of them were not closed or had been addressed through a plan for future work. Medical center officials added that correcting deficiencies may only be a temporary solution for issues related to aging structures that need extensive repairs and renovations. In addition, VA headquarters and field officials said that staff vacancies are common and can affect the efficiency and speed of maintenance and repairs.

VHA provides guidance and selected oversight to ensure medical centers implement the process for environment of care inspections. However, VHA lacks performance goals, objectives, and measures that would enable it to provide effective oversight, address challenges, and assess how well it is achieving a clean, safe, and functional environment. As part of ensuring compliance with the inspection process, VHA measures whether medical centers meet certain requirements, such as having appropriate staff present for inspections. VHA does not, however, have measures that enable it to assess how well medical centers are achieving desired outcomes. Although it has stated its intent to develop such measures, VHA has not yet committed to a time frame for doing so.

What GAO Recommends
GAO recommends that VHA set a timeline for defining goals, objectives, and outcome-oriented performance measures that can address challenges and help achieve a clean and safe care environment. VA concurred with the recommendation and provided general and technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.