

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-21](#), a report to the Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

VHA oversees one of the largest health care systems, serving approximately 9-million veterans at numerous health care facilities, including 170 medical centers. To ensure a safe environment for veterans and employees, VHA must keep its facilities clean and well maintained.

GAO was asked to examine (1) how VHA medical centers identify maintenance and repair needs and challenges they face in addressing those needs, and (2) to what extent VHA provides oversight to ensure medical centers are providing a safe, clean, and functional environment.

GAO reviewed VHA's procedures and standards related to facility operations and maintenance functions at medical centers and interviewed VHA's administrative office officials regarding oversight of these functions. GAO also interviewed VHA officials from three regional offices and six medical centers selected based on factors such as geographic location and veteran population served, and conducted site visits at four of these medical centers.

## 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.

View [GAO-19-21](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or [VonAhA@gao.gov](mailto:VonAhA@gao.gov).

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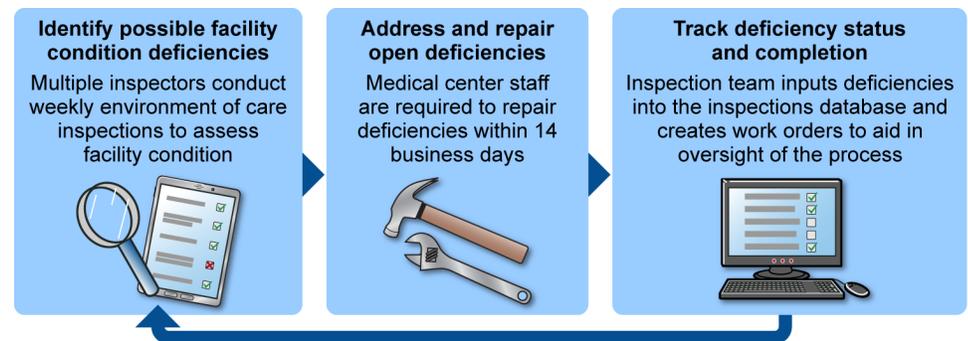
## VA MEDICAL CENTERS

### 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



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.