VA DISABILITY EXAMS

Opportunities Remain to Improve Oversight of Contracted Examiners

What GAO Found

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has not fully resolved issues regarding how it oversees the quality and timeliness of and invoicing for disability compensation medical exams that are completed by contracted examiners. VBA uses medical exam reports from both VHA and contract examiners to help determine if a veteran should receive disability benefits. GAO reported in October 2018 that VBA was behind in completing quality reviews of contracted exams and did not have accurate information on contractor timeliness. VBA’s lack of quality and timeliness data hindered its oversight of contractors’ performance. In 2018, GAO made recommendations for VBA to address these issues. VBA has begun to implement GAO’s recommendations, but continued action is needed to:

- Develop and implement a plan for using data from its new medical exam management system to (1) assess contractor timeliness, (2) monitor time spent correcting exams, and (3) verify proper exam invoicing. According to VBA, the agency has not fully implemented its plan for using this new system to resolve challenges with oversight of contractors’ performance. For example, due to system issues, VBA has not been able to implement an automated invoicing system it planned to use to validate the accuracy of contractors’ invoices. Further, VBA has not yet completed quarterly performance reviews of contracted exams under its new contracts, including any reports for fiscal year 2019. As a result, VBA still is unable to ensure that it is paying contractors the correct amounts based on its contract terms.

- Monitor and assess aggregate performance data and trends over time to identify higher-level trends and program-wide challenges. VBA officials stated that as the agency makes improvements to the exam management system data it will be able to implement this recommendation, but officials could not provide a target completion date.

VBA has taken steps to address issues GAO identified with its oversight of contracted examiner training requirements but has not yet fully addressed them. Having properly trained examiners who can provide high quality exam reports is critical to ensuring that claims processors can make timely and accurate disability determinations for veterans. In 2018, GAO recommended that VBA improve its training oversight by:

- Implementing a plan to verify that all contracted examiners have completed required training. In response, VBA began conducting random audits of training completed by contracted examiners, but it is still in the process of developing a centralized training system that will collect this information. Such a system could help ensure that contracted examiners complete training and, ultimately, conduct high-quality exams.

- Collecting information from contractors or examiners on training and use this information to assess training and make improvements. VBA has since developed a feedback tool for examiners to complete following training and plans to use it to improve the training, where needed.