

Why GAO Did This Study

VHA's RCS provided counseling (individual, group, marriage, and family) and outreach services through Vet Centers to more than 300,000 veterans and their families in fiscal year 2019. In 2017, RCS implemented changes to expectations that it uses to assess Vet Center counselor productivity, setting expectations for counselors' percentage of time with clients and number of client visits.

GAO was asked to review Vet Center productivity expectations for counselors and staffing. Among other issues, this report examines the extent to which VHA (1) evaluates its productivity expectations; and (2) assesses Vet Centers' staffing needs. To do this work, GAO reviewed RCS documentation regarding counselors' productivity expectations and analyzed RCS data on counselor productivity expectations and staffing, for fiscal year 2019. GAO interviewed RCS leadership, including district directors, and directors and counselors from 12 Vet Centers, selected for variation in geographic location and total number of clients, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that VHA (1) evaluate Vet Center productivity expectations for counselors; and (2) develop and implement a staffing model that incorporates key practices. The Department of Veterans Affairs concurred with GAO's recommendations and identified actions VHA is taking to implement them.

View [GAO-20-652](#). For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov

VA VET CENTERS

Evaluations Needed of Expectations for Counselor Productivity and Centers' Staffing

What GAO Found

The Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) provides counseling through 300 Vet Centers, which can be found in community settings and are separate from other VHA facilities. RCS has set expectations for counselor productivity at Vet Centers. For example, one expectation is for counselors to achieve an average of 1.5 visits for each hour they provide direct services. However, RCS officials told GAO that they have not conducted, and do not have plans to conduct, an evaluation of the expectations.

VA Vet Center Productivity Expectations for Counselors

TIME MANAGEMENT EXPECTATION

50% direct service provision
(50% of time should be spent directly providing services to clients.)



VISITS EXPECTATION

Each hour with a client should generate an average of 1.5 visits
(An individual counseling session generates one visit; a group counseling session generates multiple visits, based on the number of participating clients.)



Source: Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and GAO. | GAO-20-652

Although most counselors met the productivity expectations in fiscal year 2019, counselors GAO spoke with said the expectations led them to change work practices in ways that could negatively affect client care. For example, counselors at one Vet Center told GAO that, to meet productivity expectations, they spend less time with each client to fit more clients into their schedules. Without an evaluation of its productivity expectations, RCS lacks reasonable assurance that it is identifying any unintended or potentially negative effects of the expectations on counselor practices and client care.

RCS officials told GAO that by the start of fiscal year 2021 they plan to implement a staffing model to identify criteria for determining staffing needs at Vet Centers. The model incorporates data on counselors' productivity (work hours and number of visits), and total clients to determine criteria for adding or removing a counselor position from a Vet Center. However, the model does not fully address key practices in staffing model design GAO identified in previous work. For example, the model does not include the input of Vet Center counselors, or client data associated with directors, who also provide counseling. As a result, RCS is at risk of making decisions about Vet Center staffing that may not be responsive to changing client needs. Shortages of mental health staff within VHA coupled with the increasing veteran demand for mental health services highlight the critical importance of ensuring appropriate Vet Center staffing.