



Highlights of [GAO-05-1017T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In carrying out VA's mission of serving the nation's veterans and their dependents, the agency relies extensively on information technology (IT), for which it is requesting about \$2.1 billion in fiscal year 2006. VA's vision is to integrate its IT resources and streamline interactions with customers, so that it can provide services and information to veterans more quickly and effectively.

Fully exploiting the potential of IT to improve performance is a challenging goal for VA, as it is throughout government. The Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996 addressed this challenge by, among other things, establishing the position of chief information officer (CIO) to serve as the focal point for information and technology management within departments and agencies.

The Committee requested that GAO discuss the role of CIOs in the federal government, as well as provide a historical perspective on the roles and responsibilities of VA's CIO. In developing this testimony, GAO relied on its previous work at VA as well as on the CIO role across government, including a 2004 review of CIOs at major departments and agencies.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-1017T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

The Critical Role of the Chief Information Officer Position in Effective Information Technology Management

What GAO Found

CIOs play a critical role in managing information and technology within federal agencies. According to GAO's 2004 review, CIOs generally held wide responsibilities and reported to their agency heads or other top level managers. In general, CIOs reported that they were responsible for key information and technology management areas; for example, all the CIOs were responsible for five key areas (capital planning and investment management, enterprise architecture, information security, strategic planning for information technology and information resource management, and information technology workforce planning). However, in carrying out their responsibilities, the tenure of federal CIOs was often less than the length of time that some experts consider necessary for them to be effective and implement changes: the median tenure was about 2 years, and the most common response regarding time required to be effective was 3 to 5 years. In contrast, CIOs were generally helped in carrying out their responsibilities by the background and experience they brought to the job: most had background in information technology (IT) or related fields, and many also had business knowledge related to their agencies. Other factors that help CIOs meet their responsibilities include (1) being supported by senior executives who recognize the importance to their missions of IT and an effective CIO; (2) playing an influential role in applying IT to business needs; and (3) being able to structure their organizations appropriately. At the same time, CIOs cited several challenges, of which the two most frequently mentioned were implementing effective IT management and obtaining sufficient and relevant resources.

Over time, the CIO position at VA, as well as information and technology management as a whole, has received increased attention at the department. After several years with CIOs whose primary duty was not information and technology management or who were serving in an acting capacity, the department appointed a full-time permanent CIO in August 2001. In 2002, the department proposed further strengthening the position and centralizing IT management, recognizing that aspects of its computing environment were particularly challenging and required substantial management attention. In particular, the department's information systems and services were highly decentralized, and a large proportion of the department's IT budget was controlled by the VA's administrations and staff offices. To address these challenges, the Secretary issued a memo in 2002 announcing that IT functions, programs, and funding would be centralized under the department-level CIO. This realignment held promise for improving accountability and enabling the department to accomplish its mission. The additional oversight afforded the CIO could have a significant impact on the department's ability to more effectively account for and manage its IT spending.