

GAO
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-05-167, a report to the Ranking Democratic Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

More than 10,000 U.S. military servicemembers, including National Guard and Reserve members, have been injured in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Those with serious injuries are likely to be discharged from the military and return to civilian life with disabilities. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) services to help these injured servicemembers in their transition to civilian employment. GAO has noted that early intervention—the provision of rehabilitation services as soon as possible after the onset of a disability—is a practice that significantly facilitates the return to work. GAO examined how VA expedites VR&E services to seriously injured servicemembers and the challenges VA faces in its efforts to do so.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that:

- VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) collaborate to reach an agreement for VA to have access to information that both agencies agree is needed to promote recovery and return to work for seriously injured servicemembers.
- VA develop a policy and procedures for regional offices to maintain contact with seriously injured servicemembers who do not initially apply for VR&E services.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-167.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia Bascetta at (202) 512-7215 or BascettaC@gao.gov.

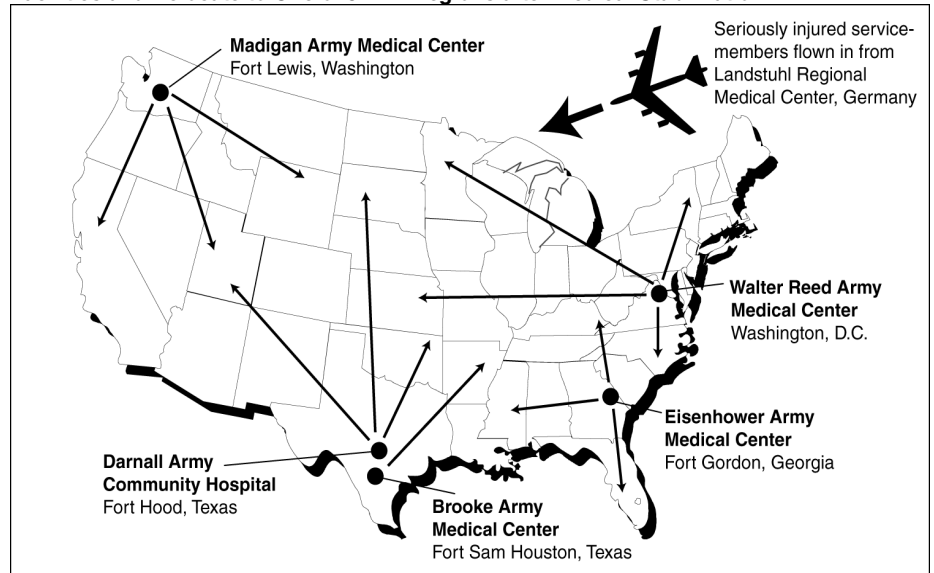
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

More VA and DOD Collaboration Needed to Expedite Services for Seriously Injured Servicemembers

What GAO Found

VA has taken steps to expedite vocational rehabilitation and employment services for servicemembers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq with serious injuries. The agency has instructed its regional offices to make seriously injured servicemembers a high priority for all VA assistance, including VR&E services, and has asked DOD to provide data that would help VA identify and monitor this population. It has also deployed additional staff to five major Army military treatment facilities where the majority of the seriously injured are treated. Pending an agreement with DOD for sharing data, VA has relied on its regional offices to learn who the seriously injured are and where they are located. We found that the regional offices we reviewed had developed information that varied in completeness and reliability. We also found that VA does not have a policy for maintaining contact with those with serious injuries who may later be ready for VR&E services but did not initially apply for VR&E. Nevertheless, some regional offices did attempt to maintain contact while other regional offices did not.

Seriously Injured Army Servicemembers Receive Treatment at Five Major Army Medical Facilities and Relocate to One of 57 VA Regions after Medical Stabilization



Source: GAO analysis of DOD and VA data and Art Explosion.

VA faces significant challenges in expediting VR&E services to seriously injured servicemembers. These include: the inherent challenge that individual differences and uncertainties in the recovery process make it difficult to determine when a servicemember will be ready to consider VR&E services; DOD's concerns that VA's outreach, including early intervention with VR&E, could work at cross purposes to military retention goals for servicemembers whose discharge from military service is not yet certain; and the lack of access to data from DOD that would allow VA to readily know which servicemembers are seriously injured and where they are located.

VA and DOD generally concurred with our findings and recommendations.