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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-149](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Chairman, former Chairman, and Ranking Minority Member, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs asked GAO to review the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) efforts to realign its compensation and pension claims processing field structure to improve performance. This report (1) identifies the actions VBA has taken to realign its compensation and pension claims processing field structure to improve performance, and (2) examines whether further changes to its field structure could improve performance.

What GAO Recommends

To help ensure more timely, accurate, and consistent decisions in a cost-effective manner, we recommend that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) direct the Under Secretary for Benefits to undertake a comprehensive review of VBA's field structure for processing disability compensation and pension claims. This review would address staff deployment, opportunities for consolidating disability compensation and pension claims processing, and human capital and real property issues.

VA concurred fundamentally with GAO's recommendation and noted that field restructuring is a complex process. It stated it will establish a task force to thoroughly explore potential areas for consolidation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-149.

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

VETERANS' BENEFITS

Further Changes in VBA's Field Office Structure Could Help Improve Disability Claims Processing

What GAO Found

Since 2001, VBA has made a number of changes to its field structure and staff deployment in an effort to improve compensation and pension claims processing performance, in particular, to improve the timeliness of claims decisions and reduce inventories. VBA

- created a Tiger Team to complete very old claims, and claims from elderly veterans,
- created nine resource centers to decide claims developed at the regional offices of jurisdiction,
- consolidated pension maintenance work at three regional offices to free up staff at other offices to concentrate on other work,
- consolidated in-service dependency and indemnity compensation claims at one office,
- consolidated processing of appeals remanded from VA's Board of Veterans Appeals at one office, and
- is consolidating decision making on Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) claims at two regional offices.

While VBA has taken these steps to improve its claims processing performance through targeted realignments of its field structure and workload, VBA has not changed the basic field structure for processing claims for disability compensation and pension benefits, and it still faces performance challenges. VBA continues to process these claims at 57 regional offices, where large performance variations and questions about decision consistency persist. For example, in fiscal year 2004 the average time to decide a rating-related claim ranged from 99 days at one office to 237 days at another, and accuracy varied across regional offices. Furthermore, productivity improvements are necessary to maintain performance in the face of greater workloads and relatively constant staffing resources. VBA and others who have studied claims processing have suggested that consolidating claims processing into fewer regional offices could help improve claims processing efficiency, save overhead costs, and improve decision accuracy and consistency.

VBA's 57 Regional Offices Process Disability Claims



Source: VBA.