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Highlights

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Improved Planning Needed to Guide Development and Implementation of Education Benefits System

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers programs that provide educational resources to veterans, service members, reservists, and eligible family members of veterans. Under an initiative that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) began in 1999, called The Education Expert System (TEES), VA is moving its education benefits claims processing systems to new technology platforms and replacing the current systems with a new system that is to add more automated processes and eliminate most human intervention. GAO was requested to (1) report on the results of TEES development to date and identify the remaining work to complete the project, (2) identify VBA's plans for completing and implementing TEES, and (3) assess the feasibility of developing and deploying TEES before the completion of VBA's Finance and Accounting System. To accomplish these objectives, GAO analyzed relevant documentation, interviewed program and project officials, and observed processing systems at VA regional offices.

What GAO Recommends

To ensure the successful implementation of TEES, GAO is recommending that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, among other actions, require the development of a comprehensive, integrated project plan to coordinate and manage the initiative. Commenting on a draft of this report, VA concurred with GAO's recommendations and described actions planned to address them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1045.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Valerie Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or melvinv@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

To date, as part of the TEES project, VBA has enhanced education benefits claims processing by developing certain capabilities that allow information to be captured in an electronic format. However, VBA has not taken action on various other initiatives that it identified as necessary to complete the project. These initiatives include (1) moving the functionality provided by its aging, stand-alone system used to process flight school, on-the-job training, and apprenticeship claims to a platform compliant with the department's enterprise architecture; (2) moving the processing and payment functionality used for many of the education claims from its current antiquated system to new technology; and (3) creating a rules-based claims processing system that will process all education benefits and types of training.

VBA does not have an integrated project management plan for the TEES initiative. According to agency officials, a project management plan originally developed in 2001 has not been updated since 2004. Because VBA does not have an integrated project management plan, it lacks critical elements needed to effectively guide the project to completion, such as a full description of its scope; identification of stakeholders' responsibilities, documented risks, and performance metrics; and an overall approach for coordinating its various education claims improvement initiatives. Moreover, without an integrated project management plan, VBA risks initiating work that could be duplicative and overlapping.

VBA's Finance and Accounting System (FAS) is substantially complete and can currently pay new compensation claims; all functionality for compensation and pension payments is scheduled to be completed by August 2008. Thus, since much of the functionality for FAS has been developed, VBA could implement a rules-based system that integrates with FAS. However, while the current strategy calls for using FAS as the payment system for TEES, the existing functional requirements for an interface between the two systems, which were developed in 2003, have not been assessed and updated. Subject matter experts needed to define business requirements for interfacing the systems have not been assigned by a key stakeholder. As a result, it is uncertain when VBA will validate and update functional requirements for the FAS interface with TEES.

United States Government Accountability Office