



Highlights of [GAO-08-56](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNA), registered nurses who have completed a master's degree program in nurse anesthesia, provide the majority of anesthesia care veterans receive in VA medical facilities. While the demand for CRNAs is anticipated to increase, many CRNAs employed by VA—VA CRNAs—are nearing retirement eligibility age. Concerns have been raised about the challenges VA may face in maintaining its VA CRNA workforce. GAO (1) identified VA CRNA workforce challenges that VA medical facilities may experience related to VA CRNAs, (2) identified the key mechanisms that VA medical facilities can use to recruit and retain VA CRNAs, and (3) determined the extent to which facilities use the key mechanisms. To identify VA CRNA workforce challenges, GAO analyzed Web-based surveys it sent to VA chief anesthesiologists, VA human resources officers, and VA CRNAs, with survey response rates of 92, 85, and 76 percent, respectively. GAO also identified the key mechanisms VA medical facilities can use to recruit and retain VA CRNAs and the extent that these mechanisms are used.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA expedite development and implementation of the training course on VA's LPS policy for VA facility officials responsible for compliance with the policy. VA generally concurred with the conclusions and recommendation and stated that it had developed a draft action plan.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-56](#). For more information, contact Laurie E. Ekstrand at (202) 512-7114 or ekstrand@gao.gov.

VA HEALTH CARE

Many Medical Facilities Have Challenges in Recruiting and Retaining Nurse Anesthetists

What GAO Found

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities have challenges in recruiting and retaining VA CRNAs for their workforce. About three-fourths of all VA medical facility chief anesthesiologists responding to GAO's survey reported that they had difficulty recruiting VA CRNAs. The challenge recruiting VA CRNAs has made it difficult to fill existing VA CRNA vacancies at VA medical facilities. Overall, 54 percent of VA medical facility chief anesthesiologists reported temporarily closing some operating rooms and 72 percent reported delaying some elective surgeries. VA's retention challenge comes from a projected substantial attrition rate. Based on the results of its survey, GAO projects that 26 percent of VA's CRNAs will either retire from or leave VA in the next 5 years. VA medical facility officials reported in GAO's survey that the recruitment and retention challenges are caused primarily by the low level of VA CRNA salaries when compared with CRNA salaries in local market areas.

VA has three key mechanisms its medical facilities can use to recruit and retain VA CRNAs. VA medical facilities can give bonuses to VA CRNAs—recruitment, relocation, and retention bonuses. In addition, VA has education payment programs that provide funding to cover CRNA education costs. Finally, medical facilities can also use VA's locality pay system (LPS) to determine whether to adjust VA CRNA salaries to help the facilities remain competitive with CRNA salaries in local market areas.

Each of the three key recruitment and retention mechanisms—bonuses, education payment programs, and VA's LPS—are used by some VA medical facilities. GAO found that in fiscal years 2005 or 2006, just over one-third of VA medical facilities that hired VA CRNAs gave recruitment bonuses. For VA medical facilities that have VA CRNAs, less than one-third gave retention bonuses in fiscal years 2005 or 2006. In addition, all VA CRNAs that applied for funds to attend a CRNA school or to offset their educational debt and were eligible received these funds in fiscal years 2005 and 2006. GAO also found that more than half of VA medical facilities used VA's LPS to determine whether to adjust VA CRNA salaries in 2005 and in 2006. However, in the eight VA medical facilities visited, GAO found that although the facilities used VA's LPS, the majority of them did not fully follow VA's LPS policy correctly in either 2005 or 2006. Officials at these facilities did not always know or were not aware of certain aspects of the LPS policy, and VA has not provided training on the LPS to VA medical facility officials since the policy was changed in 2001. As a result, VA medical facility officials have not received LPS training that reflects VA's current LPS policy, and accordingly, cannot ensure that VA CRNA salaries have been adjusted as needed to be competitive. Although VA is in the process of developing a Web-based training course for the LPS, the department has not established a time frame for finalizing the development and implementation of this training course.