

Highlights of [GAO-10-923](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives.

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2001, the Deputy Secretary of Defense stated that domestic violence will not be tolerated in the Department of Defense (DOD). Despite this posture, DOD's clinical database indicates that 8,223 incidents met criteria for domestic abuse in fiscal year 2009. However, because this database includes only cases reported to military clinical offices, it does not represent all cases. In response to a congressional request, GAO evaluated whether DOD is able to determine the effectiveness of its domestic abuse efforts. To conduct this review, GAO reviewed legislative requirements and DOD guidance, analyzed domestic abuse data, and interviewed officials involved in domestic abuse prevention and treatment and persons eligible to receive services at five military bases.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD finalize guidance on how the services are to comply with DOD policies and develop an oversight framework to guide its efforts to prevent and treat domestic abuse that includes collecting data on contributing factors and establishing metrics to determine the effectiveness of DOD's awareness campaigns. In commenting on a draft of this report, DOD generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-10-923](#) or [key components](#).
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MILITARY PERSONNEL

Sustained Leadership and Oversight Needed to Improve DOD's Prevention and Treatment of Domestic Abuse

What GAO Found

DOD has taken some actions to prevent and treat domestic abuse in response to recommendations made by the Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence in 2001 through 2003 and by GAO in a 2006 report. However, DOD has no oversight framework with goals, milestones, and metrics with which to determine the effectiveness of its efforts. This issue is complicated by uncertainty regarding the completeness of DOD's data on domestic abuse. In 2007, DOD issued guidance on military protective orders after GAO had found that its lack of guidance had resulted in inconsistent practices. However, DOD closed its Family Violence Policy Office in 2007, which had staff dedicated to overseeing the implementation of recommendations made by the Defense Task Force, after DOD had taken action on some key recommendations. At that time, the specific responsibilities of that office for overseeing implementation of the remaining Task Force recommendations were not reassigned, although overall oversight responsibility remained with the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. DOD guidance assigns many domestic abuse-related responsibilities to this office, including responsibility for developing DOD's domestic abuse instruction and ensuring compliance. GAO found the following examples in which having sustained leadership attention and an oversight framework would have helped guide DOD in obtaining information that would allow it to fully manage its efforts and determine their effectiveness:

- Significant DOD guidance has been in draft since 2006. As a result, the services are anticipating ways to implement the draft guidance, which contains, among other things, new guidelines for the services' clinical treatment and evaluation boards, without finalized guidance.
- The database intended to satisfy legislative requirements enacted in 2000 continues to provide incomplete data, and DOD still collects domestic abuse data in two databases. In 2006, GAO reported on data discrepancies in these databases and recommended that they be reconciled. This recommendation remains open, and those problems continue today. Because DOD cannot provide accurate numbers of domestic abuse incidents, it cannot analyze trends.
- It is DOD policy to target families most at risk of domestic abuse, but DOD has not defined goals for its efforts or metrics with which to measure progress. DOD collects only information on gender, rank, age, and substance use. Without information on other factors, such as length and number of deployments, DOD will be unable to fully analyze risk factors. During GAO's site visits, these factors were routinely mentioned.
- DOD lacks metrics for measuring the effectiveness of its awareness campaigns. As a result, it does not know how to direct its resources most effectively.

Without sustained leadership and an oversight framework, DOD will remain unable to assess the effectiveness of its efforts to prevent and treat domestic abuse.