

## Why GAO Did This Study

For years, VA has struggled with an increasing workload of disability compensation claims. The average time to complete a claim was 188 days in fiscal year 2011, and VA expects an increase in claims received as 1 million servicemembers leave military service over the next 5 years. As GAO and other organizations have previously reported, VA has faced challenges in reducing the time it takes to decide veterans' claims. GAO was asked to review these issues. Specifically, this report examines (1) the factors that contribute to lengthy processing times for disability claims and appeals, and (2) the status of VBA's recent efforts to improve disability claims and appeals processing timeliness. To do this, GAO analyzed VBA performance data and program documents, reviewed relevant studies and evaluations, met with staff from five VA regional offices, and interviewed VBA officials and Veterans Service Organizations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VBA (1) partner with military officials to reduce timeframes to gather records from National Guard and Reserve sources, (2) partner with SSA to reduce timeframes to gather SSA medical records, and (3) ensure the development of a robust plan for its initiatives that identifies performance goals that include the impact of individual initiatives on processing timeliness. In response to a draft of this report, VA officials generally agreed with GAO's conclusions and concurred with the recommendations, and summarized efforts that are planned or underway to address the recommendations.

View [GAO-13-89](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov)

# VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

## Timely Processing Remains a Daunting Challenge

### What GAO Found

A number of factors—both external and internal to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)—have contributed to the increase in processing timeframes and subsequent growth in the backlog of veterans' disability compensation claims. As the population of new veterans has swelled in recent years, the annual number of claims received by VBA has gone up. Compared to the past, these claims have a higher number of disabling conditions, and some of these conditions, such as traumatic brain injuries, make their assessment complex. Moreover, due to new regulations that have established eligibility for benefits for new diseases associated with Agent Orange exposure, VBA adjudicated 260,000 previously denied and new claims. Beyond these external factors, issues with the design and implementation of the compensation program have contributed to timeliness challenges. For example, the law requires the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assist veterans in obtaining records that support their claim. However, VBA officials said that lengthy timeframes in obtaining military records—particularly for members of the National Guard and Reserve—and Social Security Administration (SSA) medical records impact VA's duty to assist, possibly delaying a decision on a veteran's disability claim. As a result, the evidence gathering phase of the claims process took an average of 157 days in 2011. Further, VBA's paper-based claims processing system involves multiple hand-offs, which can lead to misplaced and lost documents and can cause unnecessary time delays. Concerning timeliness of appeals, VBA regional offices have shifted resources away from appeals and toward claims in recent years, which has led to lengthy appeals timeframes.

VBA is currently taking steps to improve the timeliness of claims and appeals processing; however, prospects for improvement remain uncertain because timely processing remains a daunting challenge. VBA is using contractors to handle some aspects of the claims process, and is also shifting some workload between regional offices. Also, VBA is modifying and streamlining certain claims and appeals processing procedures for veterans who opt to participate in these initiatives in exchange for an expedited decision. For example, veterans receive expedited processing when they submit a claim that is certified as having all required evidence. Not many veterans have elected this option, but VA is making adjustments to increase its attractiveness. In addition, VBA is trying to decrease the amount of time it takes to gather medical evidence. For example, VBA recently encouraged medical providers to use a standardized form when responding to VBA's request for information. However, results of this initiative have been mixed. VBA is also taking steps to streamline the claims process, including implementing initiatives to create (1) standardized language for decision letters sent to veterans, (2) specialized teams that process claims based on level of complexity, and (3) a paperless claims system. According to VBA officials, these efforts will help VA process veterans' claims within 125 days by 2015. However, the extent to which VA is positioned to meet this ambitious goal remains uncertain. Specifically, VBA's backlog reduction plan—its key planning document—does not articulate performance measures for each initiative, including their intended impact on the claims backlog. Furthermore, VA has not yet reported on how these efforts have affected processing times, a condition which raises concern given the mixed results that have emerged to date.