

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans with disabilities face special challenges to finding employment—resulting, for example, from the veterans’ physical or mental health, or negative attitudes or stereotypes on the part of some employers. VA’s VR&E program aims to help veterans with disabilities obtain and maintain suitable employment—compatible with their disabilities—through services such as training and job search assistance. The VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 directed GAO to review the program. GAO examined (1) the outcomes for veterans seeking employment through the program, and (2) the progress VA has made in addressing critical management issues. GAO reviewed relevant laws, regulations, and guidance as well as recent studies; reviewed various program management criteria; analyzed VA administrative data on veterans who entered the program between fiscal years 2003 and 2012; interviewed staff at the VA central office and 8 regional offices; interviewed a random but non-generalizable sample of 17 program participants; and analyzed data from a VA survey of participants.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA reflect success rates in revised performance measures, ensure the reliability of its customer satisfaction survey results, re-visit its staff allocation formula, study staff assignments, and close certain gaps in its training for staff. In its comments, VA generally concurred with these recommendations and noted steps it plans to take to address them.

View [GAO-14-61](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov

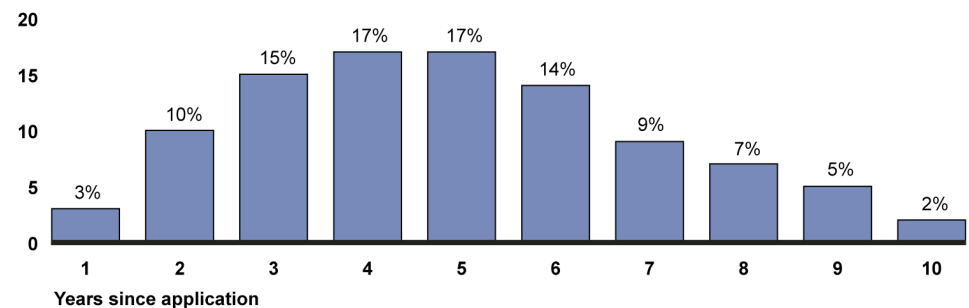
VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Further Performance and Workload Management Improvements Are Needed

What GAO Found

About half of the almost 17,000 veterans who entered the Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program in fiscal year 2003 and received employment-related services were placed in suitable jobs, one-third left the program, and most of the others are still participating. It often took veterans 6 years or more to achieve success (see figure), due in part to veterans often leaving the program temporarily. Interviews with VR&E staff and participants and administrative data GAO reviewed suggest veterans face numerous challenges that affect their ability to obtain employment, especially related to mental health conditions, working with multiple VR&E counselors over time, and civilian employers’ limited understanding of military work experience.

Time to Achieve Suitable Employment for Fiscal Year 2003 Applicants
Percentage of veterans



Source: GAO analysis of VA data.

VA has taken steps to improve VR&E performance management, workload management, and staff training, but weaknesses remain. With regard to performance management, VA has an ongoing initiative to revise its approach for measuring rehabilitation success at the individual employee, regional, and national levels. However, the new approach VA is considering for employees reflects only the number, not the rate of successful outcomes, and therefore would not provide sufficient context for understanding program success. VA has not yet developed its new approaches for assessing rehabilitation success regionally and nationally. Also, VA began surveying participants’ satisfaction with the program and plans to use the results to manage performance; while VA has generally followed good survey design practices, the agency has not fully assessed the reliability of early customer satisfaction results. In terms of workload management, VA has taken steps to reduce paperwork burdens on regional offices. However, several offices still reported heavy workloads and noted that VA’s formula for allocating staff among offices does not consider other staff duties affecting workloads, such as education counseling. In addition, VA has not studied the relative effectiveness and efficiency of regional offices’ approaches for assigning staff to manage workloads. Finally, with respect to training, VA has addressed redundancy and most gaps in training for VR&E staff, but gaps remain in the areas of job placement assistance and workplace accommodations.