

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-393](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Most veterans transition to civilian life trouble-free. For those who struggle with their transition to the point that they are arrested and jailed, VA created the VJO Program, which connects veterans with supports and services to help avoid re-incarceration. The program relies on VJO specialists to link veterans to treatment. GAO was asked to review the management of the VJO Program.

This report examines 1) how the program delivers services and the number and characteristics of veterans in the program, 2) the extent to which VA uses performance assessment of the program, and 3) the key challenges VA has identified and the extent to which VA has developed mitigation strategies. GAO obtained VA data on program participants for fiscal years 2012 through 2015; reviewed documents; interviewed VA officials and staff from nine areas served by a VA medical center and selected for their geographic diversity and differences in the structures of local criminal justice systems; and in three of the areas interviewed criminal justice system stakeholders and veterans. While information from these interviews cannot be generalized, they provide insights on program challenges and operations.

What GAO Recommends

To improve program management, VA should establish performance goals and measures and conduct a comprehensive risk assessment. In commenting on a draft of this report, VA agreed with the recommendations and discussed actions it plans to take to implement them.

View [GAO-16-393](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

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VETERANS JUSTICE OUTREACH PROGRAM

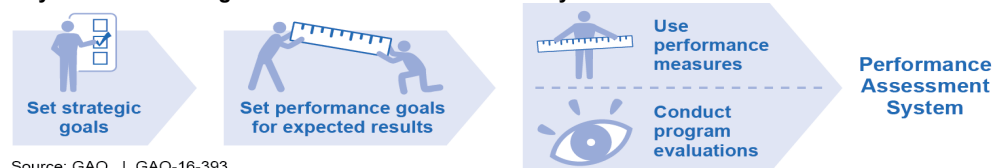
VA Could Improve Management by Establishing Performance Measures and Fully Assessing Risks

What GAO Found

The Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program—created by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)—operates through VA medical centers to provide services to veterans involved in local criminal justice systems, and in fiscal year 2015 served about 46,500 veterans, mostly men and many diagnosed with mental health or substance abuse problems. Officials from VA medical centers manage more than 260 VJO Program specialists who identify veterans in jails and local courts, assess their health and social needs, and link them to supports and services. VJO specialists monitor veterans' services and treatment in courts dedicated to veteran offenders. According to VA data, the number of veterans served by the program increased 72 percent from fiscal years 2012 - 2015. In addition, many veterans involved in the program were Post-9/11 veterans; about two-thirds were diagnosed with one or more mental health problems.

VA has taken some steps to incorporate a performance assessment system into the VJO Program, one component of effective program management (see figure). Specifically, VA developed strategic goals and plans to conduct evaluations. However, VA has not established performance goals with related targets, timeframes, and performance measures for any of the program's five broad strategic goals. VA officials told GAO they have not taken this step, in part, because VA medical centers have flexibility in determining the activities of VJO specialists. GAO's past work has highlighted strategies that agencies can use in this situation, such as developing measures based on common activities. Best practices call for agencies to establish performance goals and associated performance measures. Until VA incorporates performance goals and measures, it will lack a systematic way to obtain ongoing information to identify possible underperforming areas for improvements.

Key Elements of Program Performance Assessment Systems



Source: GAO. | GAO-16-393

VA identified several key challenges—most of which were related to the demand for services outpacing the program's resources—but has not fully developed appropriate mitigation strategies. One key challenge, for example, is addressing increased program demand as jail administrators more widely use VA's online system that better identifies incarcerated veterans. In addition, a major reason for the demand-resource imbalance is the heavier workload of VJO specialists serving veterans in an expanding number of courts dedicated to veterans, according to VA officials and stakeholders that GAO interviewed. However, GAO found that VA did not comprehensively identify and assess risks posed by each of the key challenges it identified, contrary to federal internal control standards. Absent a comprehensive risk assessment, VA is not well-positioned to develop appropriate strategies to mitigate the greatest risks, which may limit its ability to help justice-involved veterans receive assistance and avoid re-incarceration.