

## VETERANS HEALTH CARE

### Improvements Needed in Operationalizing Strategic Goals and Objectives

#### Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans' health care needs may change due to changes in veteran demographics and other factors. Strategic planning, including identifying mission, vision, goals, and objectives, and operationalizing strategies to achieve those goals and objectives are essential for VHA to establish its strategic direction to respond to these changing demands and provide care in a dynamic environment.

GAO was asked to review VHA's strategic planning. This report examines (1) VHA's strategic planning process and (2) the extent to which VHA operationalizes its strategic goals and objectives. GAO reviewed VHA strategic planning documents; and interviewed officials from VA and VHA central office, three VISNs selected to provide variation in geographic location, and nine VAMCs within these VISNs selected to provide variation in factors such as geographic location and facility complexity. GAO evaluated VHA's actions against federal standards for internal control and leading practices for strategic planning.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VHA (1) specify VAMCs' roles and responsibilities in operationalizing its strategic goals and objectives, (2) develop detailed strategies to operationalize its goals and objectives, and (3) develop an oversight process to assess progress made. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

#### What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) uses a multi-step strategic planning process to develop its strategic goals and objectives, which includes two key steps—(1) identifying and assessing factors that may affect health care delivery, which is referred to as environmental scanning, and (2) holding the annual National Leadership Council (NLC) Strategic Planning Summit—according to officials. VHA officials told GAO that they leverage VA's environmental scanning results in making decisions regarding VHA's strategic goals and objectives and that VA's central office has historically had a role in aspects of VHA's strategic planning process—such as participating in the NLC summit.

VHA relies on the VA medical centers (VAMC) that directly provide care to veterans and the Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN), regional entities to which the VAMCs report, to operationalize its strategic goals and objectives. However, certain limitations in VHA's processes hinder VISNs' and VAMCs' efforts in operationalizing these goals and objectives. Specifically,

- VHA has not specified VAMCs' role and responsibilities in its strategic planning guidance, as it has for VISNs. For example, VHA's directive for VISNs clearly states how VISN directors are to operationalize VHA's operational plans; no such directive exists for VAMC officials. Similarly, VHA provided VISNs a strategic planning guide for operationalizing its current strategic plan, but did not provide a similar guide to the VAMCs.
- VHA has not developed detailed strategies for VISNs and VAMCs to use in operationalizing all of its strategic goals and objectives. According to leading practices for strategic planning, strategies should describe how strategic goals and objectives are to be achieved, including a description of the operational processes, staff skills, technology and other resources required. In September 2014, VHA published the *Blueprint for Excellence* to provide strategies for transforming VHA health care service delivery in response to concerns regarding the VHA wait-time crisis that year. However, it did not develop similar strategy documents for other years or for the other goals and objectives in its strategic plan.
- VHA does not have an effective oversight process for ensuring and assessing the progress of VISNs and VAMCs in meeting VHA's strategic goals and objectives. According to VHA officials, VHA relies on two methods for assessing performance towards meeting selected strategic goals and objectives. Specifically, VHA uses VISN and VAMC directors' individual annual performance plans, as well as veteran survey information, to assess VHA's performance towards meeting certain metrics, such as improving veterans' access. However, it is unclear how these specific metrics are linked to assessing overall progress towards VHA's strategic goals and objectives. As a result, VHA may not know to what extent VISNs' and VAMCs' efforts to operationalize its goals and objectives are adequately addressing top management concerns or department-wide strategic goals.