

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-288](#), a report to congressional addresses

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans' access to timely health care at VA medical facilities has been a long-standing problem identified by GAO and VA's Office of Inspector General. The remote nature of the Pacific Islands creates some unique challenges for VAPIHCS, which may affect its ability to provide the approximately 50,000 veterans it serves in American Samoa, Guam, Hawaii, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands with timely access to primary, mental health, and specialty care.

House Report 114-497 included a provision for GAO to review VHA's efforts to provide timely access to health care within VAPIHCS. Among other things, this report examines: the extent to which the VAPIHCS veterans received (1) timely primary and mental health care, and (2) timely specialty care; and (3) any challenges VAPIHCS faced in recruiting and retaining physicians, and strategies to resolve them. GAO reviewed relevant policy documents and a randomly selected, non-generalizable sample of 164 medical records, and interviewed VHA, VAPIHCS, and DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes four recommendations, including that VAPIHCS improve monitoring of referrals to one DOD facility and evaluate the effectiveness of physician recruitment and retention strategies. VA concurred with three recommendations and partially concurred with the fourth. GAO maintains that monitoring referrals to the DOD facility is needed, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-18-288](#). For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov.

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VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

Opportunities Exist for Improving Veterans' Access to Health Care Services in the Pacific Islands

What GAO Found

For the sample of veterans' medical records that GAO reviewed, most veterans received primary and mental health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) within timeliness goals set by VA's Veterans Health Administration (VHA). However, GAO also found that some of these veterans experienced delays related to the processing of their enrollment applications, contacting them to schedule appointments, and completing comprehensive mental health evaluations. These delays were similar to some GAO had identified in previous work pertaining to veterans' access to care nationwide.

For the sample of veterans' medical records that GAO reviewed, VAPIHCS referred nearly all specialty care to non-VA providers within VHA's timeliness goal, but the time taken to provide care was variable and sometimes lengthy. Specifically, VAPIHCS sent specialty care referrals to

- the Veterans Choice Program (Choice Program)—for veterans that GAO reviewed, the number of days to receive care from the Choice Program was, on average, 75 days.
- Department of Defense (DOD) military treatment facilities—for veterans that GAO reviewed, the number of days to receive care from the two DOD facilities for which VAPIHCS has agreements was, on average, 37 days from one facility and 47 days from the other.

GAO identified weaknesses in VAPIHCS' management of its referral process for sending veterans for specialty care services at one of the two military treatment facilities. GAO found VAPIHCS did not always manage referrals to the military treatment facility in a timely way and there was inconsistent guidance describing the roles and responsibilities of the VAPIHCS staff involved in the process. These weaknesses may have contributed to the amount of time it took for veterans to receive specialty care services.

GAO also found that VAPIHCS faces challenges recruiting and retaining physicians. As of October 2017, 17 of approximately 100 VAPIHCS physician positions were vacant, as were several other types of health care providers. Some of the challenges VAPIHCS faced are unique to the Pacific Islands, such as the availability of only one local medical school from which to recruit, along with travel burdens and a high cost of living that may discourage physicians from relocating there. Other challenges were similar to those GAO has previously identified as faced by VA medical centers across the country, such as differences in interpretation of hiring and recruiting policies. VAPIHCS officials said they use several strategies to help recruit and retain physicians, including VHA strategies used by other VA medical centers such as financial incentives and an educational debt reduction program. Although they described limits to the success of some of these strategies, they have not evaluated their effectiveness. Without completing an evaluation of its strategies, VAPIHCS may not be optimizing its resources to improve its hiring efforts and may continue to struggle with physician shortages.