

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-623T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Health, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

As the demand for VHA's services grows—due, in part, to increasing demand from servicemembers returning from the United States' military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and the growing needs of an aging veteran population—attracting, hiring, and retaining top talent is critical to VHA's mission to provide high quality and timely care for the nation's veterans.

Physicians—who provide and supervise a broad range of care including primary and specialty care—serve an integral role in VHA's mission. Certain physician types are consistently among the most difficult to recruit and retain, and are thus considered mission-critical by VHA.

Over the past two decades, GAO and others have expressed concern about VHA's ability to ensure that it has the appropriate clinical workforce, including physicians, to meet the current and future needs of veterans.

This statement is based on GAO's October 2017 report and examines (1) VHA information on how many mission critical physicians provided care at VAMCs, (2) VHA guidance for determining its physician staffing needs, and (3) the strategies VHA used to support the recruitment and retention of physicians at VAMCs, and the extent to which it has evaluated these strategies to determine their effectiveness.

For this statement, GAO updated the information from its October 2017 report and obtained information from VHA officials in June 2018 about steps they have taken to implement the 2017 recommendations.

View [GAO-18-623T](#). For more information, contact Debra A. Draper, 202-512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov

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VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

Steps Taken to Improve Physician Staffing, Recruitment, and Retention, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) continues to face challenges related to physician staffing, recruitment, and retention, though it has begun work to implement recommendations made in GAO's October 2017 report. Specifically, GAO's report found the following:

- **VHA's data on the number of physicians that provided care at VA medical centers (VAMC) were incomplete.** GAO found that data were incomplete because they did not include data on the number of contract physicians and contained only limited data on the number of physician trainees—two types of physicians that augment the care provided by physicians employed by VHA. Thus, VHA data underestimated the total number of physicians providing care in its medical centers leaving it unable to ensure that its workforce planning processes sufficiently addressed gaps in staffing. GAO recommended that VHA implement a process to accurately count all its physicians. VHA did not concur with this recommendation, stating that it used other tools for workforce planning. VHA has since implemented a new human resources (HR) database—HR Smart—that has the capability to track each position at its VAMCs. However, VHA officials told us they do not plan to include information on physician contractors in this database.
- **VHA provided VAMCs with guidance on how to determine the number of physicians and support staff needed for some physician occupations, although it lacked sufficient guidance for its medical and surgical specialties.** GAO recommended that VHA issue guidance to VAMCs on determining appropriate staffing levels for all physicians. VHA concurred and reported it would develop staffing guidance for its medical and surgical specialties. VHA officials told GAO VHA signed a specialty care workgroup charter November 27, 2017; the primary goal of the workgroup was to develop a specialty care staffing model that would include staffing information for all specialty care. VHA anticipates completing its work and issuing staffing guidance by December 2018.
- **VHA used various strategies to recruit and retain its physician workforce, but had not comprehensively evaluated them to assess effectiveness.** Without such an evaluation, VHA did not have complete information on the underlying causes of the difficulties VAMCs face, or whether its recruitment and retention strategies were meeting physician workforce needs. GAO recommended VHA (1) establish a system-wide method to share information about physician trainees to help fill vacancies across VAMCs and (2) conduct a comprehensive, system-wide evaluation of VAMCs' physician recruitment and retention efforts and establish an ongoing monitoring program. VHA concurred and reported it has since taken steps to address the recommendations. For example, VHA's Office of Workforce Management and Consulting has partnered with its Partnered Evidence-based Policy Resource Center to evaluate and recommend a systematic approach for allocating workforce management resources. In addition, VHA has added the capability to track physician trainees to its HR Smart database. VHA expects to complete its efforts by September 2018 and September 2019, respectively.