

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-15](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, VBA processes more than 1 million disability compensation claims and provides about \$65 billion in benefits to veterans. The Jeff Miller and Richard Blumenthal Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2016 includes a provision for GAO to review VBA's regional offices to help VBA achieve more consistent performance in processing disability compensation claims.

This report examines (1) how VBA manages workload and performance for the disability compensation claims process, (2) how well VBA's timeliness and accuracy measures capture its regional offices' performance in processing these claims, and (3) how well selected regional offices communicate with VSOs and congressional caseworkers about these claims. GAO reviewed VBA policies and procedures; visited four regional offices selected to represent a range of performance scores and claims processing volume in fiscal year 2017; and interviewed VBA headquarters officials and management and staff from the selected regional offices. GAO also interviewed VSOs and congressional caseworkers—selected for House, Senate, and bipartisan representation—to learn more about their communication with VBA.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to VBA to clarify guidance for correcting errors, develop and implement measures to better assess timeliness and accuracy at regional offices, and evaluate communication with VSOs and caseworkers. The Department of Veterans Affairs concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-19-15](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

October 2018

VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

Better Measures Needed to Assess Regional Office Performance in Processing Claims

What GAO Found

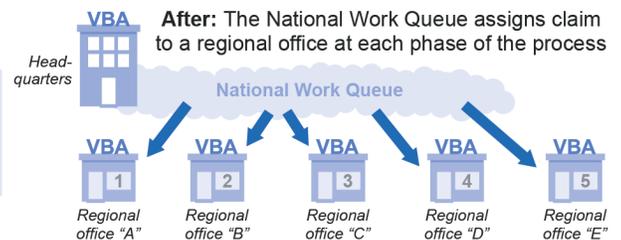
In 2016, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) centralized distribution of the disability compensation claims workload through the National Work Queue, which prioritizes and distributes claims to regional offices based on their capacity; however, there are gaps in VBA's guidance for processing claims with errors. Under the National Work Queue, multiple regional offices can work on a single claim instead of the claim remaining at one office for the duration of processing (see figure). GAO found gaps in guidance about whether a claims processor should fix an error made by another regional office, or return the claim to that office to be corrected. The former could result in missed opportunities to train staff who made the error, while the latter could result in processing delays.

VBA Disability Claims Workload Distribution Before and After the National Work Queue

Before: All five phases of a claim handled by a single regional office



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) procedures. | GAO-19-15



VBA primarily uses timeliness and accuracy measures to assess its regional offices' performance in processing disability compensation claims, but these measures do not adequately capture performance. The timeliness measure can be skewed because it is a snapshot of how long claims have been pending at an office on the last day of the month, and does not capture performance over a period of time. The accuracy measure is attributed to the office that finishes the claim, even though 88 percent of claims completed in fiscal year 2017 were processed at more than one office. VBA officials acknowledged that these measures are limited and said the agency is exploring alternatives, but VBA has no specific plan or time frame for determining and implementing new measures. Without measures to more accurately assess regional office performance, VBA may be limited in its ability to make efficient and effective decisions.

Veterans service organizations (VSO) and staff working for Members of Congress (congressional caseworkers) interviewed by GAO were generally satisfied with regional office communication regarding disability compensation claims. However, VBA's policy on whom VSOs should contact during different points in the process did not always align with what occurs at the offices we visited or with VSO needs. This could result in VSOs not receiving consistent and timely responses from VBA. Evaluating this policy could help VBA assist VSOs in better serving veterans. In addition, congressional caseworkers GAO interviewed identified ways that communication could be improved or that additional support could be provided, such as a list of contacts at all regional offices for claim inquiries. VBA officials GAO interviewed described an open-door policy through which they may receive feedback from caseworkers, but the agency does not formally solicit periodic feedback from them. Without such feedback, the agency may miss opportunities to identify and address caseworker communication needs that could help them better serve veterans.