

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-618](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2011, the VA Family Caregiver Program has provided assistance to caregivers of seriously injured post-9/11 veterans at VAMCs nationwide. However, GAO previously reported that some VAMCs have struggled to manage the program's workload. The VA MISSION Act of 2018 requires the expansion of program eligibility to veterans of all eras contingent upon implementation and certification of a new IT system.

The VA MISSION Act included a provision for GAO to review VA's efforts to implement a new IT system. GAO was also asked to examine staffing for the program. This report examines the extent to which VA 1) has established staffing requirements and has data to track program staffing; 2) monitors whether VAMCs are meeting departmental requirements for application review timeliness and required contacts; and 3) has implemented an IT system that fully supports the program. GAO reviewed program documentation and data. GAO also interviewed VHA officials and officials from four VAMCs and their VISNs that varied in their numbers of applications and approved caregivers. GAO also interviewed OIT officials and reviewed documentation related to their efforts to acquire and develop an IT system for the program.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to VA to collect complete staffing data, establish a process to ensure the data are accurate, and establish an interim method for collecting system-wide data on required contacts and visits. VA concurred with all three recommendations.

View [GAO-19-618](#). For more information, contact Sharon M. Silas at (202) 512-7114 or silass@gao.gov or Carol C. Harris at (202) 512-4456 or harriscc@gao.gov.

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VA HEALTH CARE

Actions Needed to Improve Family Caregiver Program

What GAO Found

Within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has established staffing requirements for its Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (Family Caregiver Program) that allow for variation, but its staffing data are not complete or accurate. VHA requires its local VA medical centers (VAMC) to have at least one Caregiver Support Coordinator to manage the program. Otherwise, VAMCs have flexibility in determining the additional staff needed. VHA's Caregiver Support Program Office funds most Family Caregiver Program staff at VAMCs. VAMCs also may fund additional program staff or have other VAMC staff assist the program as a collateral duty, but GAO found that the program office only tracks the staff it has funded. GAO also identified discrepancies between the number of staff it observed at selected VAMCs and the program office's staffing data. Without complete and accurate staffing data, the program office does not have reliable information about the program's current staffing levels, which could hamper its efforts to project needed staff when the program's eligibility is expanded.

The program office routinely monitors VAMCs' performance in meeting departmental timeliness requirements for reviewing enrollment applications for the Family Caregiver Program. However, it is not able to monitor whether VAMCs are completing required quarterly contacts and annual home visits to enrolled caregivers and veterans. The Family Caregiver Program's current information technology (IT) system—the Caregiver Application Tracker (CAT)—has limited reporting capabilities and cannot provide system-wide data on the completion of these contacts and visits even though this information is documented in CAT. GAO found that some VAMCs and the regional Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) that oversee them use spreadsheets to track the completion of these requirements, but the program office does not collect these data. Without system-wide data on contacts and visits, the program office is limited in its ability to monitor and identify when VAMCs may need additional staff to meet these requirements, including once the program's eligibility is expanded.

VA has yet to implement a new IT system that fully supports the Family Caregiver Program as required by the VA MISSION Act. VHA and the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) have been working jointly on projects since 2015 to improve and replace CAT. However, two of these projects were terminated without delivering viable software improvements or a replacement system. According to two independent assessments, these prior efforts lacked both effective leadership and implementation of the processes needed for requirements management. VA has asserted that its third project, in which OIT and VHA have begun to acquire and implement a commercial product to replace CAT, will take steps to avoid the issues that have impacted its past efforts. However, the initial replacement for CAT is not expected until late October 2019. Further, despite this initial deployment and additional releases expected through the summer of 2020, the department has not yet fully committed to a date by which it will certify that the new IT system fully supports the program. Until the system is implemented and certified, the expansion of eligibility for the Family Caregiver Program will be delayed.