

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-620](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Of the roughly 1 million disability claims VBA processed in fiscal year 2019, 18,287 were for veterans living abroad. Veterans living abroad are entitled to the same disability benefits as those living domestically, but GAO previously reported that veterans living abroad may not be able to access disability medical exams as readily as their domestic counterparts. VBA uses medical exam reports to help determine if a veteran should receive disability benefits. GAO was asked to review the disability claims and exam processes for veterans living abroad.

Among other things, this report examines disability claims trends for veterans living abroad and these veterans' ability to access quality disability medical exams. GAO analyzed VBA claims data for fiscal years 2014 to 2019; assessed data reliability; reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, policies, and contract documents; and interviewed employees of VBA, State, and other stakeholders.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that VBA assess the quality of embassy-referred exams, VBA and VHA assess whether to reimburse beneficiaries for travel to disability medical exams in foreign countries, and that VBA and VHA pay examiners located by embassy staff electronically. The Department of Veterans Affairs concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-20-620](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda at (202) 512-7215 or [curdae@gao.gov](mailto:curdae@gao.gov).

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## VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

### VA Should Continue to Improve Access to Quality Disability Medical Exams for Veterans Living Abroad

## What GAO Found

The number of disability claims for veterans living abroad—in foreign countries or U.S. territories—increased 14 percent from fiscal years 2014 to 2019. During this time period, claims processing time frames improved. In fiscal year 2019, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) approved comparable percentages of disability claims for veterans living abroad and domestically—63 percent and 64 percent respectively. However, for a subset of these claims—those where veterans likely received a disability medical exam scheduled by Department of State (State) embassy staff—approval rates were often lower.

Veterans' access to disability medical exams abroad improved as VBA has increasingly relied on contracted examiners, rather than embassy-referred examiners, to conduct these exams. According to VBA, this shift expanded the pool of trained examiners abroad and increased the frequency and depth of VBA's quality reviews for contract exams. These quality reviews help VBA and its contractor identify and address common errors, according to VBA and contractor officials. However, several factors continue to limit some veterans' ability to access quality disability medical exams (see figure).

### Factors That Impair the Access of Veterans Living Abroad to Quality Disability Medical Exams



#### Unknown Quality of Certain Exams

Quality of exams scheduled by embassy staff is unknown



#### Travel reimbursement

Not allowable for disability medical exams in foreign countries, as it is in the United States, including U.S. territories.



#### Examiner reimbursement

Provided via paper checks in U.S. currency

Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-20-620

**Unknown quality of certain exams:** A subset of veterans living abroad receive disability medical exams from an embassy-referred provider. VBA does not systematically assess the quality of these exams. Without doing so, VBA cannot determine if such exams affect the approval rates of veterans who receive them or contribute to longer processing times and are unable to make informed decisions about their use.

**Travel reimbursement:** Under current VA regulations, VA is not authorized to reimburse veterans for travel expenses for certain services incurred in foreign countries as it is for those incurred within the United States, including U.S. territories. Consequently, some veterans living in foreign countries may be unable to afford to travel to exams.

**Examiner reimbursement:** The Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Foreign Medical Program reimburses examiners referred by embassy staff via paper checks in U.S. currency. These checks may be slow to arrive and not accepted by foreign banks, according to State and other officials and staff we interviewed. Such payment issues can deter examiners from being willing to conduct disability medical exams and thus limit veterans' access to these exams in foreign countries.