Improvements Needed to Help Ensure Timely Access to Care

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) established an appointment scheduling process for the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP) that allows up to 19 days to complete several steps from VA providers creating a referral to community care staff reviewing that referral. However, as the figure shows, VA has not specified the maximum amount of time veterans should have to wait to receive care through the program. GAO previously recommended in 2013 the need for an overall wait-time measure for veterans to receive care under a prior VA community care program. Subsequent to VA not implementing this recommendation, GAO again recommended in 2018 that VA establish an achievable wait-time goal as part of its new community care program (the VCCP).

Potential Allowable Wait Time to Obtain Care through the Veterans Community Care Program

Note: This figure illustrates potential allowable wait times in calendar days for eligible veterans who are referred to the VCCP through routine referrals (non-emergent), and have VA medical center staff—Referral Coordination Team (RCT) and community care staff (CC staff)—schedule the appointments on their behalf.

VA has not yet implemented GAO’s 2018 recommendation that VA establish an achievable wait-time goal. Under the VA MISSION Act, VA is assigned responsibility for ensuring that veterans’ appointments are scheduled in a timely manner—an essential component of quality health care. Given VA’s lack of action over the prior 7 years implementing wait-time goals for various community care programs, congressional action is warranted to help achieve timely health care for veterans.

Regarding monitoring of the initial steps of the scheduling process, GAO found that VA is using metrics that are remnants from the previous community care program, which are inconsistent with the time frames established in the VCCP scheduling process. This limits VA’s ability to determine the effectiveness of the VCCP and to identify areas for improvement.