COVID-19

DOD Has Focused on Strategy and Oversight to Protect Military Servicemember Health

What GAO Found

Since January 2020, the Department of Defense (DOD) has developed a strategy to protect the health of military servicemembers from COVID-19, with a goal of minimizing risks while continuing operations. The strategy tailors protection measures to local conditions and risks to health and force readiness. GAO found that DOD’s strategy applies several key considerations.

DOD Application of Key Considerations to Protect Servicemembers from COVID-19

- Prioritize leadership attention and continuous communication across the organization
- Make decisions about reentry based on local conditions
- Identify mission-essential functions and employees, and classify their exposure risk level
- Implement social distancing and other appropriate protection measures
- Establish COVID-19 testing protocols
- Establish protocols to prioritize and distribute antivirals and vaccines

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) documents and interviews with DOD officials. | GAO-21-321

DOD officials oversee the implementation of the department’s COVID-19 health protection strategy for servicemembers through:

- **Sustained leadership attention.** In January 2020, the Secretary of Defense initiated COVID-19 planning and established a senior task force to oversee the response. Combatant command and installation officials continuously evaluate regional and local implementation and perform compliance checks. Notwithstanding these efforts, DOD officials stated that they expect some limited incidents of personnel not following protocols.

- **Data monitoring.** Senior leaders and local commanders assess data on cases, community spread, and testing, among other metrics, to inform strategy implementation and assess its effectiveness.

- **Lessons learned analyses.** While these analyses are ongoing as the pandemic continues, DOD has implemented mitigations to address some challenges identified, such as a new system to collect more timely and specific COVID-19 case data.

DOD has research and development projects underway to advance COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics and improve detection methods. DOD’s investments include many projects that have specific applications for servicemembers, such as pre- and postexposure prophylactic treatments to prevent the onset of the disease.