

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-348](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2019, VBA processed over 1.4 million claims for disability compensation and provided about \$88 billion in benefits to veterans injured in service to their country. Claims processors receive training to help them determine veterans' eligibility for these benefits.

GAO was asked to review VBA's management of training for disability claims processors. This report examines the extent to which VBA applied relevant leading practices identified by GAO for planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating training, among other objectives.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, policies, and training materials; assessed VBA's efforts against relevant leading practices for training in the federal government; and interviewed officials from VBA headquarters and managers and claims processors at four regional offices, selected for variation on office size, region, and claims workload.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 10 recommendations, including that VBA establish an integrated and comprehensive plan and performance goals for its training program; document and use criteria to inform its selection of training delivery mechanisms; develop policies to monitor compliance with required training; collect and incorporate stakeholder feedback; and evaluate training on a recurring basis. VA generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-21-348](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

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VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

Veterans Benefits Administration Could Enhance Management of Claims Processor Training

What GAO Found

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has over 9,000 employees who process veterans' claims for disability compensation. To ensure claims processors have the skills needed to handle disability claims efficiently and effectively, training is a key strategy. Training is particularly important as VBA hires more staff and implements new initiatives.

GAO assessed VBA's training program for disability claims processors against leading practices for training related to planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. GAO found that VBA partially applied these leading practices.

- **Planning.** VBA's planning included some efforts to determine the skills and competencies needed for a trained workforce to process claims, consistent with leading practices. However, it lacks an integrated and comprehensive plan to ensure training improves individual and agency performance. Specifically, VBA's planning has not been guided by training program goals or a governance structure that sets priorities with a strategic focus on how efforts will contribute to results. Instead, VBA has used a project-by-project planning approach.
- **Design.** In designing its training program, VBA has used a variety of training delivery mechanisms, consistent with leading practices. For example, mechanisms include self-paced and instructor-led classroom training and software to manage and deliver training. However, VBA lacks criteria to inform its selection of the most appropriate mechanism to deliver each course.
- **Implementation.** Regional offices and VBA headquarters work together to deliver training, per leading practices. However, VBA's policies to monitor the extent to which claims processors have received required training are incomplete. Specifically, it lacks policies requiring VBA to identify and correct deficiencies in completing annual training for experienced claims processors.
- **Evaluation.** VBA collects and incorporates some stakeholder feedback about training and recently finalized plans to evaluate certain training, consistent with leading practices. However, VBA's efforts do not include key stakeholder perspectives, such as those of experienced staff and their supervisors, and VBA does not have policies to ensure evaluations are consistently planned and conducted. GAO's prior work indicates that evaluation has been a consistent gap in VBA's management of training.

VBA officials described several challenges to fully applying leading practices for planning, such as other higher priorities and the frequency with which the agency is tasked with urgent or emerging training needs. VBA also stated that it has some specific strategies in place to guide training efforts, such as setting annual training requirements. Nevertheless, fully applying leading practices for training would provide VBA greater assurance that its workforce is sufficiently skilled to efficiently and effectively process disability claims and provides high-quality service to veterans.