

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-65](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

At a time when student loan debt continues to mount for many, the PSLF program—established in 2007 and administered by Education—is intended to encourage individuals to pursue careers in public service.

Senate Report 116-48 included a provision for GAO to study the effectiveness of the PSLF program at promoting military and civilian recruitment and retention as well as military readiness. GAO's report assesses the extent to which (1) DOD personnel pursue and receive loan forgiveness through the PSLF program, (2) Education has shared information with DOD officials and its military and civilian personnel about the program, and (3) DOD uses the program for recruitment and retention to promote readiness.

GAO analyzed student loan data from Education and the PSLF servicer from the beginning of the program through January 2020; reviewed relevant laws, documents, and other information related to PSLF, benefits, recruitment, retention, and readiness; and interviewed DOD and Education officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to increase information sharing about the PSLF program. These include that DOD provide information to its personnel and issue guidance to its officials about the program, and that Education and DOD collaborate to share information about the program. Education concurred and DOD partially concurred with the recommendations, which GAO continues to believe are valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-21-65](#). For more information, contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8416 or ShermanT@gao.gov or Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or EmreyArrasM@gao.gov.

April 2021

PUBLIC SERVICE LOAN FORGIVENESS

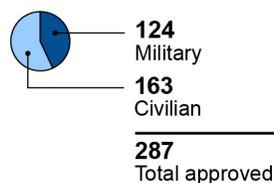
DOD and Its Personnel Could Benefit from Additional Program Information

What GAO Found

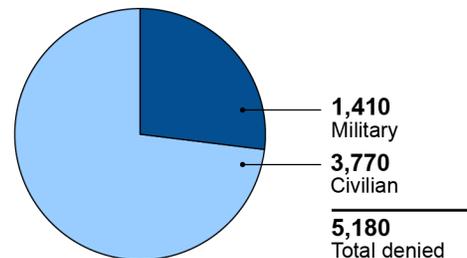
Personnel in the Department of Defense (DOD)—including service members and civilian employees—may be eligible for federal student loan forgiveness through the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program if they remain in public service employment for 10 years while making 120 qualifying loan payments, among other requirements. As of January 2020, Department of Education (Education) data show that 287 DOD borrowers received loan forgiveness, while 5,180 DOD borrowers (about 94 percent) were denied (see figure). The most common reasons for the denials were not enough qualifying payments and missing information on the form. GAO previously reported in September 2019 an overall denial rate of 99 percent for all PSLF applications submitted by borrowers. More information from DOD could help potential applicants be aware of all eligibility requirements.

Number of Department of Defense (DOD) Personnel Approved or Denied for Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF), as of January 31, 2020

Number of DOD borrowers approved for forgiveness:



Number of DOD borrowers with a denied PSLF application:



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data. | [GAO-21-65](#)

Note: The "Civilian" categories include all civilian employees within DOD, including the military services.

As its administrator, Education has specialized knowledge about the PSLF program but has not shared complete information with DOD. Education officials have not shared with DOD summary information about its personnel who have taken steps to pursue PSLF or service members who may be eligible. Education officials also stated they have not shared the benefits of using the PSLF program together with DOD's student loan repayment program. Education officials have also not updated the student loan guide for service members with specific information on PSLF. Education could take additional steps to improve information sharing about PSLF with DOD personnel. DOD officials expressed interest in obtaining more program information. Collaboration among the departments and updated program information could help DOD officials and its personnel to take full advantage of PSLF.

DOD does not widely use the PSLF program for recruitment and retention to promote readiness despite facing challenges in certain specialty career fields. Some DOD officials we interviewed stated that they preferred to use other DOD benefits and incentives that DOD directly controls, such as bonuses or DOD's student loan repayment program. DOD could enhance its recruitment and retention efforts to promote readiness with department-wide and service-specific guidance about how the PSLF program could be used as a tool for such efforts.