

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104488](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2021, VBA provided over \$112 billion in disability compensation to approximately 5.6 million veterans and their families. Over the past decade, VBA has taken steps aimed at improving its disability compensation program. GAO's prior work has shown that effective agency reforms depend on following leading practices, such as establishing outcome-oriented goals. GAO was asked to review VBA's implementation of reforms to improve its disability compensation program.

This report identifies reforms VBA has undertaken, examines the extent to which five selected VBA reforms followed leading reform practices, and reviews how VBA has managed the overall set of reforms.

GAO reviewed relevant documents, interviewed VA officials, and randomly selected five reforms based on criteria such as the number of VA offices involved and milestones completed. GAO compared the agency's efforts to relevant leading practices for effective agency reforms and managing portfolios of projects, and federal standards for internal control.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that VBA take additional actions to fully follow leading practices where needed for the selected reforms; designate a centralized leadership team to oversee VBA's many reforms; and develop a policy describing the leading practices that VA officials should follow when undertaking reforms. VA generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-22-104488](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

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VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

Compensation Program Could Be Strengthened by Consistently Following Leading Reform Practices

What GAO found

GAO identified 23 reforms the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) implemented that were aimed at improving its disability compensation program and were underway from fiscal years 2017 through 2020.

GAO's review of five of these reforms found that VBA did not consistently follow relevant leading practices for effective reforms that GAO has identified in prior work, such as establishing outcome-oriented goals and implementation plans, involving key stakeholders, and using data and evidence to justify the reform.

Extent to Which Five Randomly Selected VBA Efforts to Reform the Disability Compensation Program Followed Relevant Leading Reform Practices

Reform practices:	Duty to assist initiative	Eliminate 48-hour VSO review period	Develop Exam Management System	Initial claims predictive models	Specialized military sexual trauma teams
Establishing goals and outcomes	●	◐	◐	●	◐
Involving key stakeholders and employees	●	◐	◐	●	◐
Using data and evidence	●	◐	●	●	●
Addressing high risk and longstanding challenges	●	N/A	●	●	○
Leadership focus and attention	●	●	●	●	◐
Managing and monitoring	●	◐	◐	●	◐
Employee performance management	●	N/A	●	N/A	◐

Legend: ● Generally followed ◐ Partially followed ○ Not followed N/A = Does not apply

VSO = Veterans Service Organization

Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) documentation and interviews. | GAO-22-104488

GAO found that VBA has managed its reforms on a project-by-project basis. VBA officials told GAO they do not manage reforms as a whole because they addressed diverse issues that have arisen over time. As a result, VBA had not compiled or tracked reforms or had a method to prioritize or oversee these efforts. Moving forward, as VBA continues to plan and implement reforms, designating a centralized leadership team may help VBA to track, prioritize, and oversee ongoing and new reforms aimed at improving the disability compensation program. Also, VBA could be better positioned to effectively implement such reforms by developing a policy that comprehensively describes leading practices that its managers should follow when undertaking these efforts.