

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104620](#), a report to the Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Health, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans reach out to VHA's contact centers via phone, video, and chat to access needed health care services. Historically, these contact centers provided services inconsistently to veterans and operated generally under local oversight. The COVID-19 pandemic saw veterans increasingly reach out to contact centers, which highlighted a need for VHA to examine them.

GAO was asked to review several aspects of clinical contact center operations and oversight. This report examines (1) VHA's modernization planning and (2) VHA's guidance to networks related to assessing contact centers' performance, among other things.

GAO reviewed Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) modernization documents and interviewed officials from OVAC; VA's Office of Information and Technology; VA's Veterans Experience Office; and six networks, selected for variation in geography and their reported progress in implementing the modernization effort.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that VHA (1) update and share a schedule for the Clinical Contact Center Modernization effort beyond December 31, 2021; and provide networks with (2) guidance identifying finalized performance metrics and targets, and (3) guidance defining networks' performance assessment roles and responsibilities. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations and identified actions it is taking to address them.

View [GAO-22-104620](#). For more information, contact Sharon M. Silas at (202) 512-7114 or silass@gao.gov.

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VA HEALTH CARE

Clinical Contact Center Modernization Could Benefit from a Shared Schedule and Additional Guidance to Networks

What GAO Found

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) initiated the Clinical Contact Center Modernization effort in May 2020. Through the effort, VHA aims to improve veterans' access to virtual care and standardize operations of clinical contact centers (contact centers), such as services offered, staffing, training, and how performance is assessed.

VHA's Office of Veterans Access to Care (OVAC)—which is leading the modernization effort—has taken several steps in planning for the modernization effort. One of these steps includes setting a milestone of December 31, 2021, for each of its Veterans Integrated Service Networks to establish a contact center that provides four core services (see table). Officials from six selected networks stated they anticipated meeting this date. OVAC officials stated that modernization is an ongoing effort, and they are working to possibly enhance the four core services with additional capabilities, such as mental health care, in the future. Moving forward, OVAC and networks could benefit from having a shared schedule that includes milestones, activities, and related timelines for networks implementing any future changes. For example, a schedule would provide a shared sequence of events that could help networks better prioritize modernization activities.

Core Services That Veterans Integrated Service Networks Are Expected to Offer by December 31, 2021, as Part of VHA's Clinical Contact Center Modernization Effort

Core service	Veterans should be able to
Primary care scheduling and administration	Schedule, reschedule, and cancel appointments; and obtain information about VHA services.
Clinical triage	Discuss symptoms and concerns, and receive recommendations on the best course of action.
Primary care virtual clinic visits	Meet virtually with providers to discuss health care needs.
Pharmacy	Request and track the status of medication refills and renewals; and ask medication-related questions.

Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) guidance | GAO 22-104620

Additionally, OVAC has not developed certain guidance, which may hinder its ability to assess contact centers' performance in providing services, including

- Finalized performance metrics and targets that would clearly define performance expectations for centers and allow OVAC to assess center performance in a standardized way.
- Finalized networks' roles and responsibilities for assessing performance.

According to OVAC officials, upgrades to contact centers' telephone and quality management systems are important components of the modernization effort because they will provide data for assessing center performance. For example, the upgraded telephone system will provide data on call queues for helping to determine staff productivity. Officials told GAO that once the upgrades are fully implemented, which they anticipated would be completed in December 2021, they would have the data they need to finalize performance metrics and targets and define responsibilities for performance assessment. By providing additional guidance to networks, VHA may be able to improve its oversight of centers and determine if centers' performance is improving—two intended benefits of the modernization effort.