

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent USDA data indicate that veterans experience high rates of food insecurity, which can contribute to many negative health outcomes. GAO was asked to review VA's efforts to support veterans who may be experiencing food insecurity and the extent to which USDA coordinates with VA to support these veterans.

This report examines (1) how VA identifies and assists veterans who may be experiencing food insecurity and the extent to which it monitors and assesses the effectiveness of these efforts, and (2) the extent to which USDA coordinates with VA to support those veterans. GAO reviewed relevant VA and USDA initiatives and interviewed key officials responsible for administering these initiatives in addition to veterans' service organizations, among others. GAO assessed VA's process for monitoring and evaluating its efforts in accordance with federal standards for internal control and the extent to which USDA is coordinating with VA in accordance with leading collaboration practices, based on prior work. GAO also conducted virtual site visits to three VA medical centers that were selected to represent a range of criteria including a large number of positive screenings for food insecurity.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations including that VA monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its Workgroup's efforts and that USDA take steps to enhance collaboration in its workgroup with VA. VA concurred and said it would monitor and evaluate its workgroup. USDA also concurred.

View [GAO-22-104740](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Federal Agencies Should Improve Oversight and Better Collaborate on Efforts to Support Veterans with Food Insecurity

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken several actions to identify veterans who may be experiencing food insecurity—which the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines as the condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food—and refer them for assistance, but has not fully monitored or evaluated the effectiveness of these efforts. In 2016, VA established its Ensuring Veteran Food Security Workgroup (Workgroup), which is led by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). VHA has taken several actions through the Workgroup to address food insecurity among veterans. For example, VHA is using a two-question screening tool to identify and refer veterans who may be food insecure to a social worker, dietitian, or other VA medical center staff (see figure). Veterans who screen “positive” are referred to support and resources they need, which could include a referral to a local food bank. In addition, VHA has trained VA medical center staff on the use of the tool and how to enroll veterans in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. However, VA has not fully monitored the implementation or evaluated the effectiveness of these efforts, which is inconsistent with federal internal control standards and may hinder VHA's ability to achieve its defined outcomes and result in fewer veterans receiving the support they need.

Example of VHA Food Insecurity Screening Tool Record

FOOD INSECURITY SCREEN: This screen is not intended for a resident of a nursing home/LTC facility.
INSTRUCTIONS: Read the following introduction to the Veteran:

I'm going to read you two statements that people have made about their food situation. For each statement, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last 12 months.

Within the past 12 months, you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more.

Often true
 Sometimes true
 Never true

Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn't last and you didn't have money to get more.

Often true
 Sometimes true
 Never true

Source: Veterans Health Administration (VHA) documentation. | GAO-22-104740

USDA began leading an informal interagency workgroup (workgroup) with VA in 2020 to help address food insecurity among veterans, but it has not fully addressed leading practices for collaboration and cannot fully assess its progress in accomplishing related goals. USDA established the workgroup to, among other things, enhance support for veterans experiencing food insecurity. USDA has taken steps to collaborate with VA through this workgroup, for example, by developing nutritional resources that include common definitions of food insecurity. Developing such resources is consistent with one of GAO's leading collaboration practices. However, USDA did not follow other collaboration practices, including those related to outcomes and accountability. By taking steps to address other leading practices in its workgroup, such as through identifying clear goals that establish organizational outcomes and developing mechanisms for accountability, USDA could enhance collaboration with VA to better support veterans' food insecurity.