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

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.