VETERANS COMMUNITY CARE PROGRAM

VA Should Improve Its Ability to Identify Ineligible Health Care Providers

What GAO Found

GAO found vulnerabilities in the controls used by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and its contractors to identify health care providers who are not eligible to participate in the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP), resulting in the inclusion of potentially ineligible providers.

Examples of Requirements of and Restrictions on Veterans Community Care Program

Provider Eligibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Providers must</th>
<th>Providers must not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have an active, unrestricted medical license in the state in which services will be provided</td>
<td>Be excluded from participation in a federal health care program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certify that no state has terminated a license, registration, or certification for cause</td>
<td>Be convicted of a felony or other serious state or federal offense, if the VA determines that participation would be detrimental to veterans or the agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of over 800,000 providers assessed, GAO identified approximately 1,600 VCCP providers who were ineligible to work with the federal government, were reported as deceased, or had revoked or suspended medical licenses. For example, GAO identified a provider eligible for referrals in the VHA system but whose medical license had been revoked in 2019. Licensing documents stated that the provider posed a clear and immediate danger to public health and safety.

VHA and its contractors had controls in place to identify such providers. However, the existing controls missed some providers who could have been identified with enhanced controls and more consistent implementation of standard operating procedures. For example, GAO found that VHA did not perform some automated checks on a monthly basis as required by the agency’s standard operating procedures.

GAO also identified weaknesses in oversight of provider address data. Some VCCP providers used commercial mail receiving addresses, such as a United Parcel Service (UPS) store, as their only service address. Such addresses could be disguised as business addresses by individuals intending to commit fraud. VHA has not assessed the fraud risk that invalid address data pose to the program.

While the number of potentially ineligible providers GAO identified represents a relatively small fraction of the providers in its analysis, these vulnerabilities put veterans at risk of receiving care from unqualified providers. Additionally, VHA is at risk of fraudulent activity, as some of the providers GAO identified had previous convictions of health-care fraud.