



January 2023

VETERANS BENEFITS

VA Could Enhance
Outreach for Its Solid
Start Program by
Increasing
Collaboration with
Veterans
Organizations

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105699](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Many new veterans face significant difficulties reintegrating into civilian life during their first year of separation from service. Younger veterans, the population that includes more veterans who recently transitioned, experience higher rates of suicide than other veterans, according to VA. VA's Solid Start program was launched in 2019 to help connect new veterans to their benefits and other available supports.

GAO was asked to review VA's Solid Start program. This report examines (1) how VA implemented and monitors the Solid Start program, and (2) any outreach challenges for Solid Start and how VA addressed them. GAO reviewed relevant VA documentation on program implementation, monitoring, participation metrics, and evaluation plans and interviewed VA officials. GAO also interviewed officials from seven veterans organizations to obtain their perspective on any Solid Start outreach challenges. Veterans organizations were selected for diversity in number and types of constituents served, and based on the organizations' previous engagement with the Solid Start program.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making one recommendation to VA, to further collaborate with veterans organizations in identifying and addressing outreach gaps, and assessing Solid Start outreach strategies for hard-to-reach groups of veterans. VA agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-23-105699](#). For more information, contact Dawn Locke at 202-512-7215 or locked@gao.gov.

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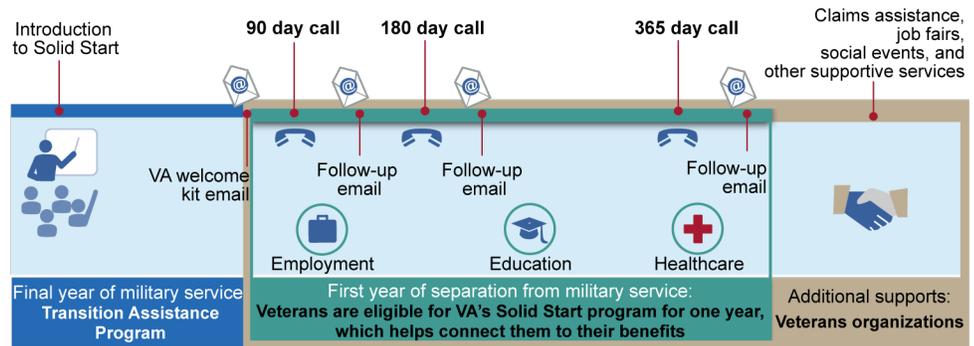
VETERANS BENEFITS

VA Could Enhance Outreach for Its Solid Start Program by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has implemented Solid Start—an outreach program to help support the well-being of new veterans—by proactively phoning all eligible veterans three times during their first year after separation. During phone calls, Solid Start representatives inform veterans of specific VA benefits based on their needs and interests, such as education and employment counseling. Once representatives speak with the veteran, they follow up with a personalized email with more information (see figure).

Examples of Supports for New Veterans, Including Solid Start Communication Milestones



Source: GAO summary of documentation and interviews with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). | GAO-23-105699

Note: The Transition Assistance Program, with limited exceptions, is a mandatory program that helps separating service members prepare for their transition to civilian life. For the Solid Start program, if VA Solid Start representatives speak with a veteran, they send a personalized follow-up email. General informational emails are also sent throughout the year of eligibility. VA continues to offer benefits and resources to veterans after the first year of separation. Veterans organizations are non-governmental organizations that assist veterans with a range of services.

VA monitors Solid Start's performance by tracking the percentage of answered calls and analyzing whether veterans who were successfully contacted used a greater number of benefits than those who were not contacted. In 2021, representatives successfully contacted about 71 percent of eligible veterans. VA's analysis showed these veterans used benefits, such as VA health care, to a greater extent than their peers who did not speak with a Solid Start representative. Solid Start had less success in reaching veterans under age 23.

All seven veterans organizations GAO spoke with identified outreach challenges in two areas: (1) communication tools, such as cold calls; and (2) building relationships with veterans who may hesitate to speak with Solid Start representatives. VA is addressing some of these challenges, such as by text messaging for younger veterans. Although veterans organizations are well positioned to connect with hard-to-reach veterans, VA has not collaborated with these organizations to identify or address any additional gaps, such as outreach to veterans experiencing homelessness, struggling to use technology, or those hesitant to speak to VA directly. VA's Strategic Plan calls for VA to collaborate with groups such as veterans organizations to identify gaps in service and build partnerships to leverage shared resources. VA may be better able to connect with hard-to-reach veterans by further collaborating with veterans organizations.

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Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
PSTAP	Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VSO	veteran service organization

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January 5, 2023

Congressional Requesters

Veterans in their first year of separation from uniformed service experience suicide rates approximately twice the overall rate for all veterans, according to Executive Order 13822, which established a policy to support the health and well-being of service members and veterans.¹ To help implement the policy and connect new veterans to their benefits, the Executive Order also directed several agencies to create a joint action plan to improve access to mental health care and suicide prevention resources during the first year after leaving the military. As a result, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) launched the Solid Start program in 2019 to proactively connect new veterans with resources and benefits, including mental health and other medical care, employment assistance, and education assistance.² To be eligible for Solid Start, individuals must be former service members who have separated from full-time active duty.³ Service members from all branches of service are eligible for Solid Start for 365 days after their separation from active duty.⁴

You asked us to examine the Solid Start program. This report examines (1) how VA has implemented and monitors Solid Start, and (2) any Solid Start outreach challenges and how VA has addressed them.

For our first objective, we reviewed relevant agency documents to describe program operations and monitoring tools for the Solid Start

¹Exec. Order No. 13,822, 3 C.F.R. 320 (2019), reprinted in 38 U.S.C. § 1712A note at 349-50 (2020).

²A law codifying Solid Start was enacted on October 17, 2022. Pub. L. No. 117-205, 136 Stat. 2232 (codified at 38 U.S.C. § 6320).

³For the purposes of our report, we use the term “veteran” to mean any separated service member eligible for Solid Start, notwithstanding the fact that those with dishonorable discharges are not veterans under 38 U.S.C. § 101(2). Individuals are eligible for Solid Start regardless of their discharge status if they are former service members who have separated from full-time active duty.

⁴For Solid Start, VA includes separated service members from the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Space Force, Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps, as well as the Reserves and National Guard. Members of the Reserve or National Guard are eligible if they were deactivated from an overseas contingency deployment of 90 days or more.

program, such as annual reports, and outreach materials. We reviewed VA's data on the percentage of veterans who answered Solid Start phone calls for veterans who left the service on or after October 18, 2019, when eligibility for Solid Start began, through August 2022. We reviewed VA's analysis, which compared the number of benefits used by successfully contacted veterans, with the number of benefits used by veterans who did not answer any Solid Start calls. We also reviewed VA's analysis of successful contact data disaggregated by age, gender, and branch of service.⁵ We assessed the reliability of the data by reviewing existing information about the data and the system that produced them, and interviewing agency officials knowledgeable about the data. We determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives. We also interviewed VA officials about their program implementation and monitoring methods.

For our second objective, we looked at challenges VA has experienced reaching veterans through Solid Start, challenges veterans have experienced in taking advantage of Solid Start resources, and how VA has addressed these challenges. Specifically, we interviewed representatives of five selected veteran service organizations (VSO) and two community-based organizations serving veterans to determine any challenges their veteran constituents have experienced with the Solid Start program.⁶ We selected organizations that varied in number and types of constituents served, and based on the organization's previous engagement with the Solid Start program.⁷ During these interviews, we discussed each organization's views of the type and level of outreach that Solid Start provides to its constituents, any challenges veterans may face in participating in the program, the organization's level of communication and collaboration with VA on Solid Start, and any ways in which the program could be improved. Information we gathered from these

⁵These data were for calendar year 2021, the most recent data available for a cohort of veterans who were eligible to receive all three Solid Start program calls. Veterans are eligible for Solid Start for 1 year after separating from service (i.e., a veteran that separated in December 2019 is eligible for calls through December 2020). Data for eligibility year 2021 cover veterans who separated from service January 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020.

⁶For the purposes of this report, we refer to these two types of organizations as veterans organizations, unless we are specifically referring only to VSOs.

⁷We interviewed the following five VSOs: American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Wounded Warrior Project, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. We also interviewed the following two community-based organizations serving veterans: Minority Veterans of America and Service Women's Action Network.

interviews, while not generalizable, provides insight into the veteran community's observations of the Solid Start program.

We also interviewed VA officials about outreach challenges the program has experienced, as well as their perspective on the outreach challenges that veterans organizations observed. In addition, we interviewed officials from VA and veterans organizations about the extent to which they had collaborated on outreach, and compared those efforts to the agency's strategic plan for fiscal years 2022 through 2028, and to their communication plan for Solid Start.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2022 to January 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

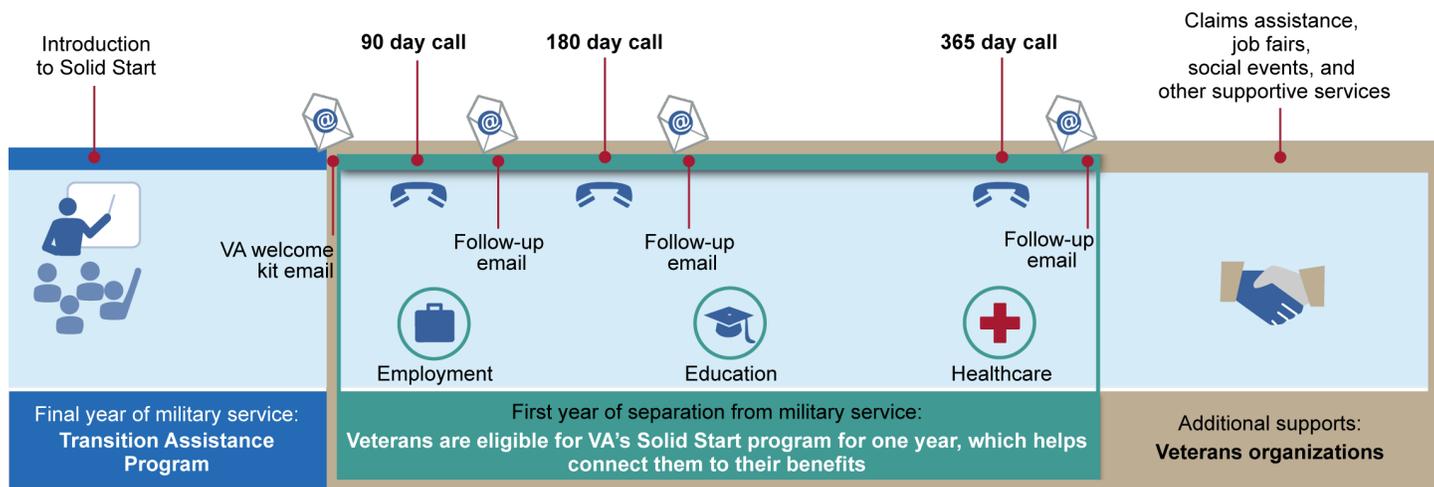
Many new veterans face significant difficulties reintegrating into civilian life. Solid Start is an outreach program intended to help support these new veterans, and is overseen by VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) which administers VA benefits and services to veterans. Service members are first introduced to Solid Start during the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) which, with limited exceptions, is a mandatory program that helps separating service members prepare for their transition to civilian life. Upon separation, VA remains in regular contact with veterans through Solid Start, which is intended to help veterans develop a trusting relationship with the agency following active duty. According to VA officials, consistent care and contact with veterans during stressful periods reduces incidents of self-harm. They said that this became the basis for the program model for Solid Start, in which representatives call veterans to determine their needs and proactively connect them to VA benefits. Solid Start representatives call and email new veterans with information about their benefits during three time intervals: 90, 180, and 365 days after separation.⁸ If representatives are able to speak with a veteran, they send a personalized follow-up email

⁸VA officials told us they decided these time intervals by analyzing internal data showing when veterans were most often applying for benefits in the first year after separation.

with more information on the benefits they discussed.⁹ In addition, general informational emails are sent throughout the year of eligibility.

Many nongovernmental organizations advocate for and work to support veterans, such as VSOs, which assist veterans with their benefit claims, sponsor a range of programs for veterans, and advocate on behalf of veterans, among other things. Some VSOs may provide programming for veterans in their communities, such as local job fairs. Others may organize events to raise money for a subset of veterans, such as housing for homeless veterans. VBA has established a VSO Liaison responsible for advising VBA on matters affecting VSOs and other veteran groups, as well as developing strategies for VBA to engage and partner with these groups. Veterans organizations can support veterans throughout their year of Solid Start eligibility, and beyond (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Examples of Supports for New Veterans, Including Solid Start Communication Milestones



Source: GAO summary of documentation and interviews with the Department of Veterans Affairs. | GAO-23-105699

Note: The Transition Assistance Program, with limited exceptions, is a mandatory program that helps separating service members prepare for their transition to civilian life. For the Solid Start program, if the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Solid Start representatives speak with a veteran, they send a personalized follow-up email. General informational emails are also sent throughout the year of eligibility. VA continues to offer benefits and resources to veterans after the first year of separation. Veterans organizations are non-governmental organizations that assist veterans with a range of services.

According to VA officials, the Solid Start program was initially assigned to and funded through the Veterans Health Administration's Office of Mental

⁹For a full list and description of benefits and resources to be discussed, see appendix I.

Health. VA officials further explained that in early 2019, the Veterans Health Administration requested that VBA assume responsibility for the effort and agreed to reimburse VBA for the costs of the program until VBA could incorporate the program into the VBA budget. VA officials indicated that VBA incorporated the program into its budget for fiscal year 2022. According to VA, program expenditures were about \$9.5 million in fiscal year 2020 due to initial start-up costs, and \$5.7 million in fiscal year 2021. VBA expects fiscal year 2022 expenditures to also be about \$5.7 million. VA reported that the program has approximately 120 full time-equivalent staff for fiscal year 2022.

VA Has Implemented Solid Start by Systematically Phoning Eligible Veterans and Measuring Program Performance

VA Systematically Phones Eligible Veterans about Available Benefits and Prioritizes Veterans with Prior Mental Health Appointments

VA has implemented Solid Start by proactively calling eligible veterans to connect them to VA benefits and additional resources. Using a data sharing agreement with the Department of Defense (DOD), VA receives weekly lists of transitioning service members, along with their personal (not service branch) contact information. Solid Start representatives then email eligible veterans to notify them that Solid Start representatives will call them soon and to provide a link to the VA Welcome Kit, which is a guide to VA benefits and services. Around 90 days after separation from the service, Solid Start representatives attempt the first call to each veteran. During each of the three call intervals (i.e., 90, 180, and 365 days), representatives make seven attempts to phone the veteran and leave voicemails on the first, third, and seventh attempts.¹⁰ Even if a veteran has answered the 90-day call and spoken to a representative, Solid Start representatives continue to phone them at the 180-day and 365-day call intervals.

¹⁰According to VA officials, this calling strategy was informed by private industry consultants with expertise on the number of calls needed to successfully connect with people.

During phone calls, Solid Start representatives share information on specific benefits, as well as offer personalized guidance based on the veteran's needs and interests. For example, representatives are required to discuss education and employment counseling available through a program known as "VA Chapter 36" during their first answered call with every veteran, according to VA officials. "VA Chapter 36" refers to the Personalized Career Planning and Guidance program, which offers free educational and career guidance, planning, and resources to veterans and their dependents who are eligible for VA education benefits.

Representatives then are to discuss as many other benefits as the veteran is interested in, with no time limit to the call. If no specific information is requested, representatives must discuss at least two other benefits that the veteran has not yet used. They focus on any benefits that may be time sensitive, such as signing up for dental benefits, for veterans who did not receive their final dental treatment before separating from service. For a list and description of benefits and resources to be discussed, see appendix I. Each call is intended to build on the previous call, so representatives are to document which benefits were discussed and either follow up or discuss additional benefits on the next call.

While the primary purpose of the calls is to provide information about benefits, Solid Start representatives may transfer veterans to specific services during the call, if needed. For example, if a Solid Start representative learns that a veteran is having trouble accessing VA health care, they can refer the veteran to a case management team member to assist with enrollment, appointment scheduling, and clinical care coordination.¹¹ Similarly, if the veteran is experiencing a mental health crisis, the representative is to transfer them to the Veterans Crisis Line—a confidential service for veterans at immediate risk of self-harm provided at no cost to the veteran.¹² In calendar year 2021, representatives transferred veterans to the Veterans Crisis Line 49 times.¹³

Similarly, during the call, if a Solid Start representative learns that a veteran is experiencing homelessness or food insecurity, they can transfer the veteran to the appropriate service, such as the VA Homeless

¹¹Veterans are transferred to a case management team member in a separate program run through VA medical centers, who assist veterans in navigating VA health care options.

¹²Solid Start representatives receive special training to identify these at-risk individuals.

¹³Veterans may be transferred to the Veterans Crisis Line more than once during their year of eligibility for Solid Start.

Coordinator. Solid Start representatives are to flag all such referrals to additional services and discuss these issues and relevant benefits with the veteran during future calls. Furthermore, veterans who have been transferred to the Veterans Crisis Line, or who are experiencing homelessness or food insecurity are called sooner during future call intervals. In addition, if a veteran has a claim pending with the VA, such as a disability compensation claim, and would like information about the status of their claim, Solid Start representatives can access the claim status system and provide them with an update.

To ensure the program focuses on those veterans who may be most at risk of self-harm, VA designates a transitioning service member as a priority veteran if the veteran has had an appointment with a mental health care professional in the year prior to separation.¹⁴ This information is flagged on the weekly lists of transitioning service members that VA receives from DOD. According to VA officials, Solid Start makes the first call to these individuals within about 3 weeks of separation, rather than waiting 90 days, and representatives must discuss VA mental health benefits during every answered call. Representatives are to make seven attempts to phone the veteran and leave voicemails on the first, third, and seventh attempts. A priority veteran is also called earlier in each contact period than other veterans. VA officials told us they are currently working with DOD on expanding this designation to include transitioning service members who may have received mental health care services regardless of who provided the services.¹⁵

VA Monitors Solid Start Performance by Analyzing the Percentage of Answered Phone Calls and VA Benefits Subsequently Used

VA monitors the performance of Solid Start by tracking the percentage of answered calls and analyzing whether veterans who were successfully contacted used a greater number of their benefits than those who were not successfully contacted. VA defines a successful contact as a phone conversation with an individual veteran that covers all required and requested benefits information at least once during the 365-day period of eligibility for Solid Start. The agency tracks this metric for all veterans, including priority veterans (see table 1).

¹⁴An individual would be designated as a priority if the appointment was conducted with a mental health professional (i.e., psychiatrist, counselor, or therapist) within the military health system.

¹⁵VA has not yet identified all of the additional provider types that would be included, but they would have to be within the military health system. According to VA, the intent would be to include all appointment options that might indicate an increased risk of suicide.

Table 1: Percentage of Veterans Successfully Contacted through Solid Start, Eligibility Years 2020 and 2021

Category	2020	2021
Number of eligible veterans (percent successfully contacted)	36,450 (57 percent)	137,609 (71 percent)
Number of eligible priority veterans (percent successfully contacted)	14,616 (71 percent)	32,332 (75 percent)

Source: GAO summary of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs data. | GAO-23-105699

Note: Veterans are eligible for Solid Start for 1 year after separating from service (i.e., a veteran that separated in December 2019 is eligible for calls through December 2020). Solid Start was launched in December 2019. The 2020 data in this table are for the first cohort of eligible veterans, who separated from service on or after October 18, 2019 through December 31, 2019. In contrast, the data for eligibility year 2021 represent a full calendar year that covers veterans who separated from service January 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020, the most recent data available for a cohort of veterans who were eligible to receive all three Solid Start program calls.

In addition, VA analyzes contact data by the veteran’s branch of service, age, and gender. In 2021, the percentage of veterans successfully contacted was 70 percent or above for all groups except for veterans under age 23. According to VA, in 2021, representatives successfully contacted about 42 percent of veterans under age 23. As discussed later, VA is taking steps to address the lower contact rate for younger veterans.

VA’s goals for successful contacts with eligible veterans in fiscal years 2020 and 2021 were 40 and 50 percent, respectively, which it exceeded both years.¹⁶ VA is also on track to exceed its goal of 50 percent in fiscal year 2022. It has successfully contacted about 63 percent of eligible veterans as of August 2022, according to its monthly data report.¹⁷

To monitor the effects of the Solid Start phone calls, VA analyzed whether veterans who were successfully contacted in 2021 used a greater number of their benefits within about 4 months of completing their eligibility for all three Solid Start calls. VA’s analysis showed that successfully contacted veterans used the following benefits more than their peers who did not speak with a Solid Start representative: compensation, education,

¹⁶According to VA officials, they established annual successful contact goals for Solid Start based on the contact rates of other VA outreach programs.

¹⁷These data on contact rates cover the period October 2021 through August 2022.

enrollment in VA health care, loan guaranty, and job training.¹⁸ For example, VA data showed that about 44 percent of veterans who were successfully contacted enrolled in VA health care, compared to about 7 percent of veterans who were not. VA officials said they plan to add additional categories of benefits to this analysis in future years.

VA also monitors program performance by recording and assessing Solid Start phone calls and by using software to capture comments and feedback from Solid Start representatives and veterans during calls. According to VA officials, they periodically review this information to identify any needed improvements to the program. Improvements based on such feedback have included updating the Solid Start call script to ask veterans about any additional support they may need related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and including referral information to the appropriate state's Department of Veterans Affairs on the subsequent personalized email summarizing each phone conversation. In addition, officials said they received feedback that representatives needed a better way to track veterans experiencing food insecurity, so they updated their call-logging system to include this information.¹⁹

VA is taking steps to assess the long-term outcomes of Solid Start through two surveys. The first is through the Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment (PSTAP), which is a multi-year study to help determine the effectiveness of TAP on transitioning service members' long-term outcomes in employment, education, health, social

¹⁸According to VA officials, these are the benefits for which enrollment data are available and can be matched with veterans' contact data. For VA's 2021 analysis, the percentage reflects those veterans who received a benefit, enrolled in a benefit, or have applied for a benefit within about 4 months of completing their 1 year of Solid Start eligibility. This analysis does not imply a causal relationship between Solid Start and enrollment in VA benefits because other VA programs also connect veterans to their benefits, such as a health care enrollment initiative called Concierge for Care. In addition, the analysis did not exclude individuals based upon benefit eligibility requirements.

¹⁹Our prior work has shown that veterans experience high rates of food insecurity, which can contribute to many negative health outcomes. We recommended that VA assess the extent to which proactively providing information about nutrition assistance and making related referrals through the Solid Start Program would be beneficial to veterans. VA concurred with this recommendation and implemented it in part by providing information about food insecurity in Solid Start informational emails. See GAO, *Nutrition Assistance Programs: Federal Agencies Should Improve Oversight and Better Collaborate on Efforts to Support Veterans with Food Insecurity*, [GAO-22-104740](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 24, 2022).

relationships, financial security, and overall satisfaction and well-being.²⁰ As part of this assessment, VA also evaluates Solid Start and the long-term effects associated with the program.²¹ The assessment team expects to publish outcomes from these multi-year surveys for Solid Start in 2023. In addition, VA officials told us they are collaborating on a new survey with VA's Veterans Experience Office, which has specialized experience in data and evaluation. The survey, which is expected to launch in fiscal year 2023, will ask a sample of Solid Start participants about their reactions to, and experiences with Solid Start.

VA Is Taking Steps to Address Outreach Challenges, but Collaboration with Veterans Organizations Is Limited

Representatives from the seven veterans organizations with whom we spoke described outreach challenges for Solid Start in two main areas: (1) communication tools and (2) building relationships with veterans. VA acknowledged the outreach challenges that veterans organizations identified and is taking or plans to take steps to address many of them. However, VA initially had limited collaboration with veterans organizations, and has not collaborated with them on specific outreach challenges.

Communication tools. Representatives at six of the seven selected veterans organizations told us that using phone calls as Solid Start's primary communication tool may present a challenge because veterans may be reluctant to answer phone calls, especially if the calls are unexpected or labeled as spam. Representatives said reluctance to answer cold calls may be exacerbated by limited awareness about Solid Start among recently transitioned veterans. Although veterans are briefed on Solid Start before leaving the military and also receive the VA Welcome Kit mentioning Solid Start, they may be overwhelmed by the volume of information during TAP. Therefore veterans may not be expecting the first Solid Start call 90 days after separation. Representatives at five of the organizations we interviewed suggested using text messaging because it could help with both directly providing

²⁰The PSTAP findings have been published annually since 2019. For previous reports, see: <https://benefits.va.gov/TRANSITION/tap-assessments.asp>.

²¹This assessment uses two surveys, one cross-sectional and one longitudinal, to collect information from veterans after separation. A cross-sectional survey looks at data from a population at one specific point in time, and a longitudinal survey follows up with subjects to present data over several time periods. Both surveys in the PSTAP assessment follow similar formats and include similar questions to enable a trend analysis. Each survey begins with a series of questions regarding TAP and VA benefits followed by a series of questions about veterans' employment, education, health and relationships, finances, and well-being.

information on benefits, as well as scheduling and reminding veterans of upcoming calls. They said this could be particularly effective for connecting with younger veterans, reducing calls identified as spam, and reducing resistance to cold calls. Additionally, representatives at three veterans organizations told us that some veterans may be difficult to reach via phone or email because either they lack access to or struggle to use technology for communication. For example, veterans living in remote areas may have limited internet or phone connectivity and veterans who are experiencing homelessness may lack access to a phone, computer, or a stable mailing address.²² Representatives at two veterans organizations suggested that additional communication methods, such as paper mailers, flyers, and handouts distributed in Vet Centers, would be useful for veterans who prefer other communication methods.²³

VA officials agreed that the communication tools it currently uses and cold calling pose challenges to connecting with eligible veterans and said that VA is taking steps to address them. VA officials told us they knew their calls were being marked as spam for some veterans, and said they are coordinating with the Federal Communications Commission as well as network providers to address this. They also acknowledged that reaching younger veterans has been a challenge, as shown in the lower success rates for contacting veterans under age 23. To address this, VA officials said they are planning two initiatives beginning in the first half of 2023: scheduling calls in advance and using text messaging to send general information, including links to the Solid Start website. Officials said they had intended to use text messaging since the program's launch in 2019. However, their call centers had to update their communication technology, and there were also delays in finalizing the contract for developing text messaging. VA will also begin a pilot program that uses text messaging to schedule calls with eligible veterans, which is intended to reach those who may be resistant to a cold call.

²²Our prior work has shown that an estimated 37,000 veterans in the United States experienced homelessness in 2019. We recommended that VA provide more information on how local service providers helping homeless veterans can collaborate with each other, which VA implemented. See GAO, *Homeless Veterans: Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Interagency Collaboration and Performance Measurement Procedures*, [GAO-20-428](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 14, 2020).

²³Vet Centers are community-based counseling centers that provide a wide range of social and psychological services, including professional readjustment counseling to eligible veterans and active-duty service members.

VA officials also acknowledged that reaching certain groups of veterans via phone and email is a challenge. VA officials said they plan to add more downloadable content to the Solid Start website in early 2023 so that veterans organizations can print and display, physically distribute, and speak knowledgeably with veterans who may not have access to a phone, email, or the website. If VA officials learn that a veteran lacks access to a phone, or if a phone number is missing in the data VA receives from DOD, VA officials said they will mail information on Solid Start.

Relationship building. Representatives at all seven of the veterans organizations we spoke with said there were barriers to creating relationships and building the trust needed for Solid Start representatives to discuss a veteran’s specific needs during calls. These barriers included representatives who lack military experience or who potentially lack cultural competency when interacting with racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ veterans; and certain veterans’ hesitancy to speak with VA.²⁴ Representatives at one organization said that veterans prefer to speak to other veterans, and can find it challenging to share their experiences with someone who lacks military experience. Representatives at another organization told us that minority veterans may face higher barriers to reintegrating than the average veteran because they may have experienced racism or homophobia while serving in the military, and therefore may not want to speak to VA. Representatives at a third organization told us that military sexual trauma survivors may not want to discuss experiences that remind them of their time in the military, and they may not trust VA to help them if they believe that VA has mishandled previous sexual trauma claims.²⁵ In addition, officials at two organizations told us that those who did not receive an honorable discharge may be uncomfortable discussing their time in the military, and may assume they are ineligible for any VA benefits. To lessen some of these challenges, representatives at two other veterans

²⁴LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning. The “plus” is meant to be inclusive of identities that may not be covered by the acronym LGBTQ, such as asexual, intersex, non-binary, and two-spirit.

²⁵In 2014, we recommended that VA improve training, conduct more outreach, and enhance its military sexual trauma-related quality reviews and analyses. VA concurred with all of our recommendations and implemented them. See GAO, *Military Sexual Trauma: Improvements Made, but VA Can Do More to Track and Improve the Consistency of Disability Claim Decisions*, [GAO-14-477](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 9, 2014).

organizations suggested hiring representatives who are veterans themselves, or requiring them to take cultural competency trainings.

VA officials said that building relationships with veterans early on is one of Solid Start's key purposes and that VA has initiatives underway to establish positive relationships with veterans through Solid Start phone calls. For example, VA assigns veterans a Solid Start representative to support them throughout their eligibility period, and the same representative calls the veteran each time, if possible. While Solid Start representatives are not required to have military experience or participate in VA's Veteran Cultural Competence Training program, they receive customer service training that helps them address a variety of potentially difficult situations and develop soft skills to interact appropriately with the veteran population, such as asking appropriate questions in an open manner to foster engagement, and recognizing and addressing individuals in crisis.²⁶ Solid Start also provides representatives with specific training for contacting military sexual trauma survivors, and all VBA employees receive Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion training, including Solid Start representatives. In addition, VA officials told us that veterans can request a representative during the call who, for instance, is a woman, another veteran, or a Spanish speaker. As noted earlier, VA is developing two surveys to assess outcomes of Solid Start, including veterans' perspectives on the ease and effectiveness of the program and degree of trust with Solid Start representatives. Both of these surveys will provide additional information on the extent to which outreach efforts are successful.

VA officials also acknowledged the difficulty of reaching veterans who did not receive an honorable discharge, and said they had conducted an internal analysis that showed one of Solid Start's lowest levels of successful outreach is among this group of veterans.²⁷ To connect with these veterans, VA officials said they have begun sending personalized emails letting the veteran know which specific benefits are available to them according to their discharge status. Representatives encourage

²⁶The Veteran Cultural Competence Training program is a training program intended to bridge the gap between civilian and veteran experiences of the military and aimed at helping to reduce veteran mental health crises and suicide rates.

²⁷This analysis included anyone who had not received an honorable discharge. As noted earlier, VA officials said that individuals are eligible for Solid Start regardless of their discharge status if they meet the requirements of having been full-time active duty service members who have separated from active duty.

these veterans to apply for applicable benefits, as well as to apply for a discharge upgrade, which may qualify them for additional benefits.²⁸ Moreover, VA officials told us that they are working on a social media campaign to promote Solid Start specifically to veterans who did not receive an honorable discharge starting in late 2022.

Limited collaboration with veterans organizations. We spoke with VA and veterans organizations about the extent to which they have collaborated on these outreach challenges. Officials from VA and representatives of all seven veterans organizations told us that collaboration between VA and veterans organizations regarding outreach has been somewhat limited up to this point.

VA officials told us that before implementing Solid Start, they met with VSOs at a national level to get their input on the program's design. For example, VSOs suggested providing veterans with information about their organizations during Solid Start calls, which VA incorporated into its call script. Since the program began, VA has briefed VSOs once or twice a year at its national meetings.

VA's Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2022–2028 states that VA will engage veterans organizations such as VSOs to identify gaps in service that should be addressed, collaborate with partners such as VSOs to improve customer service, and build partnerships to leverage shared resources.²⁹ In addition, VA's Strategic Communication Summary Report, which was used to develop the Solid Start Program, describes veterans organizations as key partners for communication and support, and describes the program as a collaborative effort across government and non-government partners.

To implement this collaborative effort with veterans organizations, VA officials told us they have begun to increase their engagement with VSOs specifically, and will increase briefings to four times a year, starting in early 2023. In addition, VA officials said they have started providing VSOs with monthly progress reports and promotional materials, which they said

²⁸If a former service member does not qualify for VA benefits based on their discharge status, Solid Start representatives will discuss other available resources, such as those available through community organizations. The representative will also try to determine if the individual is experiencing a mental health crisis, homelessness, or food insecurity, to direct them to appropriate resources.

²⁹Department of Veterans Affairs, *Fiscal Years 2022-28 Strategic Plan* (Washington, D.C.: April 2022).

will better help these organizations educate their constituents on Solid Start. According to VA officials, they have also begun soliciting general feedback on outreach, either directly from VSOs or conveyed indirectly by their constituents. VA officials believe these efforts are sufficient because the program has met its annual contact goals. However, VA has not collaborated with veterans organizations to identify or address any gaps in service, such as outreach for veterans experiencing homelessness, those who struggle to use technology, or those who are hesitant to speak to VA directly. Representatives at all seven veterans organizations we interviewed said they would welcome increased collaboration with VA on the Solid Start program, and all said this would be particularly useful for hard-to-reach veterans.

VA may be better able to connect with hard-to-reach veterans by further collaborating with veterans organizations on outreach to address any gaps in service and to leverage shared resources. Since these organizations have historically worked to make veterans aware of their benefits, and routinely connect with hard-to-reach veterans, they may be well positioned to collaborate with and advise VA on how to best communicate with these veterans, as well as encourage them to connect directly with Solid Start. This could ultimately connect even more veterans to their benefits.

Conclusions

VA's Solid Start program connects new veterans to crucial benefits and resources to help overcome significant difficulties they may face in reintegrating to civilian life. While VA is taking steps to address outreach challenges, its success with hard-to-reach groups—such as reaching veterans experiencing homelessness or those who underwent traumatic experiences in the military—may be enhanced by further collaborating with veterans organizations such as VSOs. Veterans organizations may be well positioned to help address these challenges because they already work directly with many veterans seeking assistance. Veterans organizations can leverage their relationships with these hard-to-reach veterans to provide them with information about Solid Start directly and encourage them to engage with Solid Start representatives.

Recommendation for Executive Action

The VA's Under Secretary for Benefits should collaborate with veterans organizations, such as VSOs, in identifying and addressing any outreach gaps, and assessing Solid Start outreach strategies for hard-to-reach groups of veterans.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to VA for review and comment. In its formal comments, which are reproduced in appendix II, VA agreed with

the recommendation. VA also provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 14 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.



Dawn G. Locke
Acting Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

List of Requesters

The Honorable Kevin Cramer
United States Senate

The Honorable Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senate

The Honorable Jack Bergman
House of Representatives

The Honorable David P. Joyce
House of Representatives

The Honorable Elissa Slotkin
House of Representatives

Appendix I: VA Benefits and Resources That Solid Start Representatives Discuss with Veterans

Table 2: VA Benefits and Resources That Solid Start Representatives Discuss with Veterans

Benefit or resource	Description
Burial benefits	Veterans, service members, and some family members may be eligible for burial in in any national cemetery with available space, a government headstone or marker, a burial flag, and a Presidential Memorial Certificate, at no cost to the family. VA may also provide a headstone or marker for eligible veterans or service members buried in other cemeteries. Survivors may be eligible for VA burial allowance reimbursement to defray costs of a veteran's final expenses.
Resources through Chapter 36: "Personalized Career Planning and Guidance"	These supports are available to transitioning service members, veterans, and qualified dependents. The program offers personalized career counseling to help achieve goals and ensure the most effective use of VA benefits. Representatives must discuss these benefits with all veterans during the first successful interaction.
Dental benefits	VA dental care or how to buy dental insurance if the veteran does not qualify. Representatives must discuss this benefit if the veteran's discharge record shows they did not complete a dental exam prior to discharge.
Disability compensation benefits	VA disability compensation offers a monthly tax-free payment to veterans who were sick or injured while serving in the military and to veterans whose service made an existing condition worse.
Discharge upgrade resources	Information on how to apply for a discharge upgrade or correction if the veteran did not receive an honorable discharge.
Education benefits	VA education benefits help veterans, service members, and qualified family members with needs like paying college tuition, finding the right school or training program, and career counseling.
Employment resources	The Veteran Readiness and Employment program helps veterans with a service-connected disability that impacts their ability to work. VA offers five support-and-services tracks to help the veteran receive education or training, find and keep a job, and live as independently as possible.
Financial resources	Information on available support options based upon the veterans specific needs, such VA homeless support; Military OneSource, a Department of Defense resource which offers military financial resources; and other community organizations.
Health care services	VA health care covers eligible veterans for regular checkups with primary care providers and appointments with specialists. Eligible veterans can access health care services like home health and elder care, and can get medical equipment, prosthetics, and prescriptions.
Legal resources	Information on available resources to assist with any legal issue raised by the veteran. Examples of available legal resources include Veterans Justice Outreach, which is a program to assist arrested and incarcerated veterans; the VA Office of General Counsel; and local Legal Aid.
Life insurance benefits	Veterans can receive term life insurance benefits, depending on their service members' group life insurance coverage when they left the military.
Mental health services	Information on available mental health care services available through the Veterans Health Administration and assistance with eligibility questions or enrollment challenges. Veterans are also told how to access the Veterans Crisis Line. Representatives must discuss these benefits during the first interaction with all veterans and during all interactions with priority veterans.
Pension benefits	A needs-based benefit paid to a wartime veteran based on income.
Resources through State Departments of Veterans Affairs	Information on connecting with the appropriate state Departments of Veterans Affairs to determine what state and local benefits may be available to the veteran.

**Appendix I: VA Benefits and Resources That
Solid Start Representatives Discuss with
Veterans**

Benefit or resource	Description
Resources through Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) and other community organizations	Information on how veterans can connect with VSOs and other community organizations in their area based on individual needs and requests.
VA records resource	Requests for military service or medical records.
Resources for women veterans	Medical services for women veterans, including assistance through the Women Veterans Call Center and Women's Health Transition Training program.

Source: GAO summary of information from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). | GAO-23-105699

Note: GAO did not independently review these benefits. According to VA officials, while these are the primary benefits and resources discussed during calls, Solid Start representatives will discuss any benefit, service, or support that may be needed to address a veteran's concerns. Veterans may not be eligible for all benefits.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

November 29, 2022

Ms. Dawn Locke
Acting Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Locke:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report: **VETERANS BENEFITS: VA Could Enhance Outreach for its Solid Start Program by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations** (GAO-23-105699).

The enclosure contains technical comments and the action plan to address the draft report recommendation. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tanya Bradsher".

Tanya Bradsher
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Veterans Affairs**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
***VETERANS BENEFITS: VA Could Enhance Outreach for its Solid Start Program
by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations***
(GAO-23-105699)

Recommendation 1: The Under Secretary for Benefits should collaborate with Veterans Organizations, such as VSOs, in identifying and addressing any outreach gaps, and assessing Solid Start outreach strategies for hard-to-reach groups of Veterans.

VA Response: Concur. The Veterans Benefits Administration will collaborate with Veterans organizations, such as Veterans Service Organizations, to identify and address any outreach gaps, and assess Solid Start outreach strategies for hard-to-reach groups of Veterans.

Target Completion Date: March 31, 2023

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Dawn G. Locke, (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Meeta Engle (Assistant Director), Alexandra Squitieri (Analyst-in-Charge), and Jasmine Porter made key contributions to this report. Vincent Balloon, Charlotte Cable, Hedieh Fusfield, Amy MacDonald, Jean McSween, Marcia Mann, and Aaron Olszewski provided additional support.

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Washington, DC 20548

Strategic Planning and External Liaison

Stephen J. Sanford, Managing Director, spel@gao.gov, (202) 512-4707
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814,
Washington, DC 20548

