

A report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

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What GAO Found

The Army, Navy, and Air Force have issued guidance to help facilitate command efforts to locate a service member who is deemed absent from their assigned duty location. However, the Marine Corps has not developed such guidance, as GAO recommended in 2022.

GAO analyzed Army, Navy, and Air Force guidance and identified the following gaps that could hinder efforts to locate absent service members and mitigate related risks.

- **Response time frames.** Service guidance outlines response time frames with varying levels of specificity, resulting in different interpretations among officials regarding how quickly certain actions should be initiated. For example, Army guidance includes detailed time frames for actions such as alerting law enforcement, whereas Navy and Air Force guidance does not.
- **Mental health.** Army, Navy, and Air Force officials GAO interviewed commonly observed a link between service member absences and mental health and said that locating service members often intersects with efforts to prevent self-harm. However, guidance inconsistently addresses the interconnected nature of mental health issues and service member absences, and how such considerations should inform the command's response.
- **Safety.** Army, Navy, and Air Force officials identified potential safety issues that may arise while searching for an absent service member, especially if the service member is experiencing a mental health crisis or has access to a firearm. However, guidance does not address these safety issues, potentially subjecting the absent service member or those trying to locate them to unnecessary risk.

By addressing these gaps in guidance, the services can better position themselves to help prevent harm and save lives.

Some services' guidance for commanders and the military criminal investigative organizations (MCIO) lacks clarity on whether and when to classify an absence as voluntary or involuntary, which can significantly affect the urgency and comprehensiveness of search efforts. For example, Army guidance for commanders requires them to presume the service member is potentially in danger and to presume the absence is most likely involuntary after 48 hours unless available information indicates the absence should be considered voluntary. However, Department of Defense (DOD)-wide guidance does not have a similar provision, nor do the other military services' guidance. In another example, Air Force MCIO guidance requires investigators to treat all absences as involuntary in the first instance, while guidance for the Army and Navy MCIOs does not. By revising guidance, commands and MCIOs will have a more consistent approach to absences and further their goal of quickly and safely locating absent service members.

Why GAO Did This Study

When a service member is absent from their unit, it may not be immediately clear if the absence is voluntary—that is, deliberate on the part of the service member—or involuntary, meaning the service member may be in danger. A timely and well-coordinated response to a service member's absence is critical to establishing the facts and helping to ensure their safe return, if possible.

House Report 118-125 includes a provision for GAO to review policies and procedures related to missing and absent service members. This report builds on GAO's 2022 report on this topic and examines the extent to which DOD and the military services have clarified guidance for responding to incidents of absent service members, among other issues.

GAO reviewed DOD guidance on responding to service member absences. GAO also visited a nongeneralizable sample of eight military installations, two per military service; reviewed the processes for responding to service member absences; and interviewed officials responsible for responding to such absences.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 12 recommendations, including that DOD update guidance for responding to service member absences to initially treat service member absences as involuntary after a specific time period unless available information indicates the absence should be considered voluntary. DOD concurred with these recommendations.