

### Efforts to Assess Mental Health Support for Veteran Caregiver Program Need Strengthening

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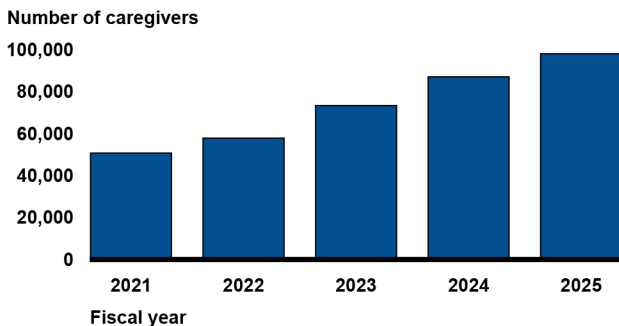
A report to congressional committees

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#### What GAO Found

The Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Caregiver Support Program offers mental health support, among other benefits, to eligible caregivers who provide around the clock care for veterans with serious injuries. This includes support groups and respite care. In fiscal year 2025, VHA data show the program served about 98,000 caregivers. In addition, VHA obligated \$2.6 billion to implement the program, according to officials. VHA officials told GAO the program has grown significantly since fiscal year 2021 due in part to expanded eligibility criteria that allowed more caregivers to participate as of October 1, 2020.

#### Caregivers Participating in Veterans Health Administration Caregiver Support Program, Fiscal Years 2021 Through 2025



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration data. | GAO-26-108070

VHA advertises the Caregiver Support Program through various methods, such as email updates and brochures at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers. Some caregivers GAO interviewed said they learned about the program through these methods. However, they wished they had learned about it sooner. They also felt other caregivers did not know about the mental health support available to them through the program.

VHA established four goals to assess whether its outreach efforts are effective at increasing caregivers' awareness of the program. One goal is to increase program enrollment by 15 percent each fiscal year. However, the other three goals, such as increasing subscribers to its email updates, do not have quantitative targets and time frames. Setting targets and time frames for these goals would better enable VHA to measure its progress in increasing awareness of the program among caregivers who are not enrolled, help the agency assess how well its outreach efforts are working, and make any needed adjustments.

VHA has also taken steps to assess how the program supports caregivers by establishing a goal to increase telehealth appointments by 10 percent in fiscal year 2025. VHA collects data on these appointments, which increased by 50 percent from fiscal year 2024 to 2025. However, the agency has not established goals and collected related data for other program services, such as other types of mental health treatment. Setting goals and collecting more complete information would better position VA to assess program performance. VHA could make any needed adjustments to further support caregivers' wellbeing, allowing it to better support veterans.

#### Why GAO Did This Study

Several factors, including the demands of their care duties, can affect caregivers' mental health and wellbeing. Research suggests that such caregiving can be linked to high levels of stress and burden and can result in depression or anxiety.

The Senator Elizabeth Dole 21<sup>st</sup> Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvements Act includes a provision for GAO to review mental health support provided by the VHA Caregiver Support Program. This report examines VHA's efforts to make caregivers aware of the mental health support available to them and VHA's efforts to assess program performance, among other objectives.

GAO reviewed VHA documentation and data for fiscal years 2021 through 2025. GAO also interviewed VHA officials, program staff and selected caregivers at four VA medical centers, and representatives from four organizations serving veterans and caregivers. GAO selected the medical centers based on program size, geography, and rurality. GAO selected organizations that focus on caregivers and have national reach. GAO also conducted a literature search and review of relevant research.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to VA to implement key performance management practices for the Caregiver Support Program, including setting quantitative targets and time frames for outreach goals, and setting goals and collecting relevant data to assess services the program offers to support caregivers' mental health. VA concurred with the recommendations and identified steps VHA plans to take to implement them.