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MILITARY DISABILITY SYSTEM

Preliminary Observations on Efforts to Improve Performance

Why GAO Prepared This Testimony

Since 2007, the DOD and VA have operated the IDES—which combines what used to be separate DOD and VA disability evaluation processes and is intended to expedite benefits for injured servicemembers. Initially a pilot at 3 military treatment facilities, IDES is now DOD's standard process for evaluating servicemembers' fitness for duty and disability worldwide. In previous reports, GAO identified a number of challenges as IDES expanded, including staffing shortages and difficulty meeting timeliness goals.

In this statement, GAO discusses initial observations from its ongoing review of the IDES, addressing two key topics: (1) the extent to which DOD and VA are meeting IDES timeliness and servicemember satisfaction performance goals, and (2) steps the agencies are taking to improve the performance of the system. To answer these questions, GAO analyzed IDES timeliness and customer satisfaction survey data, visited six IDES sites, and interviewed DOD and VA officials. This work is ongoing and GAO has no recommendations at this time. GAO plans to issue its final report later in 2012.

View GAO-12-718T. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Case processing times under the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) process have increased over time, and measures of servicemember satisfaction have shortcomings. Each year, average processing time for IDES cases has climbed, reaching 394 and 420 days for active and reserve component members in fiscal year 2011—well over established goals of 295 and 305 days, respectively. Also in fiscal year 2011, just 19 percent of active duty servicemembers and 18 percent of guard or reserve members completed the IDES process and received benefits within established goals, down from 32 and 37 percent one year prior. Of the four phases comprising IDES, the medical evaluation board phase increasingly fell short of timeliness goals and, within that phase, the time required for the military's determination of fitness was especially troubling. During site visits to IDES locations, we consistently heard concerns about timeframes and resources for this phase of the process. With respect to servicemember satisfaction with the IDES process, GAO found shortcomings in how these data are collected and reported, such as unduly limiting who is eligible to receive a survey and computing average satisfaction scores in a manner that may overstate satisfaction. Department of Defense (DOD) officials told us they are considering alternatives for gauging satisfaction with the process.

Timeliness for IDES Cases Resulting in VA Benefits (by year case completed)
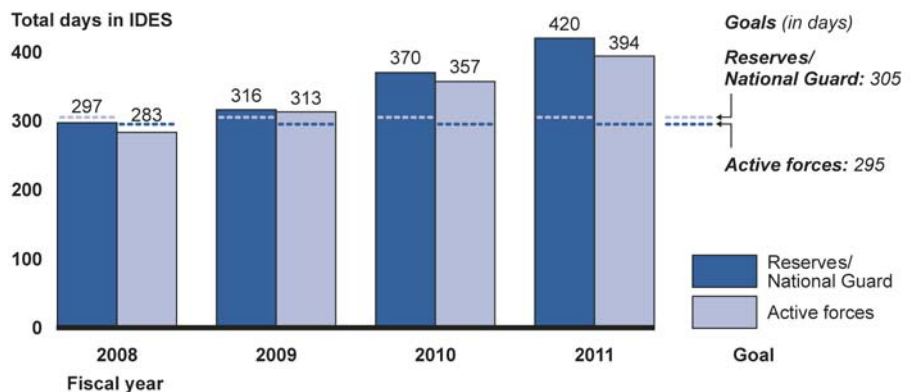
Source: GAO analysis of DOD and VA data.

DOD and Veterans Affairs (VA) have taken steps to improve IDES performance, and have other improvement initiatives in process, but progress is uneven and it is too early to assess their overall impact. VA increased resources for conducting disability ratings and related workloads. The Army is hiring additional staff for its medical evaluation boards, but it is too early to see the impact of these additional resources. DOD and VA are pursuing system upgrades so that staff and managers at IDES facilities can better track the progress of servicemembers' cases and respond to delays more quickly; however, multiple upgrades may be causing redundant work efforts. DOD officials also told us they have been working with the military services to correct case data that were inaccurately entered into VA's IDES tracking system, but have not yet achieved a permanent solution. Finally, DOD is in the early stages of conducting an in-depth business process review of the entire IDES process and supporting IT systems, in order to better understand how each step contributes to overall processing times and identify opportunities to streamline the process and supporting systems.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**