

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-328](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Primary care services are often the entry point for veterans needing care, and VHA has faced a growing demand for outpatient primary care services over the past decade. On average, 380,000 veterans were newly enrolled in VHA's health care system each year in the last decade.

GAO was asked to examine VHA's efforts to provide timely access to primary care services. This report examines, among other things, (1) newly enrolled veterans' access to primary care and (2) VHA's related oversight. GAO interviewed officials from six VA medical centers selected to provide variation in factors such as geographic location, clinical services offered, and average primary care wait times; reviewed a randomly selected, non-generalizable sample of medical records for 180 newly enrolled veterans; and interviewed VHA and medical center officials on oversight of access to primary care. GAO evaluated VHA's oversight against relevant federal standards for internal control.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VHA (1) ensure veterans requesting appointments are contacted in a timely manner to schedule one; (2) monitor the full amount of time newly enrolled veterans wait to receive primary care; and (3) issue an updated scheduling policy. VA concurred with all of GAO's recommendations and identified actions it is taking to implement them.

View [GAO-16-328](#). For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov.

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VA HEALTH CARE

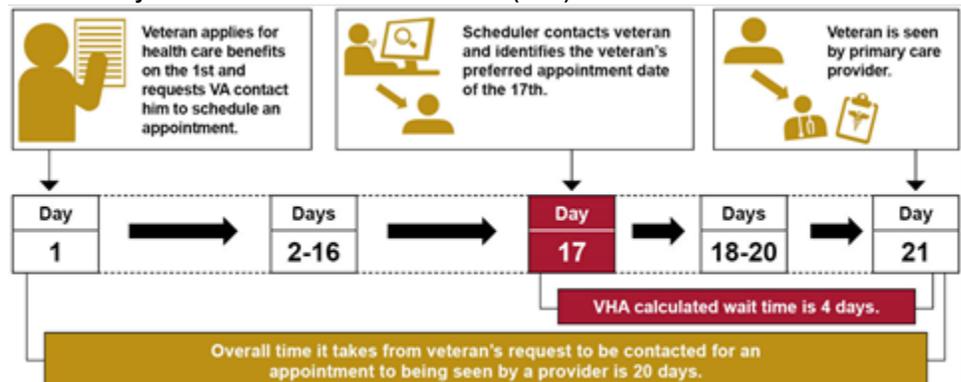
Actions Needed to Improve Newly Enrolled Veterans' Access to Primary Care

What GAO Found

GAO found that not all newly enrolled veterans were able to access primary care from the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and others experienced wide variation in the amount of time they waited for care. Sixty of the 180 newly enrolled veterans in GAO's review had not been seen by providers at the time of the review; nearly half were unable to access primary care because VA medical center staff did not schedule appointments for these veterans in accordance with VHA policy. The 120 newly enrolled veterans in GAO's review who were seen by providers waited from 22 days to 71 days from their requests that VA contact them to schedule appointments to when they were seen, according to GAO's analysis. These time frames were impacted by limited appointment availability and weaknesses in medical center scheduling practices, which contributed to unnecessary delays.

VHA's oversight of veterans' access to primary care is hindered, in part, by data weaknesses and the lack of a comprehensive scheduling policy. This is inconsistent with federal internal control standards, which call for agencies to have reliable data and effective policies to achieve their objectives. For newly enrolled veterans, VHA calculates primary care appointment wait times starting from the veterans' preferred dates (the dates veterans want to be seen), rather than the dates veterans initially requested VA contact them to schedule appointments. Therefore, these data do not capture the time these veterans wait prior to being contacted by schedulers, making it difficult for officials to identify and remedy scheduling problems that arise prior to making contact with veterans. Further, ongoing scheduling errors, such as incorrectly revising preferred dates when rescheduling appointments, understated the amount of time veterans waited to see providers. Officials attributed these errors to confusion by schedulers, resulting from the lack of an updated standardized scheduling policy. These errors continue to affect the reliability of wait-time data used for oversight, which makes it more difficult to effectively oversee newly enrolled veterans' access to primary care.

Illustration of How the Time It Takes a Veteran to See a Provider May Differ from the Wait Time Calculated by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)



Sources: VHA (information); GAO (illustration). | GAO-16-328