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VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

Preliminary Observations on VA's Technology Education Pilot Program

Accessible Version

Statement for the Record by Dawn Locke, Acting Director,
Education, Workforce, and Income Security

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105720](#), a statement for the record to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government helps veterans pursue education and employment skills in order to succeed in the civilian workforce. Congress instructed VA to develop a pilot program to provide tuition and other financial support to eligible veterans who enroll in high-technology education programs through eligible training providers. In response, VA created VET TEC, which is authorized for 5 years from April 2019, when the first contract was issued.

In addition, Congress included a provision for GAO to assess certain aspects of VET TEC. In response, GAO began work to assess VET TEC.

This statement is based on preliminary observations from GAO's ongoing review and focuses on VA's efforts to design and pilot VET TEC. To develop these preliminary findings, GAO reviewed relevant VA documents and interviewed VA officials knowledgeable about the VET TEC pilot, as well as two VET TEC training providers. In addition, VA's efforts were compared to GAO's leading practices for effective pilot design.

View [GAO-22-105720](#). For more information, contact Dawn Locke at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov.

February 2, 2022

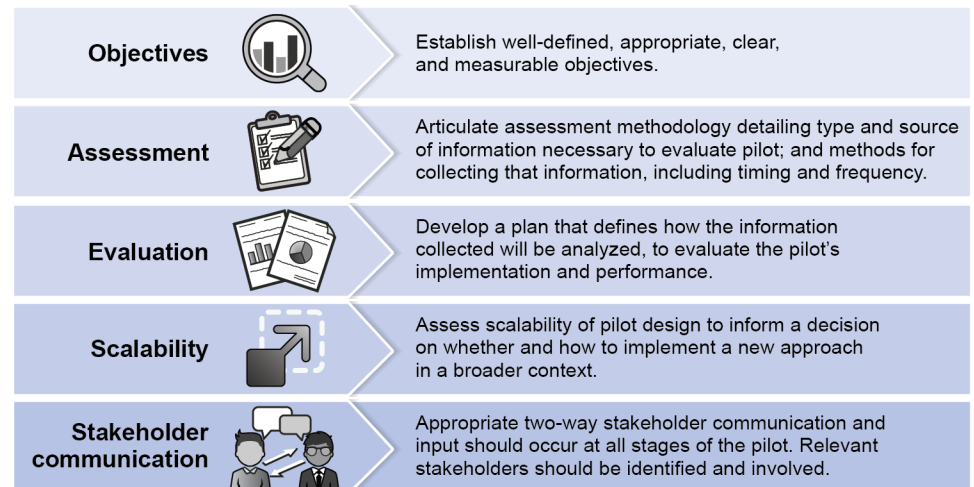
VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

Preliminary Observations on VA's Technology Education Pilot Program

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is conducting a pilot program, called Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC), that provides tuition and housing assistance to eligible veterans who enroll in a training program offered by a VA-approved provider. Although VET TEC started in April 2019, GAO's preliminary observations indicate that VA has not yet implemented most leading practices for effective pilot program design with the exception of communicating with stakeholders (see figure).

Figure: Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design



Source: GAO. | GAO-22-105720

Accessible Text for Figure: Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design

- **Objectives:** Establish well-defined, appropriate, clear, and measurable objectives.
- **Assessment:** Articulate assessment methodology detailing type and source of information necessary to evaluate pilot; and methods for collecting that information, including timing and frequency.
- **Evaluation:** Develop a plan that defines how the information collected will be analyzed, to evaluate the pilot's implementation and performance.
- **Scalability:** Assess scalability of pilot design to inform a decision on whether and how to implement a new approach in a broader context.
- **Stakeholder communication:** Appropriate two-way stakeholder communication and input should occur at all stages of the pilot. Relevant stakeholders should be identified and involved.

Specifically, VA does not have documented, measurable objectives for the program. As such, VA cannot yet determine an assessment methodology or evaluation plan to measure performance of the pilot. While VA officials said that they plan to formally evaluate VET TEC towards the end of the pilot, they did not provide specific information about what the evaluation will entail. In addition, VA is not well positioned to assess the scalability of the program because VA

officials may not have a complete picture of veteran or training provider demand for VET TEC.

GAO's preliminary observations found that VA has taken steps to implement one leading practice by communicating with stakeholders, including training providers, veterans, and employers. In ongoing work, GAO plans to further examine VA's efforts to design and implement the VET TEC pilot in accordance with leading practices and will make recommendations for improvement, as appropriate.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to submit this statement on our preliminary observations of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) pilot program. The federal government's commitment to those serving in the military includes helping them pursue education and employment skills to succeed in the civilian workforce.¹ The Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (commonly referred to as the "Forever GI Bill") furthered such assistance by instructing VA to develop a pilot program to provide tuition and other financial support to eligible veterans who enroll in high-technology education programs through eligible training providers.² In response, VA created VET TEC, which is authorized for 5 years from April 2019, when the first contract was issued.³

The Forever GI Bill also included a provision for GAO to assess certain aspects of VET TEC. In response, we began work in July 2021 to assess VET TEC. My statement is based on our preliminary observations from this ongoing work and focuses on VA's efforts to design the VET TEC pilot program.

For this work, we reviewed relevant VA policy documents and laws related to VET TEC. We also met with VA officials knowledgeable about the VET TEC pilot and interviewed two training providers. We compared

¹In 2017, 32 federal programs delivered education, employment, or self-employment services to veterans. GAO, *Military and Veteran Support: Detailed Inventory of Federal Programs to Help Servicemembers Achieve Civilian Employment*, [GAO-19-97R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 17, 2019).

²Under the Act, a high technology program of education is one that (1) is offered by an entity other than an institution of higher learning; (2) does not lead to a degree; and (3) provides instruction in computer programming, computer software, media application, data processing, or information sciences. Pub. L. No. 115-48, tit. I, § 116 (e), 131 Stat. 973, 987-88 (Aug. 16, 2017).

³Pub. L. No. 115-48, tit. I, § 116 (h), 131 Stat. 973, 988 (Aug. 16, 2017). In addition, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 went into effect in January 2021 and increased the authorization of funding for VET TEC from \$15 million per fiscal year to \$45 million per fiscal year.

VA's efforts to GAO's leading practices for effective pilot design.⁴ VA provided technical comments on this statement, which we incorporated, as appropriate. The work on which this statement is based is being conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Background

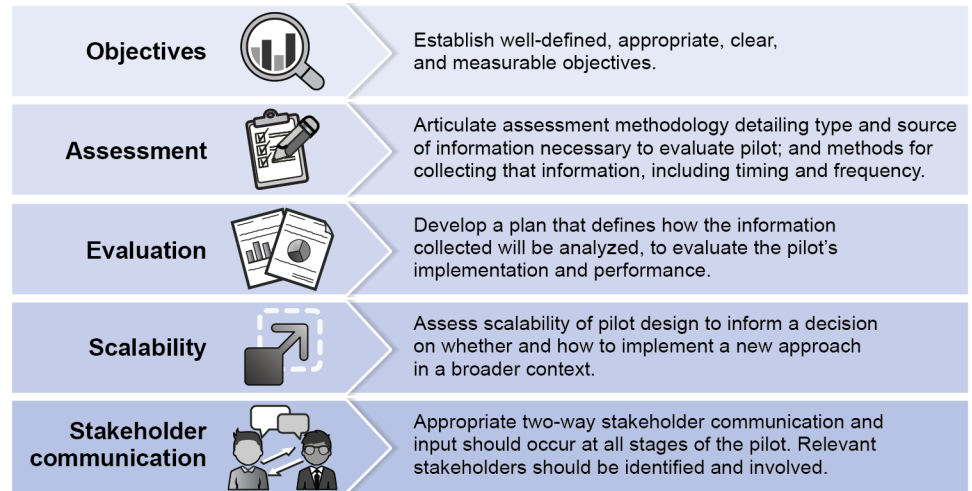
Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design

According to leading practices for effective pilot design, a well-developed and documented pilot program can help ensure that agency assessments produce the necessary information to make effective program and policy decisions. In 2016, we identified five leading practices for designing a well-developed and documented pilot program: objectives, assessment, evaluation, scalability, and stakeholder communication.⁵ These practices enhance the quality, credibility, and usefulness of pilot program evaluations and help ensure that time and resources are used effectively. While each of the five practices serves a purpose on its own, taken together, they form a framework for effective pilot design. (See fig. 1.)

⁴GAO, *Data Act: Section 5 Pilot Design Issues Need to Be Addressed to Meet Goal of Reducing Recipient Reporting Burden*, [GAO-16-438](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 19, 2016).

⁵[GAO-16-438](#)

Figure 1. Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design



Source: GAO. | GAO-22-105720

Accessible Text for Figure 1. Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design

- **Objectives:** Establish well-defined, appropriate, clear, and measurable objectives.
- **Assessment:** Articulate assessment methodology detailing type and source of information necessary to evaluate pilot; and methods for collecting that information, including timing and frequency.
- **Evaluation:** Develop a plan that defines how the information collected will be analyzed, to evaluate the pilot's implementation and performance.
- **Scalability:** Assess scalability of pilot design to inform a decision on whether and how to implement a new approach in a broader context.
- **Stakeholder communication:** Appropriate two-way stakeholder communication and input should occur at all stages of the pilot. Relevant stakeholders should be identified and involved.

Preliminary Results Indicate that VA Has Not Yet Implemented Most Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design but Has Conducted Some Stakeholder Outreach

As a result of our preliminary review, we found that VA has not yet fully implemented four of five leading practices for effective pilot design. Specifically, VA does not have documented, measurable objectives for the program. As such, VA cannot determine an assessment methodology or evaluation plan to measure performance of the pilot. While VA officials said that they will formally evaluate VET TEC towards the end of the pilot,

they have not shared their plan for doing so. In addition, VA is not well positioned to assess the scalability of the pilot program because VA officials may not have a complete picture of veteran or training provider demand for VET TEC. VA has, however, conducted some stakeholder outreach with veterans, training providers, and employers.

Measurable objectives. Based on our preliminary review, VA does not have documented, measurable objectives, which is a leading practice for effective pilot design.⁶

VA officials stated three objectives for VET TEC: (1) determining if the new payment system being used for VET TEC is viable; (2) improving employment outcomes for veterans; and (3) determining whether VET TEC will be able to attract training providers to participate in the program.

VA officials said they are meeting these three objectives for the program; however, they have not documented the specific accomplishments needed to meet them. For example, for its second objective of improving veterans' employment outcomes, VA officials said a successful outcome is employment within 180 days of program completion. While this may be a successful outcome for an individual veteran, VA officials have not identified what would be a successful overall employment rate that would meet the program objective of improving employment outcomes for all veterans completing VET TEC. For objectives one and three, VA has not identified any specific measures of success. As part of our ongoing work, we will continue to review VA's efforts to establish clear, measurable objectives.

Assessment and evaluation. Based on our preliminary findings, VA is not well positioned to assess and evaluate VET TEC. VA cannot determine an assessment methodology or evaluation plan without first having the measurable objectives discussed above. In addition, although VA officials said they will evaluate VET TEC as part of VA's final congressionally mandated report in 2024, VA officials did not provide any specific information about what such an evaluation will entail. In our ongoing work, we plan to follow up with VA to determine what additional steps, if any, the agency is taking to collect the necessary information to assess and evaluate the program.

⁶[GAO-16-438](#)

Scalability. As indicated by our preliminary findings, VA is also not well positioned to determine the benefits or challenges of expanding the pilot program. For example, based on our preliminary discussions, VA officials do not track information that may be helpful to determine veteran demand for the program or the appropriate number of training providers. In terms of veteran demand, VA officials said they know how many veterans are eligible for the program but do not track the number of veterans who were turned away when funding was unavailable, which may be an indicator of additional demand for the program. VA officials said they do not ask training providers to report to VA whether they were unable to enroll a veteran due to lack of funding.

In terms of training providers, VA officials could not tell us how many training providers are needed to meet demand for the current program or an expanded one. In addition, funding for VET TEC has increased, but according to VA, the total number of training provider locations has decreased, as of December 2021. VA officials said training providers may be hesitant to participate in the program because funding may run out before the end of a fiscal year. For example, VA officials said they received \$15 million in funding in October 2019 and exhausted those funds by May 2020. As a result, there were no additional funds available for VET TEC until VA received its next fiscal year appropriation in October 2020. As part of our ongoing work, we plan to further discuss with VA officials how they are assessing scalability, including how they are determining the number of training providers needed, how they will attract additional providers, and why some training provider locations are no longer offering the program.

Stakeholder communication. Another leading practice for effective pilot design is that appropriate two-way stakeholder communication and input should occur at all stages of the pilot, including design, implementation, data gathering, and assessment.⁷ VA officials said they engage with stakeholders, such as training providers and veterans, and have made changes to the program in response. In addition, VA has established an employer consortium, and VA officials said they meet with consortium members to discuss industry needs. The two training providers we spoke with said VA staff have been responsive to their questions, and they praised the program for providing meaningful assistance to veterans. We

⁷[GAO-16-438](#)

plan to conduct further work to learn more about VA's efforts to engage with stakeholders, including additional interviews with training providers.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement for the record.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this statement, please contact Dawn Locke, Acting Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security, 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 statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this statement are Amber Yancey-Carroll (Assistant Director), Nisha R. Hazra (Analyst-in-charge), Gabrielle Crossnoe, James Bennett, Peter Del Toro, Kirsten Lauber, Aaron Olszewski, Ronni Schwartz, and Kate Van Gelder.

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