

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2021, VA paid nearly \$99 billion in disability compensation to over 5 million veterans with service-connected disabilities. VA may ask a veteran to undergo a disability medical exam to help determine eligibility for disability compensation. VHA employees and examiners contracted by VBA conduct these exams.

The Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 includes a provision for GAO to review certain aspects of VA's disability exam program. This report examines (1) VA's use of telehealth for disability medical exams, (2) how VA and its vendors used a temporary expansion of license portability, and (3) VHA's efforts to recruit and retain examiners and provide information to its medical facilities to inform such efforts.

GAO analyzed data on VA's use of telehealth from April 2020 through September 2022 and reviewed relevant VA guidance. GAO compared VA's guidance and practices to relevant federal standards for internal control. In addition, GAO interviewed officials from VA, exam vendors, and a non-generalizable sample of five VHA medical facilities, selected in part for variation in the number of exams completed and geographic location.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that VBA develop and document formal procedures to monitor license portability use and that VHA clarify guidance to facilities to define key terminology. VA generally agreed with the recommendations.

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VA DISABILITY EXAMS

Actions Needed to Clarify Program Requirements Regarding Examiners

What GAO Found

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reported expanding their use of telehealth for disability medical exams since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both VA officials and the vendors that VBA contracts with to provide examiners reported a range of benefits associated with telehealth use, including more easily reaching veterans in underserved areas. VBA's vendors and VHA primarily used telehealth to conduct mental health exams, according to GAO analysis and interviews. However, the full extent of telehealth use is unknown because VHA medical facilities did not accurately record this information. In September 2021, VHA provided guidance to facilities to improve data collection.

VBA officials and vendors said that the temporary expansion of license portability—which allows contracted examiners in certain specialties to conduct exams in states other than where they are licensed—also expanded access in underserved areas. However, the guidelines VBA provided to its contracted exam vendors included inaccuracies, and VBA conducted inadequate monitoring of the vendors. This contributed to vendors allowing ineligible examiners to conduct exams using license portability. Examples of issues GAO found include:

- **Inaccurate guidelines:** VBA incorrectly listed dentists as eligible for license portability in the guidelines it provided to vendors. This contributed to two of VBA's three vendors using dentists to conduct exams in states other than where they were licensed.
- **Inadequate monitoring:** VBA did not review vendor-reported data to identify the types of examiners using license portability. GAO's review of these data found that one vendor used optometrists to conduct exams in states other than where they were licensed, which VBA officials said was not permitted.

During the course of GAO's review, VBA took steps to address these deficiencies. VBA issued new guidance memos to its vendors specifying that dentists and optometrists are not eligible for license portability. VBA also updated its monitoring process to review data on the types of examiners used for such exams. However, VBA has not yet developed formal procedures or documentation to guide this monitoring process. Without doing so, VBA cannot be confident that vendors are using license portability as intended.

VHA did not provide medical facilities with clear information to inform the recruitment and retention of VHA examiners. For example, VHA provided facilities with guidance to halt programmatic changes and comply with a requirement to pause efforts to eliminate examiner positions. However, the guidance did not clearly define what constituted a programmatic change or an examiner position. As a result, officials at the five facilities GAO selected for review had different interpretations of how and whether the guidance applied to them. Without clarifying the guidance, facilities may not implement it as intended, and they risk not being positioned to help address veterans' exam needs.