

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-15](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

VA operates one of the largest health care delivery systems in the nation and provides billions of dollars in benefits and services to veterans and their families. However, VA faces serious and long-standing problems with management challenges and veterans' access to care and disability benefits. For example, as of December 2018, VA reported an overall staff vacancy rate of 11 percent at VHA medical facilities, including vacancies of more than 24,000 medical and dental positions, and around 900 human resource positions. Ensuring VA, VHA, and VBA have a pipeline of talent to fill leadership positions and mission-critical occupations is key to addressing these challenges.

The VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017 includes a provision for GAO to review succession planning policies and guidance at VA and its administrations. This report addresses the extent to which succession planning policies and procedures at VA, VHA, and VBA are consistent with key leading practices.

GAO reviewed agency documents related to succession planning for leadership positions and mission-critical occupations, and interviewed agency officials. To identify key leading practices, GAO reviewed GAO's past work and Office of Personnel Management guidance.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations. VA should develop a department-wide succession plan and update its succession planning directive. VHA and VBA should fully incorporate key leading practices for succession planning. VA agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-20-15](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or [goldenkoff@gao.gov](mailto:goldenkoff@gao.gov).

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## DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

# Improved Succession Planning Would Help Address Long-Standing Workforce Problems

## What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) have not fully incorporated key succession planning leading practices (see table).

**Assessment of VA, VHA, and VBA Succession Planning Efforts against Key Leading Practices**

Leading practice	Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)	Veterans Health Administration (VHA)	Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
Obtain active support and participation from leadership	○	●	●
Develop succession plans aligned with strategic goals	○	●	○
Analyze current and future workforce gaps	○	●	●
Identify strategies for closing workforce gaps	●	●	●
Monitor, evaluate, and update succession plans and strategies	○	●	○

Legend: ● Met ● Partially Met ○ Not Met

Source: GAO analysis of VA's, VHA's, and VBA's succession planning efforts. | [GAO-20-15](#)

VA lacks a current, department-wide succession plan. According to VA officials, VA has not produced a department-wide succession plan since 2009 due to leadership turnover. VA officials said the 2009 plan does not reflect their current succession planning efforts. Establishing a succession plan would help VA identify and develop high-potential staff to meet VA's mission over the long term.

VHA's succession plan is consistent with some leading practices, but our prior work found that VHA's physician staffing data are incomplete. Also, VHA performs limited monitoring and evaluation of its plans. Additional monitoring and evaluation could help VHA assess the effectiveness of its strategies in achieving its goals.

VBA's plan includes some analysis of workforce gaps for mission-critical occupations. However, VBA's plan does not address leadership positions or fully incorporate key leading practices for mission-critical occupations, such as veterans claims examiners. Developing a succession planning process for leadership positions and fully incorporating key leading practices into its existing processes could help VBA better meet its current and future workforce needs.

VA has not updated its succession planning directive since 2003 and VA officials told us that the directive does not incorporate legal requirements put in place since then. The directive establishes requirements and responsibilities for succession planning across VA. VA officials stated that they have not updated the directive because of leadership turnover and changes in legal requirements. Updating the directive could help to ensure it reflects relevant legal requirements. In addition, we found that VA, VHA, and VBA do not follow all of the requirements outlined in the directive. Updating the directive could help to clarify and recommunicate succession planning roles and responsibilities across the department.