

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-28](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

VA's VR&E program helps veterans with service-connected disabilities obtain and maintain suitable employment. VR&E participants work with vocational counselors to develop career goals and employment plans. However, some veteran service organizations have questioned the consistency with which participants are treated by counselors in developing these plans. GAO was asked to review how VR&E vocational counselors work with participants to select employment plans, and VA's efforts to ensure high quality and consistency.

This report examines (1) the factors that vocational counselors considered when developing VR&E participants' plans and how consistently they applied those factors, and (2) the extent to which VA trains and monitors vocational counselors to ensure a consistent, high-quality approach to helping veterans develop plans. GAO analyzed VR&E quality review data from fiscal years 2016 through 2018; reviewed a random, non-generalizable sample of 34 VR&E case files from 2019; reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and VA policy; and interviewed VR&E counselors and other program officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA assess the consistency of VR&E plans among counselors by, for example, comparing counselors' responses to identical hypothetical cases, and take mitigating steps if warranted. VA concurred with the recommendation and planned to develop a consistency study.

View [GAO-20-28](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda at (202) 512-7215 or [curdae@gao.gov](mailto:curdae@gao.gov).

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# VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT

## Additional Assessment Could Enhance Consistency among Counselors

### What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) counselors in GAO's review generally considered a set of common factors when developing plans to help veterans with disabilities obtain employment, but counselors explained that inconsistent application of those factors likely occurs. These factors included the veteran's disability, his or her interests, and local labor market conditions. The 34 VR&E plans GAO reviewed showed that counselors' generally considered and documented these factors (see table). Counselors in each of the three regional offices GAO visited said that plans are individualized to suit the veteran's needs and as a result will differ because each veteran's case is unique. Nonetheless, these counselors acknowledged that some veterans with similar circumstances likely receive different types of plans given differences in counselor judgment and experience.

**Common Factors VR&E Counselors Considered When Developing Veterans' Plans and Number of Case Files GAO Reviewed in Which the Factor Was Documented**

Factor	Number of case files (out of 34)
Functional limitation from disability	34
Job/career interests	34
Vocational aptitude test results	34
Prior education	34
Prior work or military experience	34
Local labor market information	32

Source: GAO analysis of Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) case files. | GAO-20-28

Note: The table is not intended to provide a complete list of all factors that counselors took into consideration during plan development. It represents factors that were documented in all, or nearly all, case files we reviewed.

VA trains and monitors counselors to develop complete VR&E plans but does not assess the consistency of plans across counselors for veterans with similar circumstances. VA's training for VR&E counselors emphasizes that plans should accommodate each veteran's individual needs, abilities, aptitudes, and interests. In designing training for counselors, VA followed principles identified by GAO for strategically developing training. VA monitors the completeness of VR&E plans through national and regional quality reviews that check, among other elements, whether plans have an employment focus and include needed services. However, these quality reviews do not assess the consistency of plans developed by different counselors. VR&E officials explained that the agency has not yet conducted such an analysis because of other priorities, but agreed that it could do so. One of the objectives of VR&E's central office is to provide training and guidance to help ensure consistency among field staff. Assessing consistency across counselors would better position VA to mitigate any unfair differences in plans for similarly-situated veterans.