

# GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-514](#), a report to congressional addresses

## Why GAO Did This Study

VHA provides health care to more than 10 million veterans each year, offering a range of services at approximately 170 VAMCs nationwide. In January 2020, components of VHA's emergency management system began coordinating the agency's efforts to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic so VAMCs could continue the delivery of services while maintaining the health and safety of patients and staff.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to report on its ongoing monitoring and oversight efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report describes VHA efforts to prepare for COVID-19, including (1) how selected VAMCs implemented VHA's COVID-19 preparedness strategies; and (2) the steps VHA took to oversee VAMCs' implementation of preparedness strategies.

GAO reviewed VHA plans, policies, and guidance related to COVID-19 preparedness, including VHA's COVID-19 Response Plan. GAO interviewed officials at four VAMCs, a nongeneralizable sample selected based on hospital complexity and geographic diversity, as well as officials from their associated VISNs. GAO also interviewed officials from VHA's Central Office, Office of Emergency Management, HOC, and other VHA offices.

GAO provided a draft of this report to VA. In response, VA provided one technical comment, which was incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-21-514](#). For more information, contact A. Nicole Clowers at (202) 512-7114 or [clowersa@gao.gov](mailto:clowersa@gao.gov).

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## COVID-19

### Implementation and Oversight of Preparedness Strategies at Veterans Affairs Medical Centers

## What GAO Found

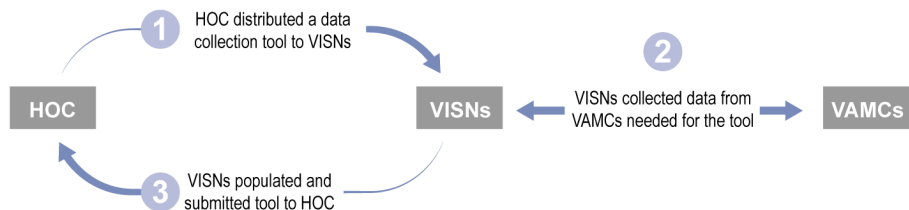
Beginning in January 2020, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) took actions to help the Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers (VAMC) prepare for COVID-19. VHA's Office of Emergency Management facilitated the development of VHA's COVID-19 Response Plan, which defined preparedness strategies for VAMCs to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. According to VHA, preparedness refers to the development of plans, resources, and capabilities to manage and recover from the effects of emergencies. Plans for the safety of staff and patients, identification of sufficient supplies and capacity, and coherent communication were among the identified strategies.

VAMCs began implementing these strategies in February 2020. Officials from four selected VAMCs reported using similar approaches to implement VHA's preparedness strategies, such as

- developed plans for screening and testing;
- trained staff on personal protective equipment (PPE) use;
- identified the capability to expand beds in the event of a patient surge;
- conducted problem solving activities to identify gaps in response capabilities;
- counted PPE and calculated consumption rates; and
- communicated safety information to patients.

VHA oversaw VAMCs' implementation of COVID-19 preparedness strategies by collecting data on the VAMCs' efforts and holding VHA-wide conference calls. VHA's Healthcare Operations Center (HOC) worked with Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) to gather data from VAMCs on a daily basis.

#### HOC Data Collection on COVID-19 Preparedness Strategies Implemented at VAMCs



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration, Healthcare Operations Center (HOC), Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN), and Department of Veterans Affairs medical center (VAMC) information. | GAO-21-514

The VHA-wide conference calls included officials from VHA Central Office, VISNs, and VAMCs, among others, and focused on the data collected. Some topics discussed included the number of VAMC staff able to provide PPE training and VAMC plans to screen staff and patients for COVID-19. VHA-wide calls were also a way to discuss data collection challenges and for VAMCs and VISNs to share best practices. In addition to the preparedness issues in this report, GAO expects to continue examining VHA's actions to address COVID-19.