

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105675](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Health, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Vet Centers provide a range of services, including individual, group, marriage, and family counseling; as well as counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder and military sexual trauma. Vet Centers supplement, and are separate from, mental health services provided through Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers.

This statement describes the status of VHA's efforts to implement the four recommendations from GAO's September 2020 report, GAO-20-652, which VHA concurred with. It also includes preliminary observations from ongoing work examining Vet Centers.

For this statement, GAO reviewed VHA's reports of steps RCS has taken to address GAO's recommendations. GAO also reviewed RCS's policies and requirements related to Vet Centers, and interviewed RCS officials and staff from five Vet Centers, selected for variation in factors such as geographic location, among others.

View [GAO-22-105675](#). For more information, contact Sharon M. Silas at (202) 512-7114 or [silass@gao.gov](mailto:silass@gao.gov).

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## VA VET CENTERS

### Continued Attention to GAO Recommendations Could Help Meet Veteran and Servicemember Needs

## What GAO Found

The Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) provides counseling to eligible veterans, servicemembers, and their families through 300 Vet Centers located in community settings. RCS has taken some steps to address GAO's four September 2020 recommendations to improve Vet Center operational processes:

- **Evaluate counselor productivity expectations.** RCS has begun to collect information that can be useful in a future evaluation of Vet Center counselor productivity, but as of January 2022, had not conducted the evaluation GAO recommended in 2020. GAO recommended the evaluation in light of counselor reports of changing work practices in ways that could negatively affect client care and continued confusion about the expectations.
- **Periodically review counselor productivity expectations.** RCS officials stated in January 2022 that they had developed a plan and time frames for periodically reassessing counselor productivity expectations, as GAO recommended in 2020. GAO is reviewing this information. Developing a plan and time frames for periodic re-evaluation can provide RCS with important opportunities to apply lessons learned and remediate any potentially negative effects.
- **Incorporate key practices in its staffing model.** As of January 2022, RCS had not stated whether its plans for a revised staffing model for Vet Centers will incorporate key practices in staffing model design—such as involving key stakeholders—as GAO recommended in September 2020. A staffing model that fully incorporates these key practices GAO identified would help ensure Vet Center staffing is responsive to changing veterans' needs.
- **Periodically reassess the staffing model.** In January 2022, RCS officials reported that they planned to draft guidance to establish periodic reviews of its new staffing model once implemented, as GAO recommended in 2020. Regularly updating staffing models in a timely manner can help support agencies' activities and decision making.

GAO's preliminary observations, based on its ongoing work on Vet Centers, suggest that Vet Centers have some processes in place that have the potential to help ensure Vet Centers provide appropriate and effective services. GAO's ongoing work also suggests that RCS and Vet Centers may have the opportunity to continue to take additional actions that will help ensure Vet Centers are effectively serving veterans, servicemembers, and their families.