



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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JUN 30 1976

HUMAN RESOURCES
DIVISION

Mr. Wallace E. Busbee
Director, Internal Audit Service
Veterans Administration



Dear Mr. Busbee:

We surveyed the Veterans' Administration (VA) vocational rehabilitation program administered by VA's Department of Veterans Benefits (DVB). Our survey was conducted at VA's central office, Washington, D.C.; the Data Processing Center (DPC) at St. Paul, Minnesota; and the Waco, Houston, New Orleans, Baltimore, St. Paul and Washington VA regional offices (VARO).

The objective of our survey was to develop an approach for determining program effectiveness. Our efforts were hindered by the lack of a reliable and useful data base for the program.

Our survey indicated problems with the Vocational Rehabilitation Master Record File (file). We noted that:

- Substantial amounts of data for the file either had not been entered or it had been entered erroneously.
- The file did not contain certain types of information needed for program management.

Presently, we do not plan to initiate a review of the program.

OMISSIONS AND ERRORS IN
THE FILE

In June 1975, the VA converted its vocational rehabilitation data management system from a punched card system to a centralized automated computer tape system to provide more reliable and timely statistical reports. Our survey indicated that the conversion had not yet accomplished what VA had envisioned because substantial amounts of data for the file either had not been entered or it had been entered erroneously.

Those data fields in the file which were affected by omitted or erroneous information included (1) date counseled, (2) disposition of counseling, (3) combined degree of disability, (4) date of birth, (5) effective reason for initiating an action, (6) date of discharge, and (7) date of claim. In addition, based on a manual count by VARO personnel,

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the names of as many as 3,900 veterans in training as of March 1976 were not in the file.

VA officials said that such problems began during the conversion period when omissions and errors in the punched card system were transferred to the automated system. To expedite the conversion, the input program used to convert the cards to tape was revised so that the computer would accept each card record and establish a corresponding tape record, even though the card was inaccurate. VA officials also stated that a low priority was given to processing data for the program, which hindered efforts to identify and resolve problems with the file.

In addition, coding instructions for preparation of the system's input documents were inadequate. DVB Circular 20-75-59, which outlined the coding procedures for preparation of VA Form 22-4624 (chapter 31 Status Code Sheet), was written so that its users had to do much cross referencing to VA manuals, forms and other sources of information. Some VA officials believed that the format used in outlining the procedures could have easily caused confusion, especially where only a small number of input documents were completed in any one period.

VA officials told us that actions have been initiated which should help upgrade the accuracy of the file. Included among these was a planned three-phase approach to updating the file. Phase I called for extracting data from the chapter 31 pay records at VA DPC, Hines, Illinois, and comparing it with the file of VA DPC, St. Paul, Minnesota. Where there is not a match, the file will be changed to conform with pay records. Phase II provided for the updated file to be further updated by matching it with the Compensation and Pension Master Record File in a manner similar to that in Phase I. Phase III called for including omitted and correcting erroneous data in the file. This would be accomplished by sending a list of omissions and errors to each VARO for appropriate corrective action. All the phases were expected to be completed by September 30, 1976.

USEFULNESS OF THE FILE TO MANAGEMENT

The file did not contain certain types of information needed for program management. VA officials said this included (1) demographic data about veterans served (which could be related to corresponding data about total potential population), (2) information on services provided each veteran, and (3) information on the outcomes of these services (in terms of training and employment status).

We agree that more information is needed to effectively manage the program. For example, employment statistics to measure whether the basic intent of the program was being accomplished were inadequate.

We did only a limited amount of work in this area, but it is our impression, based upon discussions with responsible VA officials, that the basic reasons the file did not contain certain types of information needed by program management were (1) the low priority given to this program because of its size in relation to other VA education programs and, (2) the lack of coordination between program managers and VA officials responsible for initiating and implementing changes in the data management system.

CONCLUSIONS

Management has not had suitable nor reliable data needed to determine whether the program is operating effectively. The correction of the file errors and the development of appropriate, additional program information should help.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the Chief Benefits Director, DVB, set a high priority on upgrading the quality of program data. To upgrade the accuracy of the data currently in the file, actions should include implementing the three-phase plan as soon as possible.

To avoid introducing more errors into the file, we recommend

--that coding instructions be compiled in one manual.

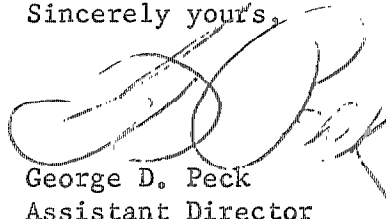
--instituting an edit program for the file which is flexible enough to detect errors in data currently being entered as well as that which will be entered to provide management with additional information needed to operate the program more effectively.

We also recommend that the Chief Benefits Director, DVB, identify the types of information required by program managers and then have them coordinate with other responsible officials to see that it is developed.

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesy extended to us by VA personnel during the survey.

Please advise us of any action taken or planned on the matters discussed in this report.

Sincerely yours,



George D. Peck
Assistant Director