



Highlights of [GAO-03-1045](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has a large inventory of claims for benefits under its compensation and pension programs. The Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs has pledged to substantially reduce this inventory in order to improve timeliness. In response, VBA emphasized producing more claims decisions per year. GAO was asked to ascertain how accuracy has changed since VBA increased its emphasis on production and to report on the agency's efforts to ensure the accuracy of its decisions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VBA

- report the accuracy of VBA disability compensation and pension claims decisions to the Congress and other stakeholders in a manner that allows for valid comparisons of accuracy across fiscal years and
- better hold regional offices accountable for the accuracy of their claims decisions, by increasing the use of its regional office accuracy data.

VBA concurred with GAO's recommendations and provided additional information about its efforts to improve accuracy.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-1045.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7215 or bascettac@gao.gov.

VETERANS' BENEFITS

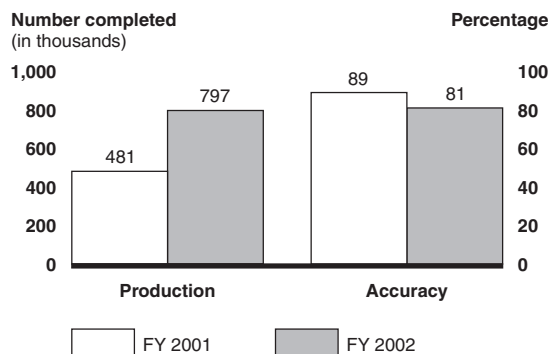
Improvements Needed in the Reporting and Use of Data on the Accuracy of Disability Claims Decisions

What GAO Found

From fiscal years 2001 to 2002, VBA's accuracy of decision-making in the disability compensation and pension benefit programs declined from 89 percent to 81 percent. The agency had reported a slight improvement in accuracy between fiscal years 2001 and 2002—from 78 percent to 80 percent. However, we found that these two annual figures were not comparable because the agency had substantially changed the way it measured accuracy for fiscal year 2002. Although VBA acknowledged a change in its accuracy measure in its annual report to the Congress, the agency did not revise its 2001 figure to allow for an appropriate comparison with 2002. VBA officials GAO spoke with suggested several factors that may have contributed to the decline in accuracy. We were not able to quantify the relative contribution of these factors. These factors included VBA's emphasis on increasing claims decisions, the specific processing requirements of the Veterans Claims Assistance Act (VCAA) of 2000, and the relative inexperience of VBA's claims processing staff.

To help ensure accountability for accuracy, VBA set accuracy standards for its regional offices. Although VBA has regional office-level accuracy data, it has not made full use of this information to encourage better performance from regional offices with low accuracy scores. For example, in fiscal year 2002, VBA did not require offices with poor accuracy to prepare improvement plans and gave performance awards to two offices that clearly failed to meet VBA's accuracy goal.

VBA Compensation and Pension Rating Products Decided and Accuracy Rates, Fiscal Years 2001-2002



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Benefits Administration data.

Note: Accuracy rates in the above chart are estimates based on samples of rating products completed in fiscal years 2001 and 2002 and have margins of error of about plus or minus 1 percentage point at the 95-percent level of confidence. We determined these accuracy rates by comparing substantially similar questions for the 2 fiscal years that focused on whether the decision to grant or deny benefits was correct. The fiscal year 2002 accuracy score includes a specific question on proper VCAA pre-decision notification that VBA did not include in its fiscal year 2001 quality reviews.