



Highlights of [GAO-08-561](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

### Why GAO Did This Study

Faced with an increase in disability claims, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is hiring a large number of new claims processing staff. We were asked to determine: (1) What training is provided to new and experienced claims processors and how uniform is this training? (2) To what extent has VBA planned this training strategically, and how well is the training designed, implemented, and evaluated? and (3) To what extent is the performance management system for claims processors consistent with generally accepted practices? To answer the questions, GAO reviewed documents including VBA policies and training curricula; interviewed VBA central office officials; visited 4 of VBA's 57 regional offices, which were selected to achieve diversity in geographic location, number of staff, and officewide accuracy in claims processing; and compared VBA's training and performance management to generally accepted practices identified by GAO.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that VBA collect feedback on training provided by regional offices and use this feedback to further improve training, and hold staff accountable for meeting their training requirement. GAO also recommends that the VA assess and, if necessary, adjust its process for placing staff in overall performance categories. In its comments, VA agreed with GAO's conclusions and concurred with the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-561](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni (202) 512-7215 [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).

## VETERANS' BENEFITS

### Increased Focus on Evaluation and Accountability Would Enhance Training and Performance Management for Claims Processors

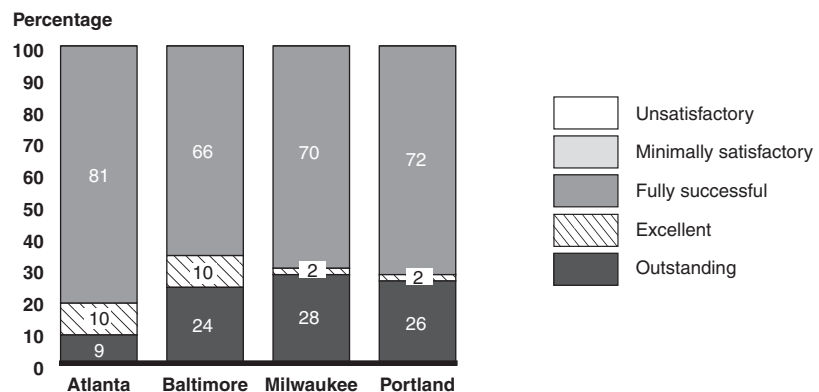
#### What GAO Found

VBA has a standardized training curriculum for new staff and a training requirement for all staff, but does not hold staff accountable for meeting this requirement. The curriculum for new staff includes what is referred to as centralized training and training at their home offices. All claims processors must complete 80 hours of training annually, which may cover a mix of topics identified centrally and by regional offices. Individual staff members face no consequences for failing to meet the training requirement, however, and VBA has not tracked training completion by individuals. It is implementing a new system that should provide this capacity.

Although VBA has taken steps to plan its training strategically, the agency does not adequately evaluate training and may be falling short in training design and implementation. VBA has a training board that assesses its overall training needs. However, the agency does not consistently collect feedback on regional office training, and both new and experienced staff GAO interviewed raised issues with their training. Some new staff raised concerns about the consistency of training provided by different instructors and about the usefulness of an on-line learning tool. Some experienced staff believe that 80 hours of training annually is not necessary, some training was not relevant for them, and workload pressures impede training.

The performance management system for claims processors generally conforms to GAO-identified key practices, but the formula for assigning overall ratings may prevent managers from fully acknowledging and rewarding staff for higher levels of performance. The system aligns individual and organizational performance measures and requires that staff be given feedback throughout the year. However, VBA officials raised concerns about the formula used to assign overall ratings. Almost all staff in the offices GAO visited were placed in only two of five overall rating categories, although managers said greater differentiation would more accurately reflect actual performance differences. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has not examined the ratings distribution, but acknowledges a potential issue with its formula and is considering changes.

**Fiscal Year 2007 Appraisals for Four Offices Were Concentrated in Two Categories**



Source: VBA regional offices.