VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

Better Accountability and Access Would Improve the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent military conflicts have increased interest in federal efforts to support servicemembers preparing to leave military service. Through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), in collaboration with the Department of Defense (DOD), has made efforts to streamline access to veterans' disability benefits by allowing some servicemembers to file a claim and obtain a single comprehensive exam prior to discharge. This report examines VA's efforts to manage the BDD program and how VA and DOD are addressing challenges servicemembers face in accessing BDD. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed relevant documents and data, interviewed officials, and conducted site visits and interviews at selected military bases.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA improve timeliness and accuracy measures for BDD and predischarge claims data, collect additional data to monitor these claims, evaluate the BDD paperless process initiative, and improve its reviews of BDD operations. We recommend that DOD improve how it measures its goal for participation in VA benefits briefings. We also recommend that VA and DOD disseminate promising practices for the cooperative exam process. DOD concurred with our recommendations. VA generally agreed with our recommendations but did not agree to track the timeliness of BDD and predischarge claims development.

What GAO Found

While VA awards compensation more quickly under BDD than through its traditional process, VA's efforts to manage the BDD program provide limited accountability for achieving optimal results. For example, the agency does not measure the time local VA personnel are developing BDD claims and thus has limited information on potential problems during claim development. Also, VA has reviewed BDD operations in only 16 of the 40 regional offices with the program. Reviewers in those 16 offices conducted limited assessments of some key aspects of program operations, such as ensuring that VA personnel fully developed claims prior to sending them to be rated. Finally, VA has not evaluated initiatives to improve the program, such as its effort to achieve paperless processing of BDD claims. As a result of these gaps in oversight, VA has limited information on how well the program is working or whether further improvements are warranted.

BDD Timeliness Measures Do Not Include Claims Development
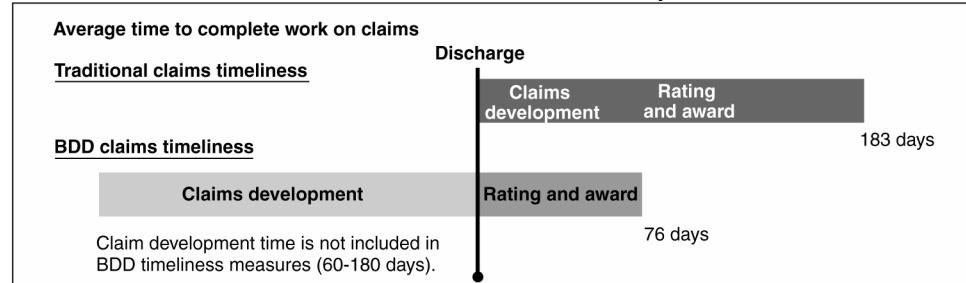
Source: GAO analysis of VA information.

VA and DOD have established BDD sites where most servicemembers discharging from the military have access to the program and issued policy guidance in July 2008 to extend access even further. Further, the agencies implemented an alternative predischarge program for members who have no or limited access to the BDD program, such as members of the National Guard or Reserves. However, whether the predischarge program expedites benefits for some members unable to use BDD cannot easily be determined, because VA does not collect sufficient data on these claims. To further improve BDD access, VA and DOD raise awareness of the program through VA benefits briefings, although attendance is not always mandatory. DOD recently established a goal of 85 percent attendance, but has not developed a plan for reaching this goal or a reliable method to measure participation. Finally, while a national agreement between VA and DOD gives local officials flexibility in implementing the cooperative exam process—a key aspect of BDD to streamline access to benefits—some bases have faced challenges maintaining local memoranda of understanding. VA and DOD have not recently evaluated or disseminated promising practices that could address such challenges.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**