



Highlights of GAO-06-561T, a testimony to the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, House Committee on Armed Services

Why GAO Did This Study

The House Subcommittee on Military Personnel asked GAO to discuss the results of its recent study on the Military Disability Evaluation System. In this study, GAO determined (1) how current DOD policies and guidance for disability determinations compare for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and what policies are specific to reserve component members of the military; (2) what oversight and quality control mechanisms are in place at DOD and these three services of the military to ensure consistent and timely disability decisions for active and reserve component members As shown in figure 1.; and (3) how disability decisions, ratings, and processing times compare for active and reserve component members of the Army, the largest branch of the service, and what factors might explain any differences.

What GAO Recommends

In this report, GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense take certain steps to improve DOD oversight of the military disability evaluation system, including evaluating the appropriateness of timeliness standards for case processing, and assessing the adequacy of training for disability evaluation staff.

The Secretary concurred and indicated that our recommendations would be implemented.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-561T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robert E. Robertson at (202) 512-7215 or robertsonr@gao.gov.

MILITARY DISABILITY EVALUATION

Ensuring Consistent and Timely Outcomes for Reserve and Active Duty Service Members

What GAO Found

In March 2006, GAO reported that policies and guidance for military disability determinations differ somewhat among the Army, Navy, and Air Force. DOD has explicitly given the services the responsibility to set up their own processes for certain aspects of the disability evaluation system and has given them latitude in how they go about this. As a result, each service implements its system somewhat differently. Further, the laws that govern military disability and the policies that the Department of Defense (DOD) and the services have developed to implement these laws have led reservists to have different experiences in the disability system compared to active duty members. For example, because they are not on active duty at all times, it takes longer for reservists to accrue the 20 years of service that may be needed to earn monthly disability retirement benefits.

While DOD has issued policies and guidance to promote consistent and timely disability decisions for active duty and reserve disability cases, DOD is not monitoring compliance. To encourage consistent decision-making, DOD requires all services to use multiple reviewers to evaluate disability cases. Furthermore, federal law requires that they use a standardized disability rating system to classify the severity of the medical impairment. In addition, DOD periodically convenes the Disability Advisory Council, comprised of DOD and service officials, to review and update disability policy and to discuss current issues. However, neither DOD nor the services systematically determine the consistency of disability decision-making. DOD has issued timeliness goals for processing disability cases, but is not collecting information to determine compliance. Finally, the consistency and timeliness of decisions depend, in part, on the training that disability staff receive. However, DOD is not exercising oversight over training for staff in the disability system.

While GAO's review of the military disability evaluation system's policies and oversight covered the three services, GAO examined Army data on disability ratings and benefit decisions from 2001 to 2005. After controlling for many of the differences between reserve and active duty soldiers, GAO found that among soldiers who received disability ratings, the ratings of reservists were comparable to those of active duty soldiers with similar conditions. GAO's analyses of the military disability benefit decisions for the soldiers who were determined to be unfit for duty were less definitive, but suggest that Army reservists were less likely to receive permanent disability retirement or lump sum disability severance pay than their active duty counterparts. However, data on possible reasons for this difference, such as whether the condition existed prior to service, were not available for our analysis. GAO did not compare processing times for Army reserve and active duty cases because we found that Army's data needed to calculate processing times were unreliable. However, Army statistics based on this data indicate that from fiscal year 2001 through 2005, reservists' cases took longer to process than active duty cases.