



Highlights of [GAO-05-655T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

## Why GAO Did This Study

The House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs asked GAO to update a 2002 study to determine what VA has done to (1) correct reported weaknesses in methods used by the Board to select decisions for quality review and calculate the accuracy rates reported by the Board and (2) address the potential for inconsistency in decision-making at all levels of adjudication in VA, including VA's 57 regional offices and the Board. GAO said in 2002 that VA had not studied consistency even though adjudicator judgment is inherently required in the decision-making process, and state-to-state variations in the average disability compensation payment per veteran raised questions about consistency. In January 2003, in part because of concerns about consistency, GAO designated VA's disability program as high-risk.

## What GAO Recommends

This testimony updates actions VA has taken to implement recommendations from the GAO's 2002 report, in which GAO recommended that VA take steps to (1) correct the weaknesses in the Board's sampling and accuracy rate calculation methods and (2) establish a system for assessing the consistency of decision-making at all levels of adjudication in VA, including VA's regional offices and the Board.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-655T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-655T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101.

# VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

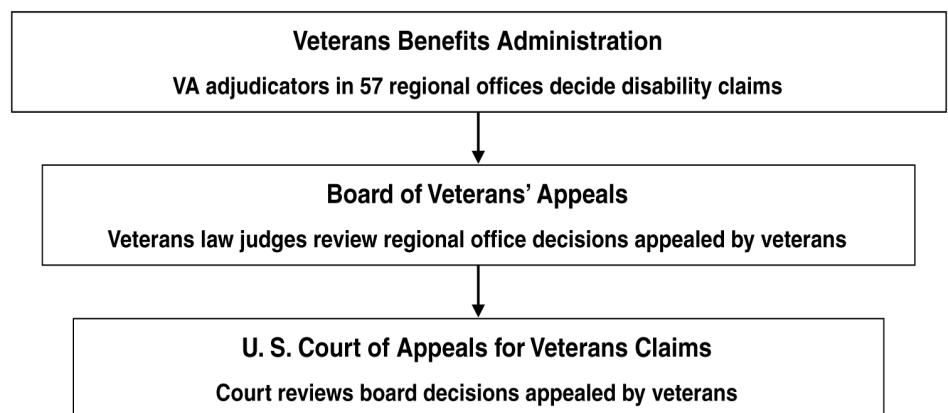
## Board of Veterans' Appeals Has Made Improvements in Quality Assurance, but Challenges Remain for VA in Assuring Consistency

### What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken steps to respond to GAO's 2002 recommendations to correct weaknesses in the methods for selecting decisions by the Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board) for quality review and calculating the accuracy rates reported by the Board. Specifically, the Board now ensures that decisions made near the end of the fiscal year are included in the quality review sample, and the Board now excludes from its accuracy rate calculations any errors that do not have the potential for resulting in a reversal by or remand from the court. GAO found that the Board had not yet revised its formula for calculating accuracy rates in order to properly weight the quality review results for original Board decisions versus the results for Board decisions on cases remanded by the court. However, GAO believes correcting this calculation method will not materially affect the Board's reported accuracy rates.

VA still lacks a systematic method for ensuring the consistency of decision-making within VA as a whole, but has begun efforts to understand why average compensation payments per veteran vary widely from state to state. These efforts include studies underway by VA's Office of Inspector General and the Veterans Benefits Administration, which oversees the operations of VA's regional offices. Some variation is expected since adjudicators often must use judgment in making disability decisions, but VA faces the challenge of determining whether the extent of variation is confined within a range that knowledgeable professionals could agree is reasonable.

### Steps in the Veterans Disability Claims and Appeals Process



Source: Prepared by GAO using information from VBA, Board of Veterans' Appeals, and U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.