



Highlights of [GAO-03-756T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

In previous GAO reports and testimonies on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and in its ongoing reviews, GAO identified major management challenges related to enhancing access to health care, improving the efficiency of health care delivery, and improving the effectiveness of disability programs. This testimony underscores the importance of continuing to make progress in addressing these challenges and ultimately overcoming them.

## What Remains to Be Done

VA remains challenged to:

- ensure timely, convenient, and equitable access to health care, including hospital, specialty outpatient, and nursing home care;
- realign its health care delivery infrastructure and implement other management initiatives to increase the efficiency of the delivery of patient support services; and
- seek solutions to modernize its disability programs as well as improve the timeliness and quality of disability claims decisions.

# DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

## Key Management Challenges in Health and Disability Programs

### What GAO Found

VA has taken actions to address key challenges in its health care and disability programs. However, growing demand for health care and a potentially larger and more complex disability workload may make VA's challenges in these areas more complex.

- **Enhancing access to health care.** VA is challenged to deliver timely, convenient health care to its enrolled veteran population. Too many veterans continue to travel too far and wait too long for care. However, shifting care closer to where veterans live is complicated by stakeholder interests. In addition, VA's efforts to reduce waiting times may be complicated by an anticipated short-term surge in demand for specialty outpatient care. VA also faces difficult challenges in providing equitable access to nursing home care services to a growing elderly veteran population.
- **Improving the efficiency of health care delivery.** VA is challenged to find more efficient ways to meet veterans' demand for health care. VA operates a large portfolio of aged buildings that is not well aligned to efficiently meet veterans' needs. As a result, VA faces difficult realignment decisions involving capital investments, consolidations, closures, and contracting with local providers. VA also faces challenges in implementing management changes to improve the efficiency of patient support services, such as food and laundry services.
- **Improving the effectiveness of disability programs.** VA is challenged to find more effective ways to compensate veterans with disabilities. VA's outdated disability determination process does not reflect a current view of the relationship between impairments and work capacity. Advances in medicine and technology have allowed some individuals with disabilities to live more independently and work more effectively. VA also faces continuing challenges to improve the timeliness, quality and consistency of claims processing. Major improvements may require fundamental program changes.

GAO designated federal real property, including VA health care infrastructure, and federal disability programs, including VA disability benefits, as high-risk areas in January 2003. GAO did this to draw attention to the need for broad-based transformation in these areas, which is critical to improving the government's performance and ensuring accountability within expected resource limits.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-756T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-756T).

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