VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

VA Can Improve Its Procedures for Obtaining Military Service Records

Why GAO Did This Study

The Ranking Democratic Member, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, asked GAO to determine (1) whether VA's internal assessments indicate its regional offices are complying with the requirements of the Veterans Claims Assistance Act (VCAA) of 2000 for obtaining military service records for veterans' disability compensation claims and (2) whether VBA could improve its procedures for obtaining military service records for claims involving post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA take the following actions.

To ensure the quality of research done on behalf of regional offices by VBA's records research unit at the National Personnel Records Center, VBA should implement a systematic quality review program to evaluate and measure the accuracy of the unit's responses to regional office research requests.

To improve timeliness in deciding PTSD claims, VBA should assess whether it could systematically utilize an electronic library of historical military records to identify veterans whose PTSD claims can be granted on the basis of information contained in such a library, rather than submitting all research requests to DOD's Joint Services Records Research Center.

VA concurred with our findings and recommendations.

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) internal assessments indicate its regional offices generally comply with VCAA's requirements for obtaining military service records for veterans' compensation claims. For example, of the decisions made by regional offices on compensation claims during the first half of fiscal year 2006, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) quality reviewers found that less than 4 percent contained errors involving failure to obtain military service records. Similarly, of the appealed compensation cases decided by the Board of Veterans' Appeals during November 2004-January 2006, the board remanded less than 3 percent to VBA for rework due to deficiencies in obtaining military service records. However, VBA does not systematically evaluate the quality of research done on behalf of regional offices by a VBA unit at the National Personnel Records Center, where the service records of many veterans are stored. Regional offices rely on this unit to do thorough and reliable searches and analyses of records and provide accurate reports on the results. Without a systematic program for assessing the quality of this unit's work, VBA does not know the extent to which the information that this unit provides to regional offices is reliable and accurate.

VBA potentially could improve its procedures and reduce the time required to process some veterans' claims for PTSD, which may result after a veteran participates in, or is exposed to, stressful events or experiences (stressors). Regional offices sometimes must turn to information contained in the military historical records of the Department of Defense (DOD) to verify the occurrence of claimed stressors. While regional offices are able to directly access and search an electronic library of such records for many Marine Corps veterans, they must rely on DOD's U.S. Army and Joint Services Records Research Center (JSRRC) to research such records for all other service branches. The JSRRC's response time to regional office requests approaches an average of 1 year. However, by building on work already done by several regional offices to establish and use an electronic library of DOD military historical records for the other service branches, VBA may be able to greatly reduce the time required to process many veterans' PTSD claims.