



Highlights of [GAO-05-572T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Veterans Affairs' Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program has taken on heightened importance due, in large measure, to the number of servicemembers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq with serious injuries and their need for vocational rehabilitation and employment assistance. This statement draws on over 20 years of GAO's reporting on VA's provision of vocational rehabilitation and employment assistance to American veterans and focuses primarily on the results of two recent GAO reports. The first, issued in June 2004, commented on the report of the VA-sponsored VR&E Task Force, which performed a comprehensive review of VR&E activities and made extensive recommendations that, if implemented, would affect virtually every aspect of VR&E's operations. The second, issued in January 2005, focused on the steps VA has taken and the challenges it faces in providing services to seriously injured veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq.

What GAO Recommends

This statement contains no recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-572T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7215 or bascettac@gao.gov.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

VA Has Opportunities to Improve Services, but Faces Significant Challenges

What GAO Found

The past year has presented the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) with an unprecedented opportunity to begin strengthening its provision of vocational rehabilitation and employment services to veterans. The VR&E Task Force has developed a blueprint for the changes needed to improve numerous programmatic and managerial aspects of VR&E's operations. We generally agree with the Task Force's three key findings.

Key VR&E Task Force Findings

Finding #1	VR&E has not been a VA priority in terms of returning veterans with service-connected disabilities to the workforce.
Finding #2	VR&E has limited capacity to manage its growing workload.
Finding #3	The VR&E system must be redesigned for the 21 st century employment environment.

We also generally agree with the Task Force's key recommendations to streamline eligibility and entitlement, institute a new employment-driven service delivery process, expand counseling benefits, reorganize and increase VR&E staffing, and improve information technology capabilities and intra- and inter-agency coordination.

VR&E faces three overriding challenges as it responds to the Task Force recommendations. First, providing early intervention assistance to injured servicemembers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq is complicated by

- differences and uncertainties in the recovery process, which make it difficult for VR&E to determine when a servicemember will be able to consider its services;
- the Department of Defense's (DOD) concerns that VA's outreach could work at cross purposes to the military's retention goals; and
- lack of access to DOD data that would allow VA to readily identify and locate all seriously injured servicemembers.

Second, VR&E needs to upgrade its information technology system. The Task Force report pointed out that VR&E's IT system is limited in its ability to produce useful reports. Third, VR&E needs to use new results-based criteria to evaluate and improve performance. The Task Force recommended that VR&E develop a new employment-oriented performance measurement system, including measures of sustained employment longer than 60 days. In fiscal year 2004, VR&E included four employment-based performance criteria in its performance and accountability report. However, as of February 2005, VR&E had not yet reported results using these longer-term measures.