



Highlights of [GAO-09-910T](#), a testimony to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee asked GAO to present its preliminary findings on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) disability claims process. This statement discusses (1) the trends in VA compensation claims and appeals, and (2) the steps VA is taking to improve disability claims processing.

This testimony is based on ongoing work. GAO's findings are based largely on VA performance data and information obtained from VA documents and through interviews with VA officials. This testimony is also based on past GAO work on this subject, updated as appropriate to reflect VA's current workload and initiatives.

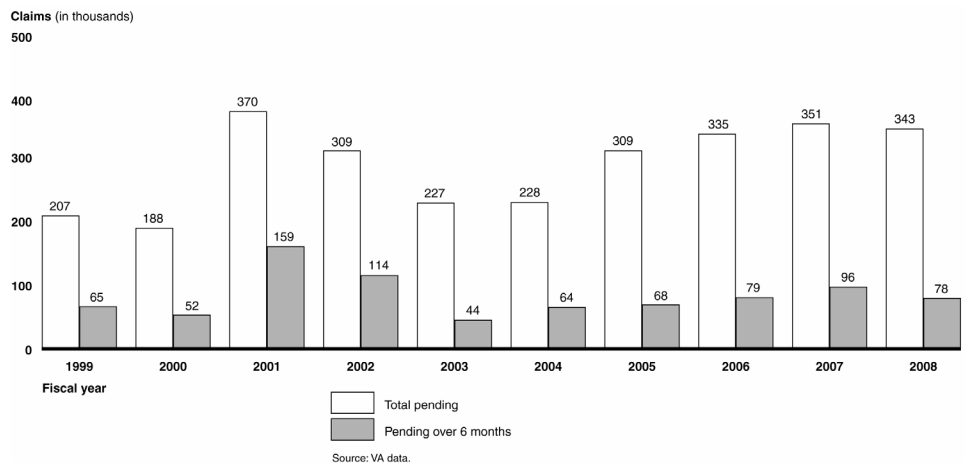
VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

Preliminary Findings on Claims Processing Trends and Improvement Efforts

What GAO Found

Over the past several years, VA disability claims workloads at both the initial and appellate levels have improved in some areas and worsened in others. For example, the number of disability claims VA completes annually at the initial level increased about 60 percent—from about 458,000 in fiscal year 1999 to about 729,000 in fiscal year 2008. However, during this same period, the number of claims pending at year-end increased 65 percent to about 343,000. Several factors affect these and other disability claims workloads, including increases in disability claims received, growing complexity of claims, court decisions and changes in regulation. Disability claims workloads at the appellate level have also improved in some areas and worsened in others. For example, over the past several years, the number of appeals resolved increased 22 percent, from more than 72,000 cases in fiscal year 2003 to almost 88,000 cases in fiscal year 2008. However, it took on average 96 days longer in fiscal year 2008 to resolve appeals than in fiscal year 2003. One factor that affects workloads at the appellate level is the submission of new evidence or claims that must be evaluated.

Pending Compensation Claims, End of Fiscal Years 1999-2008



VA has taken several steps to improve claims processing, but the effect of some of these actions is not yet known. For example, VA increased claims processing staff about 58 percent from fiscal years 2005 to 2009, which has helped to increase the total number of decisions VA issues annually. However, VA expects individual staff productivity to decline in the short-term in part because of the challenge of training and integrating new staff. In addition, VA has established 15 resource centers to which it redistributes claims and appeals for processing from backlogged regional offices. Although VA has not collected data to evaluate the effect of its workload redistribution efforts, these efforts may ultimately increase the timeliness and consistency of VA's decisions. VA is also implementing a pilot with the Department of Defense (DOD) to perform joint disability evaluations that has the potential to streamline the disability process for prospective veterans. Finally, VA has begun other initiatives, which we are in the process of reviewing, such as targeting certain claims for fast-track processing and leveraging technology.

View [GAO-09-910T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.