



Highlights of [GAO-07-589T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

As of March 1, 2007, over 24,000 servicemembers have been wounded in action since the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), according to the Department of Defense (DOD). GAO work has shown that servicemembers injured in combat face an array of significant medical and financial challenges as they begin their recovery process in the health care systems of DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

GAO was asked to discuss concerns regarding DOD and VA efforts to provide medical care and rehabilitative services for servicemembers who have been injured during OEF and OIF. This testimony addresses (1) the transition of care for seriously injured servicemembers who are transferred between DOD and VA medical facilities, (2) DOD's and VA's efforts to provide early intervention for rehabilitation for seriously injured servicemembers, (3) DOD's efforts to screen servicemembers at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and whether VA can meet the demand for PTSD services, and (4) the impact of problems related to military pay on injured servicemembers and their families.

This testimony is based on GAO work issued from 2004 through 2006 on the conditions facing OEF/OIF servicemembers at the time the audit work was completed.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-589T.

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 or bascettac@gao.gov.

DOD AND VA HEALTH CARE

Challenges Encountered by Injured Servicemembers during Their Recovery Process

What GAO Found

Despite coordinated efforts, DOD and VA have had problems sharing medical records for servicemembers transferred from DOD to VA medical facilities. GAO reported in 2006 that two VA facilities lacked real-time access to electronic medical records at DOD facilities. To obtain additional medical information, facilities exchanged information by means of a time-consuming process resulting in multiple faxes and phone calls.

In 2005, GAO reported that VA and DOD collaboration is important for providing early intervention for rehabilitation. VA has taken steps to initiate early intervention efforts, which could facilitate servicemembers' return to duty or to a civilian occupation if the servicemembers were unable to remain in the military. However, according to DOD, VA's outreach process may overlap with DOD's process for evaluating servicemembers for a possible return to duty. DOD was also concerned that VA's efforts may conflict with the military's retention goals. In this regard, DOD and VA face both a challenge and an opportunity to collaborate to provide better outcomes for seriously injured servicemembers.

DOD screens servicemembers for PTSD but, as GAO reported in 2006, it cannot ensure that further mental health evaluations occur. DOD health care providers review questionnaires, interview servicemembers, and use clinical judgment in determining the need for further mental health evaluations. However, GAO found that 22 percent of the OEF/OIF servicemembers in GAO's review who may have been at risk for developing PTSD were referred by DOD health care providers for further evaluations. According to DOD officials, not all of the servicemembers at risk will need referrals. However, at the time of GAO's review DOD had not identified the factors its health care providers used to determine which OEF/OIF servicemembers needed referrals. Although OEF/OIF servicemembers may obtain mental health evaluations or treatment for PTSD through VA, VA may face a challenge in meeting the demand for PTSD services. VA officials estimated that follow-up appointments for veterans receiving care for PTSD may be delayed up to 90 days.

GAO's 2006 testimony pointed out problems related to military pay have resulted in debt and other hardships for hundreds of sick and injured servicemembers. Some servicemembers were pursued for repayment of military debts through no fault of their own. As a result, servicemembers have been reported to credit bureaus and private collections agencies, been prevented from getting loans, gone months without paychecks, and sent into financial crisis. In a 2005 testimony GAO reported that poorly defined requirements and processes for extending the active duty of injured and ill reserve component servicemembers have caused them to be inappropriately dropped from active duty, leading to significant gaps in pay and health insurance for some servicemembers and their families.