



Highlights of [GAO-08-1137](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In February 2007, a series of articles in *The Washington Post* about conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center highlighted problems in the military's disability evaluation system. Subsequently, the Department of the Army, Department of Defense (DOD), and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) undertook initiatives to address concerns with the disability evaluation process. In 2007, the Army took steps to streamline its process, and DOD and VA began piloting a joint evaluation system to address systemic concerns about timeliness and the potential inefficiency of having separate disability evaluation systems. GAO was asked to examine (1) recent actions by the Army to help servicemembers navigate its disability evaluation process and (2) the status, plans, and challenges of DOD and VA's efforts to pilot and implement a joint disability evaluation system. GAO interviewed Army, DOD, and VA officials; visited Army treatment facilities; and reviewed data from these sources.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Army explore options for improving its disability evaluation process and its servicemember satisfaction survey, and that DOD and VA (1) establish criteria for determining whether their pilot should be widely implemented and (2) take steps to sustain management attention on pilot evaluation and implementation. DOD and VA generally agreed with the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-1137](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

MILITARY DISABILITY SYSTEM

Increased Supports for Servicemembers and Better Pilot Planning Could Improve the Disability Evaluation Process

What GAO Found

The Army has taken a number of steps to help servicemembers navigate the disability evaluation process through additional support mechanisms and streamlining efforts, but faces challenges in meeting internal goals and demonstrating impact. Most significantly, the Army has begun hiring more staff to facilitate the process for servicemembers, such as legal personnel, and setting staffing goals for key positions, such as for board liaisons and physicians. However, the Army has not met its internal staffing goals for board liaisons and physicians, and continues to face shortages in legal personnel. The Army has also struggled to meet timeliness goals for case processing and has even experienced negative trends over the last year, despite streamlining initiatives. Furthermore, the Army faces particular challenges in meeting timeliness goals for completing reservists' evaluations, due in part to the challenge of obtaining complete personnel and medical documents from nonmilitary sources. Besides staffing initiatives, the Army has also taken steps to help servicemembers better understand and navigate the process. However, we found that these efforts varied by location, and that many servicemembers we spoke with were unaware of the availability of expert legal counsel. To increase transparency of the disability process, one location we visited afforded servicemembers the opportunity to have the written summary of their medical conditions explained to them, but not all Army locations have adopted this practice. In general, the Army faces challenges in demonstrating that its efforts to date have had an overall positive impact on servicemembers' satisfaction, because it has not implemented a survey that adequately targets and queries servicemembers who are undergoing disability evaluations.

Under direction from the agencies' joint Senior Oversight Committee, DOD and VA moved quickly to design and pilot a joint disability evaluation process, but gaps remain in their plans to evaluate the pilot and potentially implement a joint process on a larger scale. DOD and VA have established a comprehensive mechanism for measuring key aspects of the pilot. However, they have not yet decided on criteria for determining whether the joint process is worthy of widespread implementation. In addition, although DOD and VA are in the process of developing surveys to measure servicemember and stakeholder satisfaction, sufficient comparative data on servicemember satisfaction may not be available when the pilot is scheduled to end. DOD and VA are also in the process of tracking challenges that have arisen in implementing the pilot, but they have not yet resolved several challenges associated with expanding the joint process if the pilot is deemed successful. Such challenges include determining who will perform the single physical examination when a VA medical center is not nearby. Beyond these concerns, DOD and VA may ultimately need to prepare for challenges that come with implementing large-scale system changes—such as those envisioned by the pilot. These challenges include sustaining management attention to ensure that the changes are implemented well and are producing the intended results. However, the Senior Oversight Committee's planned January 2009 end raises questions about whether management attention will be maintained over the long term.