



Highlights of [GAO-09-728](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (NDAA 2008) requires the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) to jointly develop and implement comprehensive policies on the care, management, and transition of recovering servicemembers. The Wounded, Ill, and Injured Senior Oversight Committee (SOC)—jointly chaired by DOD and VA leadership—has assumed responsibility for these policies. The NDAA 2008 also requires GAO to report on the progress DOD and VA make in jointly developing and implementing the policies. This report focuses on the joint development of the policies. Implementation of the policies will be addressed in future reports.

Specifically, this report provides information on (1) the progress DOD and VA have made in jointly developing the comprehensive policies required by the NDAA 2008 and (2) the challenges DOD and VA are encountering in the joint development of these policies.

GAO determined the current status of policy development by assessing the status reported by SOC officials and analyzing supporting documentation. To identify challenges, GAO interviewed the Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, the Executive Director and Chief of Staff of the SOC, the departmental co-leads for most of the SOC work groups, the Acting Director of DOD's Office of Transition Policy and Care Coordination, and other knowledgeable officials.

[View GAO-09-728 or key components.](#)  
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## RECOVERING SERVICEMEMBERS

### DOD and VA Have Jointly Developed the Majority of Required Policies but Challenges Remain

#### What GAO Found

DOD and VA have made substantial progress in jointly developing policies required by sections 1611 through 1614 of the NDAA 2008 in the areas of (1) care and management, (2) medical and disability evaluation, (3) return to active duty, and (4) transition of care and services received from DOD to VA. Overall, GAO's analysis showed that as of April 2009, 60 of the 76 policy requirements GAO identified have been completed and the remaining 16 policy requirements are in progress. DOD and VA have completed all of the policy development requirements for medical and physical disability evaluations, including issuing a report on the feasibility and advisability of consolidating the DOD and VA disability evaluation systems, although the pilot for this approach is still ongoing. DOD has also completed establishing standards for returning recovering servicemembers to active duty. More than two-thirds of the policy development requirements have been completed for the remaining two policy areas—care and management and the transition of recovering servicemembers from DOD to VA. Most of these requirements were addressed in a January 2009 DOD memorandum that was developed in consultation with VA. DOD officials reported that more information will be provided in a subsequent policy instruction, which is to be issued in August 2009. VA also plans to issue related policy guidance in the fourth quarter of 2009.

DOD and VA officials told GAO that they have experienced numerous challenges as they worked to jointly develop policies to improve the care, management, and transition of recovering servicemembers. According to officials, these challenges contributed to the length of time required to issue policy guidance, and in some cases the challenges have not yet been completely resolved. For example, the SOC must still standardize key terminology relevant to policy issues affecting recovering servicemembers. DOD and VA agreement on key definitions for what constitutes “mental health,” for instance, is important for developing policies that define the scope, eligibility, and service levels for recovering servicemembers. Recent changes affecting the SOC may also pose future challenges to policy development. Some officials have expressed concern that DOD's recent changes to staff supporting the SOC have disrupted the unity of command because SOC staff now report to three different officials within DOD and VA. However, it is too soon to determine how well DOD's staffing changes will work. Additionally, according to DOD and VA officials, the SOC's scope of responsibilities appears to be in flux. While the SOC will remain responsible for policy matters for recovering servicemembers, a number of policy issues may now be directed to the DOD and VA Joint Executive Council. Despite this uncertainty, DOD and VA officials told GAO that the SOC's work groups continue to carry out their roles and responsibilities.

GAO provided a draft of this report to DOD and VA for comment. VA provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate. DOD and VA did not provide other comments.