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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-635](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, GAO designated federal disability programs as a high-risk area because federal disability programs remained grounded in outmoded concepts that have not been updated to reflect the current state of science, medicine, technology, and labor market conditions. In addition, the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) faced management challenges, especially with their disability claims processing. Further, disability experts have expressed concerns about the level of coordination among the many federal agencies that provide benefits and services to individuals with disabilities.

GAO was asked to determine: (1) what steps SSA and VA have taken to modernize their disability programs and (2) to what extent SSA and VA coordinate with other federal agencies that provide services to individuals with disabilities. To do this, GAO reviewed literature, agency strategic plans and performance and accountability reports, and interviewed agency officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that Congress, in consultation with key agencies and other stakeholders, consider authorizing an entity consisting of leaders from appropriate federal agencies to develop a cost-effective federal strategy that would integrate services and support to individuals with disabilities. The agencies reviewed our report and provided technical comments.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-635](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).

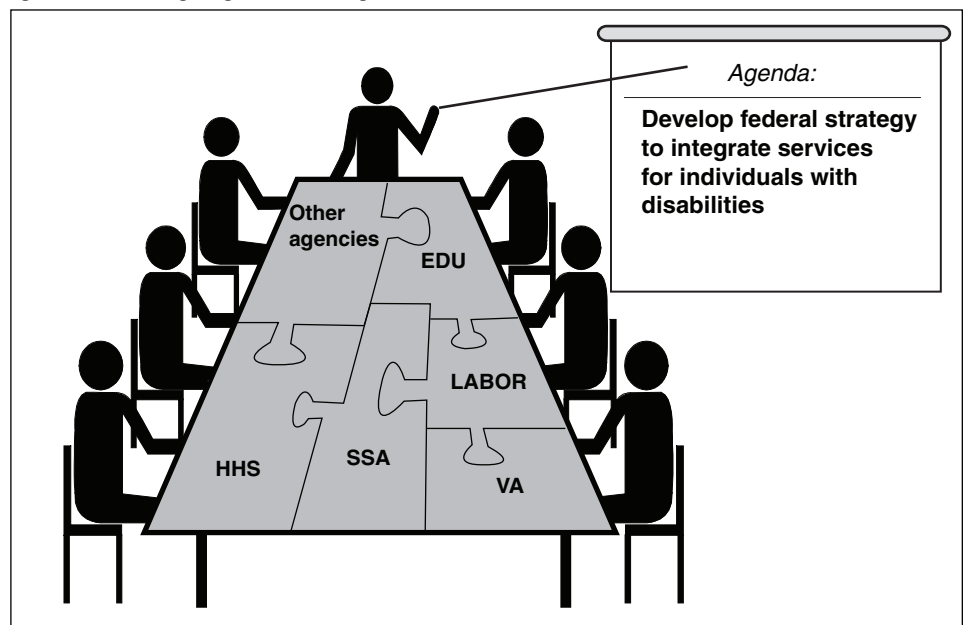
# FEDERAL DISABILITY PROGRAMS

## More Strategic Coordination Could Help Overcome Challenges to Needed Transformation

### What GAO Found

SSA and VA have taken some initial steps to recognize a more modern concept of disability, but both agencies still encounter challenges in fully assessing an individual's capacity to work and in addressing claims processing problems. SSA and VA have revised some eligibility criteria to reflect medical advances and to support beneficiaries' efforts to return to work and achieve self-sufficiency. However, their revisions to eligibility criteria fall short of fully incorporating a modern understanding of how technology and labor market changes should impact eligibility for disability benefits and return-to-work rates remain low. The low return-to-work rates may be due, in part, to the timing in which certain supports are offered to beneficiaries. However, the timing of services are constrained by several factors, including program design, laws, and the agencies' limited span of authority over benefits and services offered by other agencies. Finally, although SSA and VA are taking steps to address management challenges, both agencies continue to experience delays in processing disability claims and persistent backlogs.

### Agencies Working Together to Integrate Services for Individuals with Disabilities



Source: GAO analysis; Art Explosion (images).

SSA and VA disability programs partner with other federal agencies that provide services to individuals with disabilities on specific initiatives, but governmentwide coordination of cross-cutting programs is lacking. For example, SSA and VA have partnered with specific agencies to support employment-related services, conduct research, and improve the integrity and operation of their disability programs, among other things. While interagency partnerships may help to improve some programs, individuals with disabilities and the programs serving them continue to operate without a centralized federal strategy or a coordinating entity to ensure federal policies, services, and supports are aligned.