

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-227T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

VBA pays disability benefits for conditions incurred or aggravated while in military service, and pension benefits for low-income veterans who are either elderly or have disabilities unrelated to military service. In fiscal year 2014, the department paid about \$58 billion in disability compensation and about \$5 billion in pension claims.

The disability claims process has been the subject of attention by Congress and others, due in part to long waits for processing claims and a large backlog of claims. To process disability and pension claims more efficiently, VA began development and implementation of an electronic, paperless system—VBMS—in 2009.

This statement summarizes GAO's September 2015 report ([GAO-15-582](#)) on (1) VA's progress toward completing the development and implementation of VBMS and (2) the extent to which users report satisfaction with the system.

What GAO Recommends

In its September 2015 report, GAO recommended that VA develop a plan with a time frame and a reliable cost estimate for completing VBMS, establish goals for system response time, minimize the incidence of high and medium severity system defects for future VBMS releases, assess user satisfaction, and establish satisfaction goals to promote improvement. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-227T](#). For more information, contact Valerie C. Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or melvinv@gao.gov.

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VETERANS BENEFITS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Ongoing Efforts Can Be Improved; Goals Are Needed to Promote Increased User Satisfaction

What GAO Found

As GAO reported in September 2015, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made progress in developing and implementing the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), with deployment of the initial version of the system to all of its regional offices as of June 2013. Since then, VBA has continued developing and implementing additional system functionality and enhancements that support the electronic processing of disability compensation claims. As a result, 95 percent of records related to veterans' disability claims are electronic and reside in the system. However, VBMS is not yet able to fully support disability and pension claims, as well as appeals processing. Nevertheless, while the Under Secretary for Benefits stated in March 2013 that the development of VBMS was expected to be completed in 2015, implementation of functionality to fully support electronic claims processing has been delayed beyond 2015. In addition, VBA has not yet produced a plan that identifies when the system will be completed. Accordingly, holding VA management accountable for meeting a time frame and for demonstrating progress will be difficult.

As VA continues its efforts to complete development and implementation of VBMS, three areas could benefit from increased management attention.

- **Cost estimating:** The program office does not have a reliable estimate of the cost for completing the system. Without such an estimate, VA management and the department's stakeholders have a limited view of the system's future resource needs, and the program risks not having sufficient funding to complete development and implementation of the system.
- **System availability:** Although VBA has improved its performance regarding system availability to users, it has not established system response time goals. Without such goals, users do not have an expectation of the system response times they can anticipate and management does not have an indication of how well the system is performing relative to performance goals.
- **System defects:** While the program has actively managed system defects, a recent system release included unresolved defects that impacted system performance and users' experiences. Continuing to deploy releases with large numbers of defects that reduce system functionality could adversely affect users' ability to process disability claims in an efficient manner.

VA has not conducted a customer satisfaction survey that would allow the department to compile data on how users view the system's performance, and ultimately, to develop goals for improving the system. GAO's survey of VBMS users found that a majority of them were satisfied with the system, but decision review officers were considerably less satisfied. Although the results of GAO's survey provide VBA with data about users' satisfaction with VBMS, the absence of user satisfaction goals limits the utility of survey results. Specifically, without having established goals to define user satisfaction, VBA does not have a basis for gauging the success of its efforts to promote satisfaction with the system, or for identifying areas where its efforts to complete development and implementation of the system might need attention.