VA HEALTH IT

Use of Acquisition Best Practices Can Improve Efforts to Implement a System to Support the Family Caregiver Program

Why GAO Did This Study

To provide greater support for caregivers of post-9/11 veterans, Congress and the President enacted legislation requiring VA to establish a program to assist caregivers with the rigors of caring for seriously injured veterans. In May 2011, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), which operates VA's health care system, established the Family Caregiver Program at each of its VA medical centers across the United States. At that time, the department implemented an IT system, called CAT, to help support the program. Subsequently, the VA MISSION Act was enacted in June 2018, requiring VA to implement an IT system to fully support the Family Caregiver Program by October 1, 2018. Further, VA's Secretary is to certify the system by October 1, 2019.

GAO was asked to discuss its September 2014 report that examined how VHA is implementing the Family Caregiver Program. In addition, the statement includes relevant information VA provided on its actions toward addressing GAO's prior recommendation. The statement also discusses critical success factors related to IT acquisitions as identified in GAO's prior work. The reports cited throughout this statement include detailed information on the scope and methodology of GAO's prior reviews.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommended in 2014 that VA expedite the process for identifying and implementing an IT system that would fully support the Family Caregiver Program. VA concurred with the recommendation and subsequently began taking steps to implement a replacement system. The recommendation remains open.

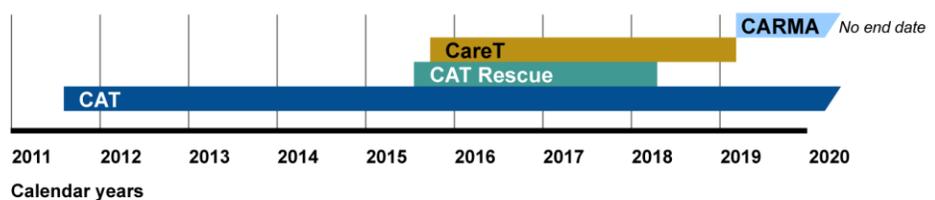View GAO-19-581T. For more information, contact Carol C. Harris at (202) 512-4456 or harriscc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

In September 2014, GAO reported on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (Family Caregiver Program) and found that the program office had limitations with its information technology (IT) system—the Caregiver Application Tracker (CAT). Specifically, the program did not have ready access to workload data that would allow it to monitor the effects of the program on VA medical centers' resources. VA has initiated various projects since 2015 to implement a new system, but has not yet been successful in its efforts. (See figure.) Specifically, in July 2015 VA initiated a project to improve the reliability of CAT's data, called CAT Rescue. However, the department reported in January 2017 that it had identified numerous defects during system testing. The project ended in April 2018 before any new system capabilities were implemented. A companion project was initiated in September 2015 to develop the Caregivers Tool (CareT), a new system intended to replace CAT. The CareT project was expected to use improved data from CAT Rescue, while also adding new system capabilities. However, the user acceptance testing of CareT identified the need for the department to develop more system capabilities than originally planned. Further, VA reported that implementing a system by October 1, 2018, as specified in the Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (MISSION Act), was not feasible. Subsequently, VA terminated CareT in February 2019. The department initiated another project in March 2019 to implement a new system, the Caregiver Record Management Application (CARMA). GAO has ongoing work to evaluate the department's efforts to implement an IT system to support the Family Caregiver Program as required by the MISSION Act.

Figure: Timeline of the Veterans Affairs' Family Caregiver Program's IT System Update and Replacement Projects

Caregiver Application Tracker (CAT), Caregiver Application Tracker Rescue (CAT Rescue), Caregivers Tool (CareT), Caregiver Record Management Application (CARMA)

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs data. | GAO-19-581T

GAO's prior work has determined that successfully overcoming IT acquisition challenges can best be achieved when critical success factors are applied. These factors can serve as a model of best practices that VA could apply to enhance the likelihood that the acquisition of a replacement IT system for the Family Caregiver Program will be successfully achieved. Examples of these critical success factors include, maintaining active engagement of program officials with stakeholders, involving end users and stakeholders in the development of requirements, and ensuring participation of end users in testing system functionality prior to formal end user acceptance testing.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**