



Highlights of [GAO-06-1010](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Almost 6,000 servicemembers died from October 2001 through September 2005. The Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Social Security Administration (SSA) provide assistance to survivors of servicemembers who die on active duty. This assistance includes but is not limited to making funeral arrangements, applying for federal benefits, providing relocation assistance, and coordinating with other agencies. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 required GAO to assess casualty assistance provided to survivors of servicemembers. For this report, GAO reviewed the extent to which DOD has (1) an oversight framework and standards to monitor the assistance it provides to survivors of these deceased servicemembers and (2) visibility over the costs of its casualty assistance programs. GAO also reviewed the roles of VA and SSA in providing casualty assistance. In conducting this review, GAO analyzed agency documents and interviewed program officials, limiting its scope to federal programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD develop an oversight framework and add standards to its casualty assistance policy. DOD did not provide its formal comments in time to be included in this report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1010.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Derek Stewart at (202) 512-5559 or stewartd@gao.gov.

MILITARY PERSONNEL

DOD Needs an Oversight Framework and Standards to Improve Management of Its Casualty Assistance Programs

What GAO Found

DOD does not have a comprehensive oversight framework and standards that could improve its ability to monitor the casualty assistance it provides to survivors of servicemembers who die while on active duty. The absence of a comprehensive oversight framework exists because DOD has not developed departmentwide program objectives and all the necessary outcome measures to monitor the military services' casualty assistance programs' effectiveness and efficiency. GAO found that while each service gathers information about its casualty assistance program and DOD and the services meet three times a year to share information, program performance comparisons across services are hampered by the lack of common metrics and assessment methods. Moreover, DOD's current policy does not specify key standards for the services' casualty assistance programs that would facilitate more consistent delivery of assistance across the services. Such standards would include processes (1) for consistent delivery of short- and long-term assistance across and within the services and (2) for coordinating with the Defense Finance and Accounting Service about benefit payments to survivors.

DOD does not know the total costs of its casualty assistance programs because it has limited visibility over all program costs. This limited visibility exists for two primary reasons: (1) casualty assistance program costs are scattered across many different parts of DOD's budget, including military personnel, operation and maintenance, and defense health program budgets, and (2) costs of benefits provided to survivors of active duty servicemembers and military retirees, such as the annuities, are lumped together. Although casualty assistance program costs and benefits represent a small portion of DOD's overall budget, without visibility over costs, it is difficult for program officials to make informed decisions regarding the costs of any changes to DOD's casualty assistance programs. In GAO's July 2005 report on the transparency of the military compensation system, GAO recommended that DOD compile the total costs to provide military compensation and communicate them to decision makers perhaps as part of its annual budget submission to Congress. Casualty assistance benefits are another type of cost that could be included as part of total compensation costs. Because GAO recommended that DOD compile total compensation costs in its July 2005 report, GAO is not making that recommendation here.

VA and SSA primarily provide long-term financial and nonfinancial benefits to support and compensate survivors starting almost immediately after the servicemember's death and possibly extending through the lifetime of the survivor. However, neither agency has visibility over the extent to which these survivors utilize their benefits or the overall costs of their participation.