



Highlights of [GAO-08-473T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

### Why GAO Did This Study

The Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, House Veterans' Affairs Committee, asked GAO to present its views on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) disability claims process. This statement discusses (1) claims processing challenges VA faces, (2) steps VA is taking to address these challenges, and (3) opportunities for more fundamental reform.

GAO has reported and testified on this subject on numerous occasions. GAO's work has addressed VA's efforts to improve the timeliness and accuracy of decisions on claims, VA's efforts to reduce pending claims levels, and concerns about decisional consistency. This testimony is based on a body of past work, updated as appropriate to reflect the current workload and initiatives.

## VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

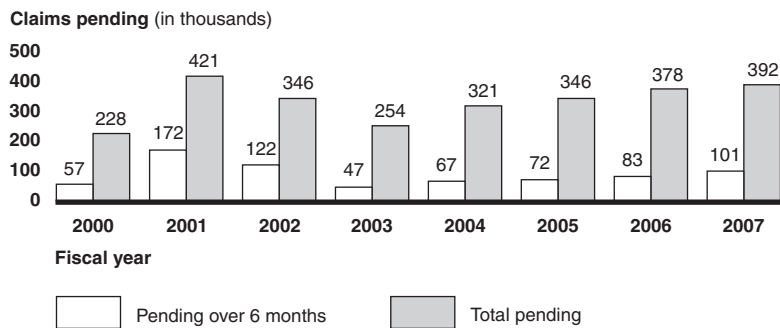
### Claims Processing Challenges Persist, while VA Continues to Take Steps to Address Them

#### What GAO Found

Despite taking steps to improve its disability claims process, VA continues to face challenges, specifically in reducing the number of claims pending, speeding up the process of deciding claims, and improving accuracy and consistency of decisions across regional offices. For example, between fiscal years 2003 and 2007, the inventory of claims awaiting a decision by VA grew by more than 50 percent to a total of about 392,000, and the average number of days claims were pending increased by 3 weeks to 132 days. Further, GAO and VA's Inspector General have identified concerns about the consistency of decisions across regional offices. Factors affecting VA's claims-processing performance may include increases in the number and complexity of claims being filed and the potential impacts of laws and court decisions.

VA continues to take steps to help improve claims-processing performance, including requesting funding for additional staff. The President's fiscal year 2009 budget request funds an increase of more than 2,600 additional full-time equivalent employees over fiscal year 2007 levels to process claims.

**Rating-Related Claims Pending at End of Period, Fiscal Years 2000-2007**



Source: VA data.

Beyond the steps VA is taking to address its claims processing challenges, opportunities for significant performance improvement may lie in more fundamental reform of VA's disability compensation program. Such reforms could include reexamining program design such as updating the disability criteria to reflect the current state of science, medicine, technology, and labor market conditions. It could also include examining the structure and division of labor among field offices. Recent studies conducted by presidential and congressionally appointed commissions have recommended some fundamental changes, including updating VA's rating schedule, which provides the basis for decisions about eligibility for benefits.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-473T](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).