



Highlights of [GAO-08-647T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNA), registered nurses who have completed a master's degree program in nurse anesthesia, provide the majority of anesthesia care in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities. There are approximately 500 VA-employed CRNAs (VA CRNA) who provide care to veterans in VA medical facilities. While the demand for CRNAs has increased, many employed by VA are nearing retirement eligibility age. Concerns have been raised about the challenges VA may face in making VA CRNA salaries competitive in order to maintain its VA CRNA workforce, particularly in local markets that can be highly competitive.

This testimony is based on GAO work reported in *VA Health Care: Many Medical Facilities Have Challenges in Recruiting and Retaining Nurse Anesthetists*, ([GAO-08-56](#), Dec. 13, 2007). This testimony (1) identifies workforce challenges that VA medical facilities experience related to VA CRNAs, and (2) identifies a key mechanism that VA medical facilities have to help make VA CRNA salaries competitive and the extent to which VA facilities use this mechanism.

For the December 2007 report, GAO analyzed surveys sent to VA chief anesthesiologists, VA human resources officers, and VA CRNAs. GAO also visited eight VA medical facilities and interviewed facility officials about efforts to recruit and retain VA CRNAs.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-647T](#). For more information, contact Marjorie Kanof, (202) 512-7114 or [kanofm@gao.gov](mailto:kanofm@gao.gov).

## VA HEALTH CARE

### Recruitment and Retention Challenges and Efforts to Make Salaries Competitive for Nurse Anesthetists

#### What GAO Found

GAO reported in December 2007 that VA medical facilities had challenges recruiting and retaining VA CRNAs. In GAO's report, most surveyed officials said that they had difficulty recruiting VA CRNAs at their facilities. The challenge of recruiting VA CRNAs affected the ability of VA officials to reduce existing VA CRNA vacancy rates—the number of unfilled VA CRNA positions—at their medical facilities. Vacancy rates varied across VA and, according to GAO's survey, impacted the delivery of services at VA medical facilities. On the basis of its survey results, GAO also found that in addition to their current recruiting challenges, VA medical facilities would likely face a challenge retaining VA CRNAs in the next 5 years due to the number of VA CRNAs projected to either retire from or leave VA. VA medical facility officials reported in GAO's survey that the recruitment and retention challenges were caused primarily by the low level of VA CRNA salaries when compared with CRNA salaries in local market areas.

GAO also reported that VA's locality pay system (LPS) is a key mechanism VA medical facilities can use to determine whether to adjust VA CRNA salaries to help the facilities remain competitive with CRNA salaries in local market areas. GAO also reported that the majority of VA medical facilities that employ VA CRNAs used LPS. However, at the eight VA medical facilities it visited, GAO found that although the facilities used VA's LPS, the majority of them did not fully follow VA's LPS policy correctly in either 2005 or 2006. The problems some VA medical facilities had fully following VA's LPS policy, along with the explanations of facility officials, indicated that VA had not provided adequate training on its LPS policy. As a result, VA medical facility officials cannot ensure that VA CRNA salaries have been adjusted as needed to be competitive in local market areas. Training on the LPS is necessary to help ensure that VA medical facilities are competitive as an employer. In December 2007, GAO recommended that VA expedite the development and implementation of a training course for VA medical facility officials responsible for compliance with the policy. VA agreed with GAO's recommendation and in comments on GAO's draft report stated that it had developed a draft action plan for training staff on its LPS policy. VA anticipated that the online training course would be available by the end of fiscal year 2008.