VETERANS' BENEFITS

Improvements Needed in VA's Training and Performance Management Systems

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) disability claims process has long been a subject of concern because of long waits for decisions and large backlogs of claims pending decisions. To address these issues, VA has hired almost 3,000 new claims processors since January 2007. However, adequate training and performance management are essential to developing highly competent disability claims processors and ensuring that experienced staff maintain the skills needed to issue timely, accurate, and consistent decisions.

The Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, House Veterans' Affairs Committee asked GAO to present its views on 1) VA's training for its claims processors and 2) VA's performance management of this staff. This statement is based on a May 2008 report on VA's training and performance management (GAO-08-561) and has been updated as appropriate.

What GAO Recommends

In its May report, GAO recommended that VA collect feedback from staff on the training provided in the regional offices and use this feedback to improve training; hold staff accountable for meeting their training requirement; and assess, and if necessary adjust its process for placing staff in overall performance categories. VA concurred with these recommendations, but has not yet reported any significant progress in implementing them.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-1126T. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.
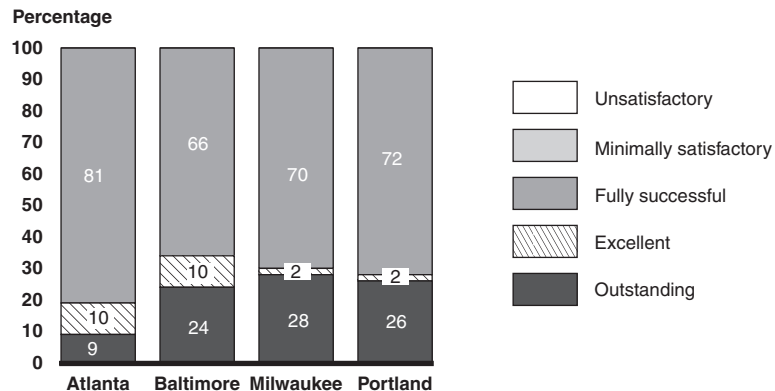
What GAO Found

Training for VA disability claims processors complies with some accepted training practices, but VA does not adequately evaluate its training and may have opportunities to improve training design and implementation. VA has a highly structured, three-phase training program for new staff and an 80-hour annual training requirement for all staff. GAO found that VA has taken steps to plan this training strategically and that its training program for new staff appears well-designed and conforms to adult learning principles. However, while VA collects some feedback on training for new staff, it does not collect feedback on all the training conducted at its regional offices. Moreover, both new and experienced staff reported problems with their training. Some new staff told us a computer-based learning tool is too theoretical and often out of date. More experienced staff said they struggled to meet the annual 80-hour training requirement because of workload pressures or could not always find courses relevant given their experience level. Finally, the agency does not hold claims processors accountable for meeting the annual training requirement.

VA's performance management system for claims processing staff generally conforms to accepted practices. For example, individual performance measures, such as quality and productivity, are aligned with the agency's organizational performance measures, and VA provides staff with regular performance feedback. However, the system may not clearly differentiate among staff performance levels. In each of the regional offices we visited, at least 90 percent of claims processors were placed in just two of five overall performance categories. Broad, overlapping performance categories may deprive managers of the information they need to reward top performers and address performance issues, as well as deprive staff of the feedback they need to improve.

Fiscal Year 2007 Appraisals for Four Offices Were Concentrated in Two Categories

Source: VBA regional offices.

United States Government Accountability Office