



Highlights of [GAO-10-450T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) collaborates with the Department of Defense (DOD) to streamline access to veterans' disability benefits by allowing some servicemembers to file a claim and undergo a single collaborative exam process prior to discharge. BDD is designed for servicemembers with conditions that, while disabling, do not generally prevent them from performing their military duties. This program can shorten the time it takes for veterans to receive benefits by several months.

GAO was asked to discuss issues surrounding VA's and DOD's BDD program and related Quick Start program, and identify ways VA and DOD could improve these programs for transitioning servicemembers. This statement is based on GAO's September 2008 report ([GAO-08-901](#)) that examined (1) VA efforts to manage the BDD program and (2) how VA and DOD are addressing challenges servicemembers face in accessing the BDD program. GAO updated some information to reflect the current status of claims processing and improvement initiatives in the BDD program.

View [GAO-10-450T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).

## VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

### Opportunities Remain for Improving Accountability for and Access to Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program

#### What GAO Found

Although VA awards disability benefits more quickly under BDD than through its traditional disability claims process, gaps in program management and accountability remain. For example, VA does not separately measure the total time its personnel spend developing BDD claims. As a result, VA has limited information on potential problems and improvement opportunities regarding BDD claims. GAO continues to believe that VA should measure BDD development time; however, VA told GAO it has no plans to capture this information. GAO also found that VA implemented two initiatives to improve the BDD program—i.e., consolidating BDD processing in two offices and instituting paperless processing of BDD claims to increase efficiencies and improve security of information—but did not evaluate whether or the extent to which desired improvements resulted. Finally, GAO found that VA was not completely or consistently monitoring BDD operations at all locations. VA has since taken steps to review BDD operations at more sites and has revised its protocols to ensure more consistent reviews of BDD operations.

VA and DOD have taken steps to improve servicemembers' access to the BDD program; however, opportunities remain for further improvement. For servicemembers such as National Guard and Reservists who are generally unable to complete the BDD claims process within the required time frame, VA established an alternative pre-discharge program called Quick Start. Under this program, servicemembers may still initiate a disability application prior to discharge, but can complete the claims process, including medical exams, at another location after discharge. In response to GAO's recommendation, VA has taken steps to collect additional data to determine the extent to which the Quick Start program is helping those with limited or no access to the BDD program. However, as with BDD claims, VA told GAO it has no plans to measure time spent developing these particular claims, and GAO continues to believe it should. VA and DOD have coordinated to increase BDD program awareness through VA benefits briefings for servicemembers, and DOD established a goal that 85 percent of servicemembers attend these non-mandatory briefings. GAO continues to believe that DOD should establish a plan with a specific time frame for meeting this goal, but DOD has not developed such a plan. Finally, GAO found that some bases faced difficulties maintaining local agreements intended to prevent redundancy and inconvenience for servicemembers in obtaining required medical exams. In response to GAO's recommendation, DOD reported that it is working with VA to identify best practices to address local challenges to implementing their cooperative exam process.