



Highlights of [GAO-10-530T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

For years, in addition to experiencing challenges in making disability claims decisions more quickly and reducing its claims backlog, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has faced challenges in improving the accuracy and consistency of its decisions.

GAO was asked to discuss issues surrounding VA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR) program, a disability compensation and pension quality assurance program, and possible ways, if any, this program could be improved.

This statement focuses on actions VA has taken; including those in response to past GAO recommendations, to (1) address identified weaknesses with STAR and (2) improve efforts to monitor the consistency of claims decisions. This statement is based on GAO's prior work, which examined several aspects of STAR, as well as VA's consistency review activities, and on updated information GAO obtained from VA on quality assurance issues that GAO and VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) have identified. GAO also reviewed VA's OIG March 2009 report on STAR.

GAO is not making any new recommendations.

[View GAO-10-530T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS

VA Has Improved Its Programs for Measuring Accuracy and Consistency, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

Over the past several years, GAO has identified several deficiencies with the Veterans Benefit Administration's (VBA) STAR program, and although VBA has taken actions to address these issues, it continues to face challenges in improving claims accuracy. For example, GAO found that STAR reviewers lacked organizational independence, a basic internal control principle. In response to our finding, VA began utilizing organizationally independent reviewers that do not make claims decisions. GAO also found that sample sizes for pension claims were insufficient to provide assurance about decision accuracy. In response to GAO's recommendation, in fiscal year 2009, VA began increasing the number of pension claims decisions it reviews annually at each of its offices that process pension decisions. VA has also taken a number of other steps to address weaknesses that VA's OIG found in the STAR program, including (1) establishing minimum annual training requirements for reviewers and (2) requiring additional supervisory review of STAR reviewers' work. Although it has made or has started making these improvements, VBA remains challenged to improve its decision accuracy for disability compensation decisions, and it has not met its stated accuracy goal of 90 percent. VBA's performance has remained about the same over the past several fiscal years.

In addition, VA has taken steps to address deficiencies that GAO and the VA's OIG have identified with consistency reviews—assessments of the extent to which individual raters make consistent decisions on the same claims. For example, in prior work, GAO reported that VA did not conduct systematic studies of impairments that it had identified as having potentially inconsistent decisions. In response to GAO's recommendation, in fiscal year 2008, VBA's quality assurance staff began conducting studies to monitor the extent to which veterans with similar disabilities receive consistent ratings across regional offices and individual raters. However, last year, VA's OIG reported that VA had not followed through on its plans to conduct such reviews. In response to this and other OIG findings and recommendations, VA took a number of actions, including developing an annual consistency review schedule and hiring additional quality assurance staff. However, VBA has only recently begun these programs to improve consistency, and it is too early to assess the effectiveness of their actions.