VHA has taken actions to address key challenges in its health care and disability programs. However, growing demand for health care and a potentially larger and more complex disability workload may make VA's challenges in these areas more complex.

**Enhancing access to health care.** VA is challenged to deliver timely, convenient health care to its enrolled veteran population. Too many veterans continue to travel too far and wait too long for care. However, shifting care closer to where veterans live is complicated by stakeholder interests. In addition, VA's efforts to reduce waiting times may be complicated by an anticipated short-term surge in demand for specialty outpatient care. VA also faces difficult challenges in providing equitable access to nursing home care services to a growing elderly veteran population.

**Improving the efficiency of health care delivery.** VA is challenged to find more efficient ways to meet veterans' demand for health care. VA operates a large portfolio of aged buildings that is not well aligned to efficiently meet veterans' needs. As a result, VA faces difficult realignment decisions involving capital investments, consolidations, closures, and contracting with local providers. VA also faces challenges in implementing management changes to improve the efficiency of patient support services, such as food and laundry services.

**Improving the effectiveness of disability programs.** VA is challenged to find more effective ways to compensate veterans with disabilities. VA's outdated disability determination process does not reflect a current view of the relationship between impairments and work capacity. Advances in medicine and technology have allowed some individuals with disabilities to live more independently and work more effectively. VA also faces continuing challenges to improve the timeliness, quality and consistency of claims processing. Major improvements may require fundamental program changes.

VA remains challenged to:
- ensure timely, convenient, and equitable access to health care, including hospital, specialty outpatient, and nursing home care;
- realign its health care delivery infrastructure and implement other management initiatives to increase the efficiency of the delivery of patient support services; and
- seek solutions to modernize its disability programs as well as improve the timeliness and quality of disability claims decisions.

What Remains to Be Done

VA designated federal real property, including VA health care infrastructure, and federal disability programs, including VA disability benefits, as high-risk areas in January 2003. GAO did this to draw attention to the need for broad-based transformation in these areas, which is critical to improving the government's performance and ensuring accountability within expected resource limits.