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Chairman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable John R. Carter
Chairman
The Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Veterans Health Administration: Hiring Trends in the U.S. Pacific Territories

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA), within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), operates one of the largest health care systems in the nation. VHA offers health care services to about 9 million veterans enrolled at 171 VA medical centers and more than 1,100 outpatient facilities. In the U.S. Pacific territories of American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), VHA provided outpatient primary and mental health care services at VA clinics to approximately 7,700 veterans in fiscal year 2021, according to VHA data.

It is essential that VHA recruits and retains an adequate number of skilled staff to help it meet its mission of providing quality and timely care for veterans. To help facilitate the hiring, recruitment, and retention efforts of the federal workforce, federal law authorizes various human capital flexibilities and incentives. These human capital flexibilities include exceptions to the competitive examination process traditionally used to fill federal position vacancies (referred to as hiring flexibilities) and the incentives for recruiting, relocating, and retaining qualified staff, as authorized in statute.¹ Hiring flexibilities can help the government address critical skills gaps or achieve certain public policy goals, such as employing veterans. Recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives assist federal agencies in attracting and retaining staff who possess unusually high or unique qualifications, or who fulfill essential needs for the agencies. These incentives include monetary awards and programs available to VHA's workforce, such as recruitment, relocation, and retention bonuses, as well as student loan repayment programs.

¹The federal competitive examination process requires that agencies notify the public that the government will accept applications for a job, screen applications against minimum qualification standards, apply selection priorities such as veterans' preference, and assess applicants' relative competencies or knowledge, skills, and abilities against job-related criteria to identify the most qualified applicants.

According to the VHA Workforce and Succession Strategic Plan for Fiscal Year 2020-2021, the agency faces difficulties ensuring it has the appropriate workforce to meet the current and future needs of veterans due to factors such as national shortages and increased competition with other health care systems for clinicians in hard-to-fill occupations, such as nurses. In recent years, we and the VA Office of the Inspector General have raised questions about whether VHA has the appropriate workforce to meet the needs of veterans in these U.S. Pacific territories due, in part, to the geographic remoteness of these territories.²

House Report 116-445, which accompanied the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2021, included a provision for GAO to review VA hiring activities in the U.S. Pacific territories of American Samoa, Guam, and CNMI.³ In this report, we describe VHA's

1. vacancy trends in the U.S. Pacific territories, and
2. use of human capital flexibilities to hire, recruit, and retain staff in the U.S. Pacific territories.

To describe VHA's vacancy trends in the three U.S. Pacific territories, we obtained data from VA's HR Smart data system on the cumulative number of vacant positions by Office of Personnel Management occupational series in each year from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2022 for those territories.⁴ These data included vacancies counted in the initial fiscal year that a position was vacated, regardless of the amount of time the position was vacant, according to VHA officials. Vacant positions that remained vacant from one fiscal year into the next were not included in the subsequent year's count of vacancies. If a position was vacated once, filled, and vacated again during the same year, then this would count as two vacancies, according to VHA officials. VA noted a limitation that the vacancies in HR Smart may not be indicative of true current and budgeted positions, and characterized vacancy data as "best estimates" based on available data and systems.⁵ In addition to analysis of VHA vacancy data, we interviewed VHA officials from the Office of Workforce Management and Consulting, Veterans Integrated Service Network 21, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System, and VHA staff in the U.S. Pacific territories of American Samoa, Guam, and CNMI about trends in staffing and vacancies as well as any challenges acquiring and retaining qualified staff in those areas.⁶

To describe the human capital flexibilities VHA used to hire, recruit, and retain staff in the U.S. Pacific territories, we obtained VHA data from HR Smart on hiring flexibilities and data on recruitment,

²See, for example, GAO, *Veterans Health Administration: Opportunities Exist for Improving Veterans' Access to Health Care Services in the Pacific Islands*, [GAO-18-288](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 12, 2018), and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, *Healthcare Inspection Summarization of Select Aspects of the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System Honolulu, Hawaii*, Report No. 15-04655-347 (Sept. 22, 2016).

³H.R. Rep. No. 116-445, at 68-69 (2020).

⁴HR Smart is VA's official system for managing personnel records and processing personnel actions for its staff.

The Office of Personnel Management is the federal government's chief human resources agency that provides human resources leadership and support to federal agencies. It defines an occupational series as a group of positions that all have similar specialized lines of work and qualification requirements. For the purposes of this report, we will refer to positions within an occupational series as occupations.

⁵In its June 2022 annual report on staffing capacity, VA stated that it is not yet at the point where vacancies recorded in HR Smart are indicative of true current and budgeted positions. Further, the annual report noted that VA continues to work on internal system changes to achieve better data quality in vacant positions, such as participation from financial managers to help ensure positions marked as "budgeted" have available funds to support actual hiring. See Department of Veterans Affairs, *Annual Report on the Steps Taken to Achieve Full Staffing Capacity* (Washington, D.C.: June 2022), accessed Oct. 17, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/EMPLOYEE/docs/Section-505-Annual-Report-2022.pdf>.

⁶VHA's health care system is divided into 18 health care networks, referred to as regional networks, which are responsible for managing and overseeing VA medical centers and clinics within a defined geographic area.

relocation, and retention incentives used each fiscal year from 2016 through 2022.⁷ In addition, we reviewed documentation that describes the human capital flexibilities VHA used agency wide and in the U.S. Pacific territories. We interviewed the VHA officials described above to identify those flexibilities used explicitly for hiring, recruitment, and retention. These officials provided examples of additional recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives they used to attract qualified applicants that were not captured in HR Smart.

To assess the reliability of VHA’s vacancy data and data on human capital flexibilities, we interviewed relevant officials, reviewed related documentation, and performed electronic testing to identify any missing data or obvious errors. On the basis of these steps and cognizant of the data limitations identified by VA, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives.

We conducted this audit from March 2022 through February 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Across the three U.S. Pacific territories, VHA provides varying outpatient primary care and mental health services to veterans, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: VHA Facility and Staff in the U.S. Pacific Territories, as of September 30, 2022			
Location	Type of facility	Total staff	Key occupations
American Samoa	Community-based outpatient clinic	30	Medical officer (i.e., physician) Nurse Medical support assistant Practical nurse ^a Transportation clerk and assistant
Guam	Community-based outpatient clinic Outreach clinic	55	Medical officer (i.e., physician) Nurse Medical support assistant Social work Practical nurse ^a
The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands ^b	Other outpatient services site ^c	3	Nurse Social work Miscellaneous administration and program

Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration data. | GAO-23-105953

^aA practical nurse works under the direction and supervision of the registered nurse or physician and provides a range of practical nursing care to patients.

^bThe Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands engages a part-time contract physician to provide primary care services at the outpatient services site.

^cVHA defines other outpatient services sites as sites in which veterans receive services that do not meet the criteria to be classified as a community-based outpatient clinic or health care center.

⁷VA transitioned from its legacy human resources data system to the new system, HR Smart, in 2016, according to VHA officials.

Enclosure I describes VHA staff by occupation in each of the three U.S. Pacific territories from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2022.

VHA hiring officials told us that they generally rely on recommendations from staff in the U.S. Pacific territories to identify positions that need to be filled in the territories' various clinics. Hiring managers from the VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System at Honolulu then use these recommendations to seek and obtain budgetary approval for filling the positions from VA finance officials. Once approved, the officials forward the request to human resources staff to create the posting to fill the vacant position.

VHA employees are covered by three types of personnel systems that have different requirements and flexibilities related to recruitment and hiring, performance management, and other aspects of human resources processes.

- **Title 5 of the U.S. Code (Title 5):** Title 5 of the U.S. Code outlines the rules federal agencies must follow to hire employees. The majority of federal staff across the government are hired under the authority of Title 5 and are typically non-medical personnel.⁸
- **Title 38 of the U.S. Code (Title 38):** Title 38 of the U.S. Code provides VA with authority for appointing medical staff, including physicians and registered nurses. These appointments are made based on an individual's qualifications and professional attainments in accordance with standards established by VA's Secretary.
- **Title 38-Hybrid:** Under this system, VA may hire staff in positions such as medical support assistants; social workers; and practical nurses. This system combines elements of both Title 5 (such as for performance appraisal, leave, and duty hours) and Title 38 (such as for appointment, advancement, and pay).

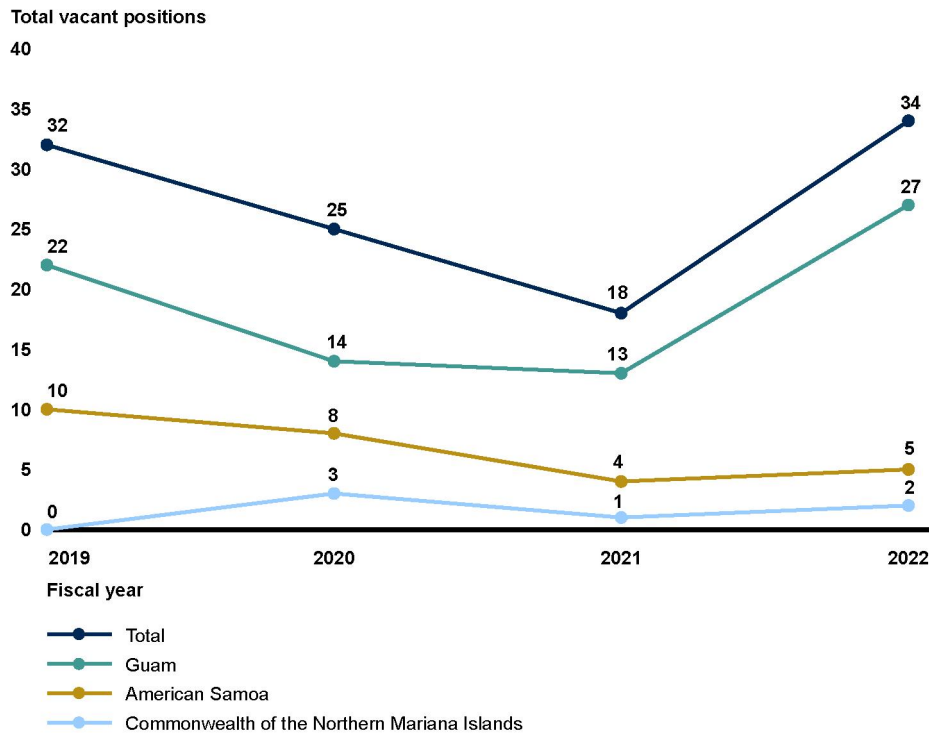
Enclosure II describes VHA's use of these three personnel systems by occupation from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2022.

VHA Vacancy Trends in the U.S. Pacific Territories

In the U.S. Pacific territories, VHA generally experienced a decrease in total vacancies from fiscal year 2019 through 2021 (from 32 to 18 vacancies), followed by an increase to 34 vacancies in fiscal year 2022, based on our analysis of VHA data. Guam accounted for the majority of the vacancies across the three territories, with 70 percent of vacancies during the four fiscal years. American Samoa and CNMI accounted for 25 percent and 6 percent of the vacancies, respectively. See figure 1.

⁸The federal government consists of three types of services: the competitive service, the excepted service, and the Senior Executive Service. The competitive service consists of all civil service positions in the executive branch of the federal government with some exceptions. In the competitive service, an individual generally must go through a competitive process (i.e., competitive examining), which is open to all applicants.

Figure 1: VHA Data Indicating Vacant Positions Across the Three U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Year 2019 through Fiscal Year 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration data. | GAO-23-105953

Data table for Figure 1: VHA Data Indicating Vacant Positions Across the Three U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Year 2019 through Fiscal Year 2022

	Commonwealth Of the Northern Marina Islands	American Samoa	Guam	Total
2019	0	10	22	32
2020	3	8	14	25
2021	1	4	13	18
2022	2	5	27	34

Note: VHA officials told us that data on vacancies include vacancies listed by the initial fiscal year a position was vacated, regardless of the amount of time the position was vacant. Vacant positions that remain vacant from one fiscal year into the next are not included in the subsequent year count of vacancies. If a position was vacated once, filled, and vacated again during the same year, then this would count as two vacancies, according to VHA officials.

We found that the top five occupations with the most vacancies during this time frame were the (1) nurse, (2) social work, (3) health aid and technician, (4) miscellaneous clerical and administrative, and (5) medical officer (i.e., physician) occupations. Vacancies in each of the U.S. Pacific territories fell into the following occupations:

- In Guam, a majority of vacancies were in the nurse, social work, and medical officer occupations.

- In American Samoa, a majority of vacancies were in the nurse, social work, health aid and technician, practical nurse, and transportation clerk and assistant occupations.
- In CNMI, all vacancies were in the nurse and social work occupations.

For total vacancies by occupation, see enclosure III.

VHA hiring officials we spoke to said that they have had challenges filling vacancies for physicians and nurses. They also described social workers as one of the most difficult to recruit positions in the U.S. Pacific territories. According to officials, the education institutions located in the U.S. Pacific territories do not offer graduate degree programs in social work. However, to be eligible to be appointed to a social worker position, candidates must hold a master's degree in social work from a school fully accredited by the Council on Social Work Education.⁹ As a result, VHA social workers hired in the U.S. Pacific territories must receive their social work graduate degrees elsewhere, typically in Hawaii or the U.S. mainland. Officials noted that this severely limits the pool of potential applicants for VHA clinics in the U.S. Pacific territories.

VHA officials stated that the agency does not routinely conduct analyses on its vacancy trends specific to the U.S. Pacific territories, given the small number of employees in those areas.¹⁰ Instead, VHA officials told us that they use the annual workforce cycle planning meetings to monitor and assess the status of its workforce in the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System, which includes the three U.S. Pacific territories. According to the 2021 Workforce Planning Annual Cycle Report for the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System, Workforce Management and Consulting designed the annual workforce planning cycle to provide a structured, data-driven approach to identifying shortage occupations.

The VA Pacific Islands Health Care System's 2021 Annual Workforce Cycle Planning Report highlighted several challenges in employing and retaining staff in some of the occupations that we found had the most vacancies in the U.S. Pacific territories from fiscal years 2019 through 2022: nurse, medical officer, and health aid and technician occupations. These challenges included

- geographically remote locations, and
- competition from other health care systems or employers.

Additionally, VHA's annual report noted that a lack of qualified applicants was a challenge for both nurse and medical officer occupations. In our prior work, we found that VHA experienced challenges recruiting and retaining physicians similar to those noted in the annual report.¹¹

VHA officials told us that the geographical recruitment and retention challenges are significant challenges in the U.S. Pacific territories because of the distance between the territories and the U.S. mainland. See enclosure IV for a depiction of distances and flight times. VHA officials also said that the

⁹38 U.S.C. § 7402(b)(9); VA Handbook 5005/120 Part II App.G39 (Sept.10, 2019).

¹⁰VA is required by law to conduct assessments of each of its Veterans Integrated Service Networks and medical facilities' capacity to provide health care services to veterans and publicly report data on vacant positions throughout the agency. VA is also required to submit to Congress an annual report on the steps the Department is taking to achieve full staffing capacity, including the amount of additional funds necessary to enable the Department to reach full staffing capacity. VA MISSION ACT of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-182, §§ 203, 505, 132 Stat. 1393, 1447, 1477 (2018). In its publicly posted data, VA reports vacancies at the VA medical center level, which aggregates data from VA medical centers and affiliated clinics.

¹¹See GAO, *Veterans Health Administration: Better Data and Evaluation Could Help Improve Physician Staffing, Recruitment, and Retention Strategies*, [GAO-18-124](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 19, 2017).

geographical remoteness of the territories leads to difficulties in retaining staff. For example, VHA officials told us that many employees who are not originally from the territories or do not have family in the territories are typically of short tenure. They also said that long hiring time frames—on average about 3 to 6 months—pose challenges for filling vacancies. According to VHA officials, candidates that are selected can drop out due to the length of time it takes to be hired.

According to the VHA Workforce and Succession Strategic Plan FY 2020–2021, VHA continuously recruits for vacant positions to maintain staffing levels in the face of these challenges and to grow the workforce to meet increased demand. A VHA official in one of the U.S. Pacific territories provided examples of actions taken at the local level to help address these challenges. For example, a VHA official in CNMI stated that they successfully recruited a nurse already living in the territory and working in a private practice. In addition, the VHA official said they also recruited a social worker working in Guam who wished to return home to CNMI to be near family and friends.

VHA’s Use of Human Capital Flexibilities to Hire, Recruit, and Retain Staff in the U.S. Pacific Territories

To recruit and retain staff in the U.S. Pacific territories, we found VHA used several human capital flexibilities from fiscal years 2016 through 2022. Human capital flexibilities used included exercising hiring flexibilities (exceptions to the competitive hiring process used to fill vacancies) and employing other recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives for recruiting and retaining staff.

Hiring flexibilities. VHA used 11 types of hiring flexibilities from fiscal year 2016 through 2022 to hire staff in the U.S. Pacific territories, based on our analysis of VHA data. See table 2. VHA data show that it used the two Title 38 Excepted Service Appointment authorities most often to hire staff in the U.S. Pacific territories during this time period.

Table 2: Hiring Flexibilities Used by VHA in the U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Year 2016 through Fiscal Year 2022

Flexibility title	Description
Title 38 Excepted Service Medical Provider Appointment	This flexibility allows appointments exclusively in VHA outside the title 5 competitive process for physicians, dentists, podiatrists, chiropractors, optometrists, registered nurses, physician assistants, and expanded-function dental auxiliaries.
Title 38 Excepted Service Other Medical Professional Appointment	This flexibility allows appointments exclusively in VHA outside the title 5 competitive process for certain other medical professionals.
Title 5 Direct Hire Authority	This flexibility allows agencies to appoint people in positions without adherence to certain competitive examination requirements when the Office of Personnel Management has determined there is a severe shortage of qualified candidates or a critical hiring need.
Title 38 Medical Provider Temporary or Without Compensation Appointment	The flexibility exclusively allows VA to appoint on a temporary full-time basis, part-time basis, or without compensation basis, persons in the physicians, dentists, podiatrists, chiropractors, optometrists, registered nurses, physician assistants, and expanded-function dental auxiliaries positions.
Title 5 Veteran Employment Opportunity Act	The flexibility allows an agency to appoint eligible veterans access to positions that otherwise may have only been available to current competitive service employees.
Title 5 Reinstatement Appointment	The flexibility allows an agency to appoint by reinstatement to a competitive service position a person who previously was employed under career or career-conditional appointment.
Title 5 Transfer Appointment	This flexibility allows an agency to appoint by transfer to a competitive service position, without a break in service of a single workday, a current career or career-conditional employee of another agency.
Veterans Recruitment Appointment	This flexibility allows an agency to appoint eligible veterans without competition under certain circumstances or otherwise through excepted service hiring procedures.

Flexibility title	Description
Title 5 Noncompetitive Military Spouse Appointment	This flexibility allows an agency to appoint noncompetitively a spouse of a member of the armed forces serving on active duty, a spouse of a 100 percent disabled service member injured while on active duty, or the un-remarried widow or widower of a service member who was killed while performing active duty. ^a
Title 5 Noncompetitive Term Appointment	The flexibility allows an agency to appoint noncompetitively veterans with compensable service-connected disability of 30 percent or more. ^a
Title 38 Intern/Trainees Temporary or Without Compensation Appointments	The flexibility exclusively allows VA to appoint on a temporary full-time basis, part-time basis, or without compensation basis persons in the other professional, clerical, technical, and unskilled personnel (including interns, residents, trainees, and students in medical support programs).

Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration data. | GAO-23-105953

^aService-connected disability refers to an injury or illness that the Department of Veterans Affairs deemed was incurred or aggravated during military service.

Recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives. VHA data show that it used recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives multiple times from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2022 across the U.S. Pacific territories.¹² Such incentives included the following:

- **Recruitment incentives** were used for newly-appointed employees (or a group of newly-appointed employees) in positions that were likely to be challenging to fill in the absence of an incentive, such as for medical officer and nurse occupations.
- **Relocation incentives** were used for recruiting currently-employed VHA employees from other facilities for occupations such as medical officer who would have to relocate from a different geographic area to a territory in accepting the position. This incentive was used when the determination had been made that the position would otherwise be difficult to fill.
- **Retention incentives** were used for existing employees, when the agency determined that the unusually high or unique qualifications of the employee, or a special need of the agency for the employee's services, made it essential to retain the employee and that the employee would be likely to leave federal service in the absence of an incentive. VHA used such incentives for occupations such as nurse, social worker, and medical support assistant.

Based on our analysis of VHA data on use of recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives in the U.S. Pacific territories, we found that VHA most frequently used retention incentives from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2022, particularly in fiscal years 2020 and 2021. VHA officials told us that they mostly used retention incentives because hiring new staff is very difficult and therefore using retention incentives to retain existing VHA staff was ideal. VHA less frequently used its relocation and recruitment incentives in the U.S. Pacific territories. VHA officials stated that they have offered the relocation incentive to all eligible new hires, but that few have accepted it.

VHA officials told us they have also used the Education Debt Reduction Program—a VHA-wide program that repays qualifying student loan debt. One official noted that it has been especially useful for recruiting and retaining staff in the U.S. Pacific territories. VHA officials also highlighted other flexibilities such as compressed work schedules and additional leave awards as useful tools to recruit

¹²VHA also used performance-related awards based on employee contributions and ratings, such as the individual cash award (ratings based) and individual time off. According to VHA officials, these awards can be useful tools for both recruitment and retention.

and retain medical officers and other medical staff.¹³ These flexibilities are used to provide shorter work schedules and extended periods of leave for medical officers. Officials told us that this program is especially useful in the remote U.S. Pacific territories where many staff have family and friends on the U.S. mainland, resulting in long travel times for employees.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to VA for review and comment. VA provided us with technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7114 or HundrupA@gao.gov. Contact points for our offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. In addition to the contact named above, Ann Tynan (Assistant Director), La Sherri Bush (Analyst-in-Charge), Romonda McKinney, Amy Andresen, and Ben Etheridge made key contributions to this report. Also contributing were Todd Anderson, Steven Lozano, Cathy Hamann Whitmore, and Jennifer Whitworth.



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Enclosures - 4

¹³The Education Debt Reduction Program is a VA reimbursement program that repays qualifying student loan debt up to \$200,000 or \$40,000 per year (tax-free) for up to 5 years for individuals in patient care positions designated as extremely difficult for recruitment and retention by local VHA medical facilities.

Enclosure I: VHA Staff by Occupation in the U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Years 2016 through 2022

According to Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data, the total number of staff in American Samoa and Guam community-based outpatient clinics (clinics) increased from fiscal years 2016 through 2022. American Samoa clinic staff grew from 23 to 30 employees and Guam clinic staff grew from 47 to 55 employees. The largest occupation to increase was the medical support assistance occupation, which grew by a combined 10 employees between American Samoa and Guam. VHA staff in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) increased from one employee in fiscal year 2016 to three in fiscal year 2022. The increase in staff came from the addition of a social worker and a nurse.

The medical officer (i.e., physician) occupation decreased in American Samoa and Guam. Both clinics shrank by a combined six medical officer employees from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2022. The largest decrease in the medical officer occupation occurred in fiscal year 2022 in Guam where the clinic medical officer staff shrank from seven to four employees.

Table 3: VHA Staff by Occupation in the U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Years 2016 through 2022
(Total VHA staff onboard as of September 30th of each fiscal year)

American Samoa	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Social science (i.e., readjustment counsel therapist positions)	2	2	1	-	-	-	-
Social science aid and technician (i.e., peer specialist)	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Psychology	-	-	1	1	1	1	1
Social work	2	2	1	1	-	-	-
Miscellaneous administration and program	-	-	-	1	1	1	1
Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	2	2	1	1	2	2	2
Medical officer (i.e., physician)	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
Nurse	5	5	5	5	5	5	6
Practical nurse	3	2	3	4	4	4	3
Physical therapist	1	-	1	1	1	1	-
Health aid and technician	1	1	-	1	1	1	3
Medical technician	1	1	1	1	-	2	2
Pharmacist	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Pharmacy technician	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Prosthetic representative	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
Medical support assistance	1	1	4	4	4	4	4
Purchasing	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Transportation clerk and assistant	-	-	1	2	3	3	3
Total American Samoa	23	21	23	27	27	29	30

Guam	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Social science (i.e., readjustment counsel therapist positions)	2	2	-	1	1	1	-
Social science aid and technician (i.e., peer specialist)	5	4	1	1	1	1	1
Psychology	1	-	1	2	1	1	1
Social work	5	3	6	7	7	8	6
Miscellaneous administration and program	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	2	1	2	4	6	6	6
Medical officer (i.e., physician)	9	6	8	7	8	7	4
Nurse	11	10	12	15	14	16	13
Practical nurse	4	4	5	5	5	6	5
Dietitian and nutritionist	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
Occupational therapist	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Physical therapist	-	1	1	1	1	1	1
Health aid and technician	2	2	1	2	2	2	2
Pharmacist	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Medical support assistance	4	6	8	9	11	11	11
Purchasing	-	-	-	1	1	1	1
Vocational rehabilitation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total Guam	47	40	46	56	61	63	55

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Social work	-	-	1	1	1	1	1
Miscellaneous administration and program	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Nurse	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
Total CNMI	1	1	2	2	3	3	3

Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data. | GAO-23-105953

Enclosure II: VHA Personnel Systems Used in the U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Years 2016 through 2022

According to Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data, VHA used three personnel systems for new employees hired from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2022, as show in table 4.

Table 4: Personnel Systems VHA Used for New Employees Hired in the U.S. Pacific Territories, by Occupations, Fiscal Years 2016 through 2022

Personnel system and occupation	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Title 38 - Total	5	1	2	5	4	3	4	24
Title 38 - Medical officer (i.e., physician)	3	-	-	1	2	1	3	10
Title 38 - Nurse	2	1	2	4	2	2	1	14
Title 38 hybrid - Total	1	2	18	9	6	2	4	42
Title 38 hybrid - Psychology	1	-	2	1	-	-	-	4
Title 38 hybrid - Social work	-	-	9	2	2	1	1	15
Title 38 hybrid - Practical nurse	-	-	2	2	1	1	-	6
Title 38 hybrid - Dietitian and nutritionist	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	2
Title 38 hybrid - Physical therapist	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Title 38 hybrid - Health aid and technician	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2
Title 38 hybrid - Medical support assistance	-	2	4	3	2	-	1	12
Title 5 - Total	-	2	1	8	3	6	-	20
Title 5 - Social science (i.e., readjustment counsel therapist positions)	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Title 5 - Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	-	1	-	2	2	2	-	7
Title 5 - Health aid and technician	-	1	-	2	1	2	-	6
Title 5 - Medical technician	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2
Title 5 - Purchasing	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2
Title 5 - Transportation clerk and assistant	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	2

Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data. | GAO-23-105953

Enclosure III: VHA Vacant Positions by Occupations in the U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Years 2019 through 2022

Table 5: VHA Vacant Positions by Occupations in the U.S. Pacific Territories, Fiscal Years 2019 through 2022 (VHA vacant positions by fiscal year)

American Samoa	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Nurse	2	1	2	-	5
Social work	2	1	-	1	4
Health aid and technician	-	-	2	1	3
Practical nurse	1	1	-	1	3
Transportation clerk and assistant	3	-	-	-	3
Medical technician	-	2	-	-	2
Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	2	-	-	-	2
Medical officer (i.e., physician)	-	1	-	-	1
Pharmacist	-	-	-	1	1
Physical therapist	-	-	-	1	1
Prosthetic representative	-	1	-	-	1
Purchasing	-	1	-	-	1
Total American Samoa	10	8	4	5	27

Guam	2019	2020	2021	2022	
Nurse	7	5	6	8	26
Social work	3	3	2	4	12
Medical officer (i.e., physician)	1	-	1	5	7
Health aid and technician	-	3	1	2	6
Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	2	1	1	2	6
Medical support assistance	4	-	-	1	5
Transportation clerk and assistant	2	-	-	2	4
Pharmacist	1	-	1	-	2
Practical nurse	-	-	1	1	2
Dietitian and nutritionist	1	-	-	-	1
Miscellaneous administration and program	1	-	-	-	1
Orthotist and prosthetist	-	-	-	1	1
Physical therapist	-	-	-	1	1
Prosthetic representative	-	1	-	-	1
Purchasing	-	1	-	-	1
Total Guam	22	14	13	27	76

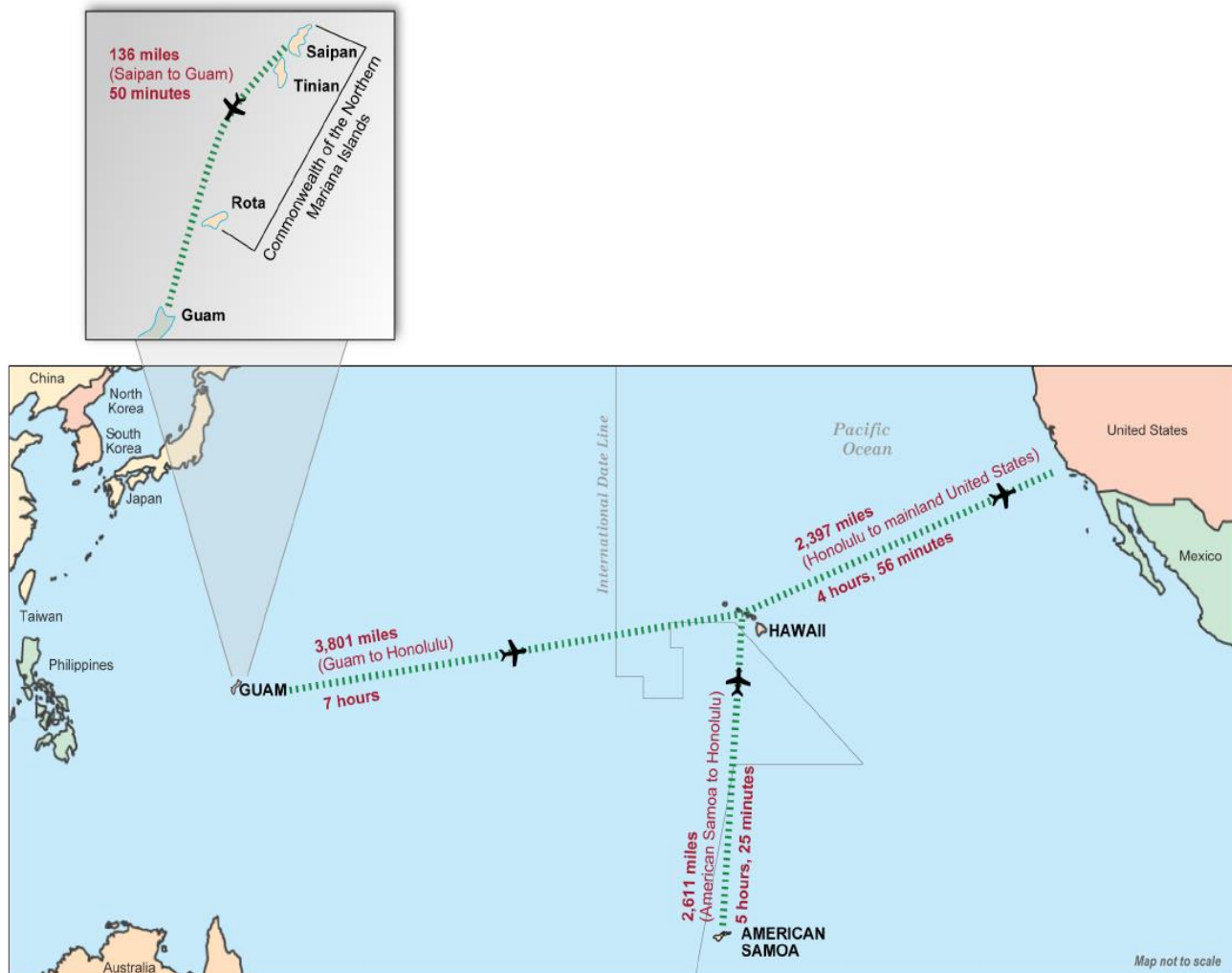
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	2019	2020	2021	2022	
Nurse	-	1	1	2	4
Social work	-	2	-	-	2
Total CNMI	-	3	1	2	6
U.S. Pacific territories total	32	25	18	34	109

Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data. | GAO-23-105953

Note: VHA officials told us that data on vacancies in this table include vacancies listed by the initial fiscal year a position was vacated regardless of the amount of time the position was vacant. Vacant positions that remain vacant from one fiscal year into the next are not included in the subsequent year count of vacancies. If a position was vacated once, filled, and vacated again during the same year, then this would count as two vacancies, according to VHA officials.

Enclosure IV: Distances and Flight Times between U.S. Pacific Territories, Hawaii, and the Continental United States

Figure 2. Distances and Flight Times between U.S. Pacific Territories, Hawaii, and the Continental United States



Source: GAO; Map Resources (map). | GAO-23-105953

Note: The flight paths illustrated here represent segments of or total trips some veterans may travel to receive health care services.

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