

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-582](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

VBA pays disability benefits for disabling conditions incurred or aggravated while in military service, while pension benefits are for low-income veterans who are either elderly or have disabilities unrelated to military service. In fiscal year 2014, the department paid about \$58 billion in disability compensation and about \$5 billion in pension claims. The disability claims process has been the subject of attention by Congress and others, due in part, to long waits for processing claims and a large backlog of claims. To process disability and pension claims more efficiently, VA began implementation of an electronic, paperless system in 2009. GAO was asked to study VBMS. Specifically, GAO (1) assessed VA's progress toward completing the development and implementation of VBMS and (2) determined to what extent users report satisfaction with the system. To do so, GAO reviewed relevant program documentation, administered a survey to a stratified random sample of about 3,500 users, and interviewed appropriate VA officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA develop a plan for completing VBMS, establish goals for system response time, minimize the incidence of high and medium priority system defects for future VBMS releases, assess user satisfaction, and establish satisfaction goals to promote improvement. VA concurred with the recommendations and described actions it is planning to take in response, except for the first recommendation. GAO continues to believe development of a plan for completing the system is important.

View [GAO-15-582](#). For more information, contact Valerie C. Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or [MelvinV@gao.gov](mailto:MelvinV@gao.gov).

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## VETERANS BENEFITS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

### Ongoing Development and Implementation Can Be Improved; Goals Are Needed to Promote Increased User Satisfaction

## What GAO Found

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made progress in developing and implementing the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), with deployment of the system to all of its regional offices as of June 2013. While 95 percent of records related to veterans' disability claims are electronic and reside in the system, additional capabilities have not yet been completed, such as automation of the steps associated with a veteran's request for an increase in benefits. Further, VBA has not yet developed and implemented pension processing capabilities in VBMS, nor has it articulated when the system will support appeals processing. The VBMS program reported receiving funding of about \$1 billion from fiscal years 2009 to 2015, at which time system completion was originally planned. Although development of the system is expected to continue beyond 2015, the incremental approach VA is using to develop and implement VBMS has not yet produced a plan that identifies when the system will be completed and can be expected to fully support disability and pension claims processing and appeals. Thus, it will be difficult for VA to hold its managers accountable for meeting its time frame and for demonstrating progress.

As VA continues its efforts to complete development and implementation of the system, three areas could benefit from increased management attention.

- **Cost estimating:** The program office does not have a reliable estimate of the cost for completing the system. Without such an estimate, VA management and the department's stakeholders have a limited view of the system's future resource needs, and the program risks not having sufficient funding to complete development and implementation of the system.
- **System availability:** Although VBA has improved its performance for ensuring the system is available to users, it has not established system response time goals. Without such goals, users do not have an expectation of the system response times they can anticipate and management does not have an indication of how well the system is performing relative to performance goals.
- **System defects:** While the program has actively managed system defects, a recent system release included unresolved defects that impacted system performance and users' experiences. Continuing to deploy releases with large numbers of defects that reduce system functionality could adversely affect users' ability to process disability claims in an efficient manner.

While VBA has employed various methods to obtain VBMS users' feedback, it has neither established goals to define user satisfaction, nor conducted a survey of claims processing employees to obtain a more comprehensive picture of overall customer satisfaction. GAO's survey of VBMS users estimated that a majority report satisfaction with the system, but that one group of users who are responsible for examining claims decisions was considerably less satisfied. Although the results of GAO's survey provide VBA with useful data about users' satisfaction with the system, the absence of user satisfaction goals limits the utility of survey results. Specifically, without having established goals to define user satisfaction, VBA does not have a basis for gauging the success of its efforts to promote satisfaction with the system.