GAO Highlights

August 2016

VA IT MANAGEMENT

Organization Is Largely Centralized; Additional Actions Could Improve Human Capital Practices and Systems Development Processes

Why GAO Did This Study

VA relies extensively on IT to deliver services to millions of our nation's veterans. VA reported spending approximately $3.9 billion in 2015 and received appropriations of approximately $4.1 billion in 2016 to improve and maintain its IT resources. Even as the department has engaged in various attempts to improve its IT management capabilities, GAO has issued numerous reports that highlighted challenges in its efforts.

This study was to determine (1) how VA is organized to manage and perform key IT-related functions and the extent to which it has centralized the management of IT resources, (2) the extent to which VA has implemented effective IT human capital management, and (3) the extent to which VA has established key processes to effectively manage major system development and acquisition efforts. To conduct its study, GAO reviewed VA policies, procedures, and other documentation and compared the department's processes to best practices for human capital management and IT systems development and acquisition. GAO also interviewed VA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that VA take two actions to assist the department in sustaining a workforce with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to execute its mission and goals, as well as six actions to assist the department in developing comprehensive processes that reflect systems development best practices. VA generally agreed with GAO's conclusions and concurred with GAO's eight recommendations.

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) performs key information technology (IT)-related functions, such as leadership, strategic planning, systems development and acquisition, and systems operations and maintenance, largely through its centralized Office of Information & Technology (OI&T), led by the Chief Information Officer (CIO). VA's two IT governance boards are intended to play a role in other key functions, such as investment management. Nevertheless, the department faced challenges in effectively managing IT, including (1) preventing IT activities from occurring outside the control of OI&T, (2) maintaining collaboration between OI&T and business units, and (3) delivering efficient and cost-effective IT capabilities. In response to these and other challenges, the CIO initiated an effort in January 2016 to transform OI&T into a more veteran-focused organization that emphasized transparency, accountability, innovation, and teamwork. The transformation strategy calls for OI&T to stabilize and streamline core processes and platforms, mitigate weaknesses from information security and GAO assessments, and improve outcomes by institutionalizing a new set of IT management capabilities. The CIO intends to complete the transformation by the first quarter of 2017.

Key to an agency's success in effectively managing its IT systems is sustaining a workforce with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to execute a range of management functions that support its mission and goals. VA took steps to implement effective IT human capital practices by documenting an IT human capital strategic plan and initiating an update based on changed priorities, analyzing workforce data, identifying skill gaps for the current year, and implementing an IT training program. However, OI&T had not consistently implemented all of these practices. Specifically, the office had not (1) tracked and reviewed historical and projected leadership retirements and (2) identified skills and competencies needed beyond the current year. Without annually tracking and reviewing data related to leadership retirements or identifying skills needed in future years, OI&T faces a risk of being unprepared to effectively respond to vacancies in key positions and not having the capabilities to deliver IT support that can contribute to improved services for veterans.

Key to successful development and acquisition of IT services is establishing documented processes that reflect best practices. Although there were gaps in some areas, VA's processes generally included best practices for project validation, project planning, requirements management, risk management, project monitoring and control, and process and product quality assurance. In addition, processes for developing and maintaining a project schedule had not fully addressed the majority of the associated best practices. Ensuring that these processes address all key practices will assist the department in effectively managing its IT system development and acquisitions.

_____

United States Government Accountability Office