

## Why GAO Did This Study

VA receives billions of dollars per year to provide health care and disability compensation to promote the wellness of veterans with service-connected conditions. VA studies veterans' health through research and assesses changes in service-connected conditions through its reevaluation process.

GAO was asked to review VA's efforts to study and gauge the health outcomes of veterans with service-connected conditions. This report examines the extent to which (1) veterans used VA health care services to treat service-connected conditions, and what is known about their health outcomes; (2) VA uses information on reevaluations to help manage the program; and (3) VA's procedures position it to determine when to conduct a reevaluation.

GAO reviewed fiscal year 2018 VA health care data; selected studies; VA data on completed reevaluations from fiscal years 2013-2018; and relevant federal laws, regulations, and program guidance. GAO also interviewed staff at four VA regional offices (selected for variation in claims workload and location) and VA officials at the agency's central office.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that VA develop a plan to address challenges to studying health outcomes, use information on reevaluations to improve program management, and improve procedures and training for reevaluations. VA agreed with two recommendations and agreed in principle with the other three, but its proposed actions do not fully address GAO's concerns.

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# VA DISABILITY COMPENSATION

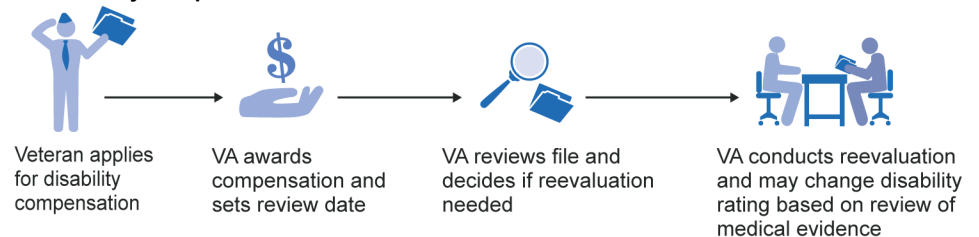
## Actions Needed to Enhance Information about Veterans' Health Outcomes

### What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2018, about 54 percent of veterans receiving Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability compensation had at least one VA outpatient visit to treat an injury or illness that VA deemed was incurred or aggravated during military service (i.e., a service-connected condition). However, the health outcomes of veterans with service-connected conditions, such as changes in the severity of symptoms or the incidence of mortality, are not well understood. Information about health outcomes is central to ensuring veterans' wellness and assessing improvement in their disability status. According to VA researchers GAO spoke with and academic studies GAO reviewed, various challenges have limited research on this population. For example, data reside in different VA systems and use different identifiers for medical conditions, hindering use of the data. While VA has begun to consider ways to analyze health outcomes, it has not yet established a plan for this effort, including the scope, specific activities, and timeframes for addressing the identified research challenges.

VA does not glean information from the results of reevaluations to help manage its disability compensation program. Disability reevaluations help VA gauge whether veterans' service-connected conditions have changed, and whether disability compensation should be modified to reflect those changes (see figure).

#### VA Disability Compensation Reevaluation Process



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) documents. | GAO-20-26

However, VA does not fully use key management information, such as:

- trends in how frequently certain conditions are reevaluated, including those required by VA regulations to be reevaluated; and
- outcomes of reevaluation decisions for individual conditions (i.e., whether conditions worsened or improved).

Both trend and outcome information could help VA better target its resources toward reevaluating conditions more likely to change.

VA recently updated its procedures manual to specify which staff may determine whether a veteran's condition should be reevaluated, but has not clearly defined skill sets and training needed to consistently implement these procedures. Specifically, the updated procedures do not indicate the knowledge, skills, and abilities staff need to determine when to conduct reevaluations. Further, VA has not ensured that training aligns with these needed skillsets. Without improving procedures and training, VA is at risk of conducting unnecessary reevaluations and burdening veterans.