

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105372](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

VHA has seen a significant increase in demand for mental health services and expects that demand to continue to grow. One way VHA meets such demand is by integrating certain mental health services within primary care settings.

The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 included a provision for GAO to review VHA's integration of primary and mental health services. Among other objectives, this report examines the extent to which facilities have met VHA requirements to integrate mental health care into primary care. It also discusses challenges that have affected such integration and steps VHA has taken to mitigate them.

GAO reviewed VHA documentation and policies on integration efforts and annual survey data from 2011 to 2022. GAO also interviewed VHA officials and providers from nine VHA facilities. These facilities were selected based on geographic location and other factors, such as the percentage of veterans receiving integrated mental health services in fiscal year 2020.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that VHA (1) monitor the development and implementation of corrective action plans and (2) evaluate and implement strategies to help mitigate staffing challenges affecting the integration of mental health and primary care services. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations and described steps it has or plans to take to implement them.

View [GAO-23-105372](#). For more information, contact Alyssa M. Hundrup at (202) 512-7114 or [hundrupa@gao.gov](mailto:hundrupa@gao.gov).

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## VETERANS HEALTH CARE

### Staffing Challenges Persist for Fully Integrating Mental Health and Primary Care Services

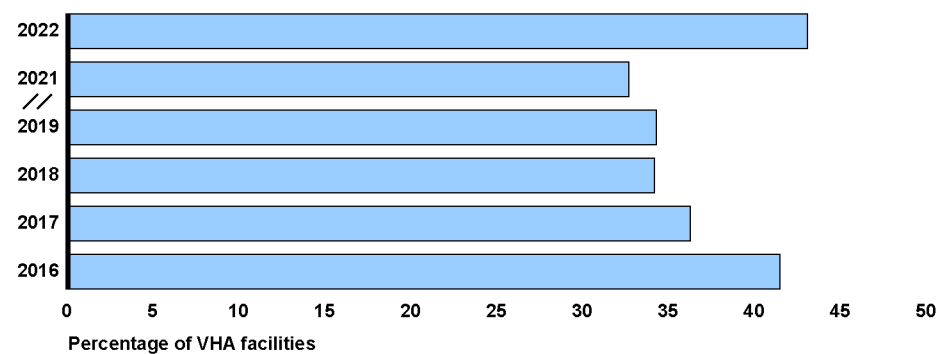
## What GAO Found

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) requires its medical facilities serving at least 5,000 veterans annually to integrate mental health services into the primary care services they provide. Specifically, facilities are required to have mental health providers, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers, available within primary care settings to work collaboratively and share responsibility with primary care providers to (1) assess and treat veterans with mental health symptoms and conditions, such as anxiety or depression; and (2) follow up with those veterans to monitor symptoms and adherence to medications, and provide education and referral services.

VHA data show that as of February 2022, about 79 percent of 455 VHA facilities reported they met both requirements, with the remainder meeting one or none of the requirements. VHA officials said that regional networks are responsible for monitoring their facilities' adherence to the requirements and developing corrective action plans. However, VHA does not monitor implementation of corrective action plans. Doing so would ensure facilities are taking appropriate actions to comply. Veterans at those facilities would then have better access to mental health care services in primary care settings, as VHA intends.

VHA facilities reported that persistent staffing challenges have adversely affected their efforts to integrate mental health services into primary care settings from 2016 through February 2022 (see figure).

Percentage of VHA Facilities That Reported Staffing As Their Most Significant Challenge, 2016 through 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data. | [GAO-23-105372](#)

Note: Data were reported in VHA annual surveys. According to VHA officials they did not administer a 2020 annual survey due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address staffing challenges, officials from the selected facilities in GAO's review reported taking steps such as offering more flexible work schedules and providing additional technology to reduce workloads. Regional network officials identified several additional strategies that VHA could consider, such as providing additional guidance on recruiting and retaining staff and increasing funding for certain positions. Evaluating and implementing these strategies, and any others as appropriate, may help facilities mitigate staffing challenges. Doing so would help ensure that veterans receive the most appropriate and timely mental health care services available.