

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105699](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Many new veterans face significant difficulties reintegrating into civilian life during their first year of separation from service. Younger veterans, the population that includes more veterans who recently transitioned, experience higher rates of suicide than other veterans, according to VA. VA's Solid Start program was launched in 2019 to help connect new veterans to their benefits and other available supports.

GAO was asked to review VA's Solid Start program. This report examines (1) how VA implemented and monitors the Solid Start program, and (2) any outreach challenges for Solid Start and how VA addressed them. GAO reviewed relevant VA documentation on program implementation, monitoring, participation metrics, and evaluation plans and interviewed VA officials. GAO also interviewed officials from seven veterans organizations to obtain their perspective on any Solid Start outreach challenges. Veterans organizations were selected for diversity in number and types of constituents served, and based on the organizations' previous engagement with the Solid Start program.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making one recommendation to VA, to further collaborate with veterans organizations in identifying and addressing outreach gaps, and assessing Solid Start outreach strategies for hard-to-reach groups of veterans. VA agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-23-105699](#). For more information, contact Dawn Locke at 202-512-7215 or locked@gao.gov.

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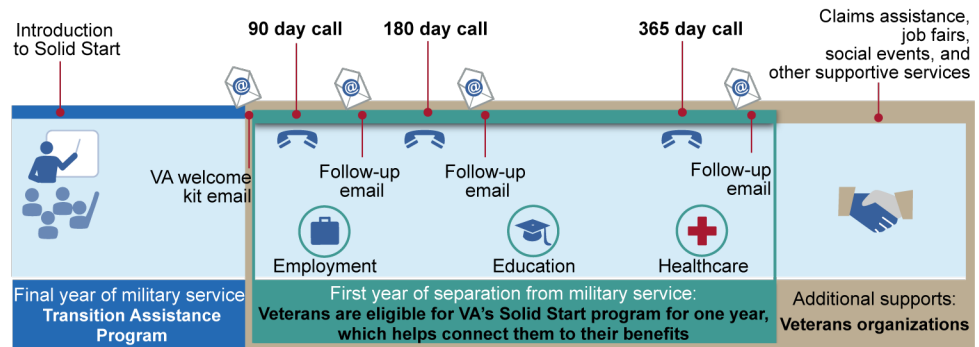
VETERANS BENEFITS

VA Could Enhance Outreach for Its Solid Start Program by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has implemented Solid Start—an outreach program to help support the well-being of new veterans—by proactively phoning all eligible veterans three times during their first year after separation. During phone calls, Solid Start representatives inform veterans of specific VA benefits based on their needs and interests, such as education and employment counseling. Once representatives speak with the veteran, they follow up with a personalized email with more information (see figure).

Examples of Supports for New Veterans, Including Solid Start Communication Milestones



Source: GAO summary of documentation and interviews with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). | GAO-23-105699

Note: The Transition Assistance Program, with limited exceptions, is a mandatory program that helps separating service members prepare for their transition to civilian life. For the Solid Start program, if VA Solid Start representatives speak with a veteran, they send a personalized follow-up email. General informational emails are also sent throughout the year of eligibility. VA continues to offer benefits and resources to veterans after the first year of separation. Veterans organizations are non-governmental organizations that assist veterans with a range of services.

VA monitors Solid Start's performance by tracking the percentage of answered calls and analyzing whether veterans who were successfully contacted used a greater number of benefits than those who were not contacted. In 2021, representatives successfully contacted about 71 percent of eligible veterans. VA's analysis showed these veterans used benefits, such as VA health care, to a greater extent than their peers who did not speak with a Solid Start representative. Solid Start had less success in reaching veterans under age 23.

All seven veterans organizations GAO spoke with identified outreach challenges in two areas: (1) communication tools, such as cold calls; and (2) building relationships with veterans who may hesitate to speak with Solid Start representatives. VA is addressing some of these challenges, such as by text messaging for younger veterans. Although veterans organizations are well positioned to connect with hard-to-reach veterans, VA has not collaborated with these organizations to identify or address any additional gaps, such as outreach to veterans experiencing homelessness, struggling to use technology, or those hesitant to speak to VA directly. VA's Strategic Plan calls for VA to collaborate with groups such as veterans organizations to identify gaps in service and build partnerships to leverage shared resources. VA may be better able to connect with hard-to-reach veterans by further collaborating with veterans organizations.