

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106364](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Citizens from the U.S. territories and FAS generally enlist in the military at higher per capita rates than some U.S. states. As veterans, they are eligible for certain VA benefits. However, GAO has previously found that veterans living in the remote Pacific U.S. territories and abroad can face unique and sometimes substantial challenges accessing their VA benefits.

The Honoring our PACT Act of 2022 includes a provision for GAO to review veterans' access to their benefits in the U.S. territories and FAS. This report examines, among other objectives, how VA estimates the population of veterans in the U.S. territories and FAS and VA efforts to help address challenges these veterans face accessing VA health care services.

GAO conducted site visits to all five territories and Hawaii, reviewed documentation, and interviewed officials from VA and DOD program offices as well as from local and regional offices of each of these agencies. GAO analyzed data such as veteran demographics and health care service utilization. GAO also interviewed non-federal stakeholders, such as FAS embassy staff.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to VA and one to DOD. These include recommendations that VA assess (1) the data sources in its model for estimating the veteran population in the U.S. territories and FAS and (2) its travel benefits policies for territory veterans and amend its regulations as appropriate. VA and DOD concurred with GAO's recommendations and identified steps the departments will take to address them.

View [GAO-24-106364](#). For more information, contact Sharon M. Silas at (202) 512-7114 or silas@gao.gov.

May 2024

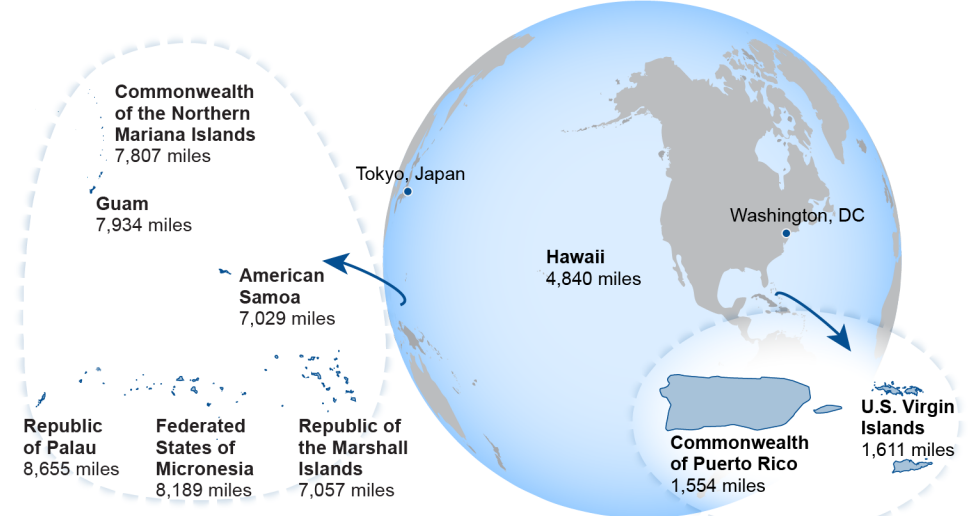
VETERANS AFFAIRS

Actions Needed to Improve Access to Care in the U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States

What GAO Found

In addition to serving veterans in the 50 U.S. states and District of Columbia, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is responsible for providing health care and other benefits to veterans in the three foreign countries in the Pacific collectively known as the freely associated states (FAS) and in the five U.S. territories.

U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States and Their Distances from Washington, D.C.



Maps not to scale

Source: GAO analysis; Map Resources (individual islands); Yevhenii/stock.adobe.com (globe). | GAO-24-106364

VA uses a model to estimate the size of the veteran population to inform resource allocation and outreach needs. However, VA lacks assurance that the model's estimates are accurate for territory and FAS veterans—for example, one major data source for the model does not include data on most of these locations. Further, local stakeholders from these areas consistently stated that VA's estimates were low. Assessing the model's data sources and availability of other data sets, and making changes as appropriate, could help VA ensure the accuracy of its data for the territories and FAS.

Additionally, VA efforts have not sufficiently addressed veterans' access to care challenges in the territories and FAS. For example, due to VA's eligibility criteria for its travel benefits program, as of March 2024, FAS veterans and a large portion of territory veterans do not qualify for VA travel benefits, though they generally need to travel long distances to access VA care. Regarding FAS veterans, legislation enacted in March 2024 explicitly authorized VA subject to certain agreements to reimburse them for travel related to eligible health care services, but VA has not yet implemented this legislation. Additionally, the enabling law that authorized VA to reimburse certain veterans' travel also authorized VA to make payments to any person not explicitly covered in the law, pursuant to regulations. VA may be able to improve access to care for veterans living in the territories by assessing whether it is feasible and advisable to expand eligibility for certain veterans in these areas, as well as by amending its regulations as appropriate.