

Why GAO Did This Study

VHA provided nearly 80 million outpatient medical appointments to veterans in fiscal year 2011. While VHA has reported continued improvements in achieving access to timely medical appointments, patient complaints and media reports about long wait times persist.

GAO was asked to evaluate VHA's scheduling of timely medical appointments. GAO examined (1) the extent to which VHA's approach for measuring and monitoring medical appointment wait times reflects how long veterans are waiting for appointments; (2) the extent to which VAMCs are implementing VHA's policies and processes for appointment scheduling, and any problems encountered in ensuring veterans' access to timely medical appointments; and (3) VHA's initiatives to improve veterans' access to medical appointments. To conduct this work, GAO made site visits to 23 clinics at four VAMCs, the latter selected for variation in size, complexity, and location. GAO also reviewed VHA's policies and data, and interviewed VHA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VHA take actions to (1) improve the reliability of its medical appointment wait time measures, (2) ensure VAMCs consistently implement VHA's scheduling policy, (3) require VAMCs to allocate staffing resources based on scheduling needs, and (4) ensure that VAMCs provide oversight of telephone access and implement best practices to improve telephone access for clinical care. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-13-130](#). For more information, contact Debra Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov.

VA HEALTH CARE

Reliability of Reported Outpatient Medical Appointment Wait Times and Scheduling Oversight Need Improvement

What GAO Found

Outpatient medical appointment wait times reported by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), are unreliable. Wait times for outpatient medical appointments—referred to as medical appointments—are calculated as the number of days elapsed from the desired date, which is defined as the date on which the patient or health care provider wants the patient to be seen. The reliability of reported wait time performance measures is dependent on the consistency with which schedulers record the desired date in the scheduling system in accordance with VHA's scheduling policy. However, VHA's scheduling policy and training documents for recording desired date are unclear and do not ensure consistent use of the desired date. Some schedulers at Veterans Affairs medical centers (VAMC) that GAO visited did not record the desired date correctly. For example, three schedulers changed the desired date based on appointment availability; this would have resulted in a reported wait time that was shorter than the patient actually experienced. VHA officials acknowledged limitations of measuring wait times based on desired date, and described additional information used to monitor veterans' access to medical appointments, including patient satisfaction survey results. Without reliable measurement of how long patients are waiting for medical appointments, however, VHA is less equipped to identify areas that need improvement and mitigate problems that contribute to wait times.

While visiting VAMCs, GAO also found inconsistent implementation of VHA's scheduling policy that impedes VAMCs from scheduling timely medical appointments. For example, four clinics across three VAMCs did not use the electronic wait list to track new patients that needed medical appointments as required by VHA scheduling policy, putting these clinics at risk for losing track of these patients. Furthermore, VAMCs' oversight of compliance with VHA's scheduling policy, such as ensuring the completion of required scheduler training, was inconsistent across facilities. VAMCs also described other problems with scheduling timely medical appointments, including VHA's outdated and inefficient scheduling system, gaps in scheduler and provider staffing, and issues with telephone access. For example, officials at all VAMCs GAO visited reported that high call volumes and a lack of staff dedicated to answering the telephones impede scheduling of timely medical appointments. In January 2012, VHA distributed telephone access best practices that, if implemented, could help improve telephone access to clinical care.

VHA is implementing a number of initiatives to improve veterans' access to medical appointments such as expanded use of technology to interact with patients and provide care, which includes the use of secure messaging between patients and their health care providers. VHA also is piloting a new initiative to provide health care services through contracts with community providers that aims to reduce travel and wait times for veterans who are unable to receive certain types of care within VHA in a timely way.