

## Why GAO Did This Study

In June 2018, Congress passed the VA MISSION Act of 2018, which requires VA to establish a permanent community care program. VA plans to consolidate the Choice Program and its other VA community care programs into one community care program—the VCCP. This legislation helps address some of the challenges faced by the Choice Program and VA's other community care programs. VA's implementation of the VCCP can benefit from the lessons learned under the Choice Program. Ignoring these lessons learned increases VA's risk for not being able to ensure that all veterans receive timely access to care in the community and that community providers are reimbursed in a timely manner.

This testimony focuses on lessons learned from the Choice Program, including recommendations GAO has made to VA to help ensure (1) veterans' timely access to care under the VCCP (2) effective monitoring of veterans' access to care under the VCCP, and (3) timely payments to community providers under the VCCP. This testimony is based on GAO reports on the Choice Program that were issued in June 2018 and September 2018.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made 12 recommendations to VA to improve its management and oversight of the Choice Program and the VCCP. VA generally agreed with all but one of GAO's recommendations. GAO continues to believe that all of the recommendations are warranted. As of April 2019, these recommendations have not been implemented.

## VETERANS HEALTH CARE

### VA Needs to Address Challenges as It Implements the Veterans Community Care Program

## What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Choice Program (Choice Program) allows eligible veterans to obtain health care services from providers not directly employed by VA (community providers). The program is largely managed by third party administrators (TPA), who are responsible for establishing provider networks, scheduling veterans' appointments, and paying providers. GAO has identified the following challenges to the Choice Program that VA needs to address as it implements its new Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP).

**Factors that adversely affected veterans' timely access to care.** GAO found that numerous factors adversely affected veterans' timely access to care through the Choice Program. These factors included (1) administrative burden caused by complexities of referral and appointment scheduling processes; (2) poor communication between VA and its medical facilities; and (3) inadequacies in the networks of community providers established by the TPAs, including an insufficient number, mix, or geographic distribution of community providers. VA has taken steps intended to help address these factors, however, some have not been fully addressed. In June 2018, GAO made five recommendations to VA, including that VA establish a system that will facilitate care coordination and exchanges of information among VA medical facilities, VA clinicians, TPAs, community providers, and veterans. VA agreed or agreed in principle with all five recommendations, but has not yet implemented them.

**Unavailable and unreliable data.** GAO found that VA cannot systematically monitor the timeliness of veterans' access to Choice Program care because it lacks complete, reliable data to do so. The data limitations GAO identified included a lack of data on the timeliness of accepting referrals and opting veterans in to the program, inaccurate data on clinically indicated dates (which are used to measure the timeliness of care), and unreliable data on the timeliness of urgent care. In June 2018, GAO made five recommendations to VA, including that VA implement mechanisms to allow VA to systematically monitor the amount of time taken to prepare referrals, schedule appointments, and complete appointments. VA agreed with four of the five recommendations, but has not yet implemented them.

**Untimely payments to community providers.** GAO identified three key factors that affected timeliness of payments to community providers under the Choice Program. These factors included (1) VA's untimely payments to TPAs, which in turn extended the length of time TPAs took to pay providers' claims; (2) Choice Program reimbursement requirements, which led to claim denials; and (3) inadequate provider education on filing claims. GAO found that VA has taken actions to address the factors, such as amending certain reimbursement requirements. However, two of these factors have not been fully addressed. In September 2018, GAO made two recommendations to VA, including that VA collect data on and monitor compliance with its requirements pertaining to customer service for community providers. VA agreed with the recommendations, but has not yet implemented them.