

Why GAO Did This Study

Over one-third of the U.S. military serve in the reserve components. In return for their service, the nation has committed to compensate veterans for service-connected disabilities. The Identifying Barriers and Best Practices Study Act includes a provision for GAO to study reserve component members' access to VA disability benefits.

This report examines VA's approval rates for reserve and active component disability compensation claims and how DOD and VA addressed stakeholder-identified challenges facing reserve component members in accessing disability compensation, among other topics.

GAO analyzed VA data; reviewed relevant federal laws, DOD and VA policies, and other documents; and interviewed VA and DOD officials and 15 selected stakeholders, including researchers and veterans service organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 14 recommendations, including that DOD and VA develop guidance for reserve component members on documenting health conditions; the military services fully apply sound planning practices to implement the new form; and VA ensure claims processors have data on reserve component members' dates of training. DOD concurred and VA concurred in principle with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-24-105400](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

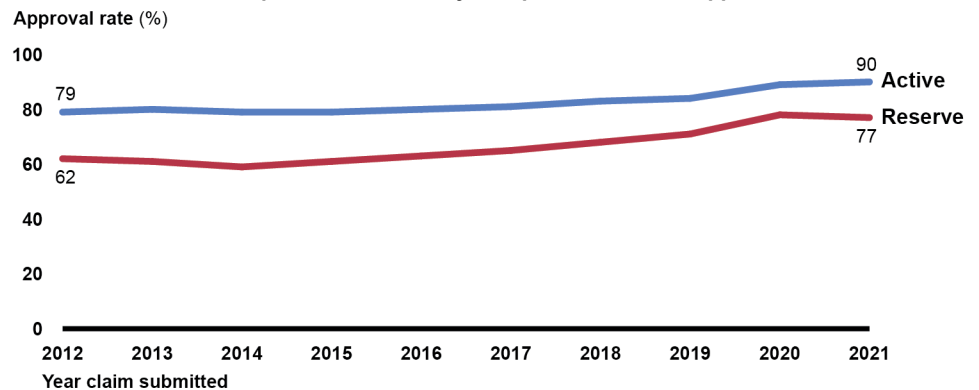
VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

Actions Needed to Address Challenges Reserve Component Members Face Accessing Compensation

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) approved 11 to 20 percent fewer initial disability compensation claims from members of the reserve components—the Reserves and National Guard—than the active components (i.e., full-time active-duty military) each year from 2012 through 2021, the most recent data available. VA and Department of Defense (DOD) officials were unaware of this difference. Reserve component approval rates remained lower across characteristics such as military rank and age, but the size of the difference sometimes varied.

Active and Reserve Component VA Disability Compensation Claim Approval Rates



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) data. | GAO-24-105400

DOD and VA partially addressed challenges reserve component members face accessing disability compensation. Disability compensation claims generally must include evidence of a health condition that developed during military duty and led to a disability. Stakeholders—who study or work with reserve component members—identified challenges related to reserve component members' timely documentation of their health conditions and VA claims processors' ability to obtain evidence to support their claims. For example:

- All 15 stakeholders told GAO that reserve component members do not always understand the importance of immediately documenting health conditions to support any future disability compensation claims. DOD and VA guidance does not address this knowledge gap.
- Thirteen stakeholders and several claims processors told GAO that finding evidence needed to support reserve component claims, such as service dates, is difficult. One form lists active-duty service but not reserve component members' two-week annual training. DOD designed a new form that will list dates of annual training, but the military services have not fully applied sound planning practices to implement it. VA claims processors also lack a reliable data source for the dates of monthly weekend drills.

Guidance on documenting health conditions, efficient rollout of DOD's new form, and better VA data on service dates could help reserve component members prove that their disabilities are connected to their military service. Without this proof, VA claims processors will likely deny disability compensation claims.