

VA BENEFITS:

Increasing Outreach and Measuring Outcomes Would Improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill On-the-Job Training and Apprenticeship Programs

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What GAO Found

Veterans surveyed and interviewed by GAO said the on-the-job training (OJT) and apprenticeship programs offered under the Post-9/11 GI Bill—the largest education benefit program overseen by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)—have helped them transition to civilian life, though program data show relatively few veterans have participated. Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits were initially available only for higher education, but in 2011 provisions were enacted that expanded benefits to cover OJT and apprenticeship. Many veterans GAO interviewed (21 of 28) said that the supplemental income the programs provided helped them offset income losses they experienced when leaving the military. About half of the veterans responding to GAO's survey (80 of 156) reported that the program allowed them to use their GI Bill benefits even though college was not a good fit for them. Since OJT and apprenticeship benefits became available in 2011, about 27,000 of the 1.2 million veterans who have received Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits have participated in these programs.

VA primarily provides information about the OJT and apprenticeship programs through mandatory briefings for transitioning servicemembers and on its website. While VA's outreach efforts include some information on these programs, VA's mandatory briefings and web resources generally emphasize higher education and lack sufficient detail for veterans to reasonably understand how to use their GI Bill benefits for OJT and apprenticeships. State officials GAO surveyed reported conducting outreach in a variety of ways, such as attending job fairs and speaking to veterans groups. Without more outreach, veterans who could benefit from these programs may not learn about them.

Key challenges faced by veterans and employers using these programs include lack of awareness and administrative burdens, according to state officials, veterans, and employers GAO surveyed. Most state officials surveyed (39 of 44) reported that lack of awareness about the programs is a primary challenge they face in facilitating veteran and employer participation. Further, over half of state officials surveyed (24 of 42) cited challenges related to VA's current paper-based payment processing system, which requires employers to fax or mail monthly forms to VA in order for a veteran to receive benefits. In addition, 11 of the 15 employers and apprenticeship sponsors GAO interviewed said the process is burdensome or inefficient, and 6 of the 28 veterans GAO interviewed said their benefits have sometimes been delayed. VA is developing a new data system, but it may not be implemented until 2017 at the earliest, according to VA officials, and administrative challenges in the interim could hinder program participation.

Little is known about the performance of VA's Post-9/11 GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs because VA does not measure program outcomes, such as whether participants retain employment after completing the program. Absent such information, GAO examined Department of Labor (DOL) outcome data for its related OJT and apprenticeship programs, which indicate the potential for positive outcomes for these training models. Standards for internal control call for establishing and reviewing performance measures to allow an agency to evaluate relevant data and take appropriate actions. Without such measures, VA is limited in its ability to assess its programs.

Why GAO Did This Study

As the military draws down its forces, many veterans will enter the civilian workforce and may seek educational and training opportunities to further their transition into civilian jobs. Because pursuing a higher education degree may not be the best path for some veterans, the Post-9/11 GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs provide alternative opportunities. GAO was asked to review these programs.

This report examines (1) how selected veterans and employers used the programs and how widely they have been used; (2) to what extent VA and states have taken steps to inform veterans and employers about these programs; (3) what challenges, if any, veterans and employers have faced in using them; and (4) to what extent VA has assessed the performance of its programs. GAO analyzed VA program data as of March 2015 and DOL program data from 2013 and 2014, and assessed outreach materials. GAO also surveyed officials in all 44 states overseeing VA's programs; conducted nongeneralizable surveys of randomly selected veterans and employers; and interviewed veterans and employers in two states selected for variation in veteran population and type of state agency.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA improve outreach, ease administrative challenges, and establish outcome measures for its OJT and apprenticeship programs. VA agreed with GAO's conclusions and concurred with all three recommendations.

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Recommendations for Executive Action

- 1. Recommendation:** To help ensure that veterans are aware of the Post-9/11 OJT and apprenticeship programs so they can make informed decisions about how they use their benefits, the Secretary of VA should identify and implement appropriate, cost-effective actions to increase awareness of OJT and apprenticeship benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Status: Closed - Implemented 

Comments: In January 2016, VBA's Office of Transition, Employment, and Economic Impact increased the amount of information concerning On-the-Job Training (OJT) and Apprenticeship within the Career Technical Training Track (CTTT), and included OJT and Apprenticeship information in the Benefits I Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefing. The TAP briefing now includes instructions on how to access the Department of Labor website for information regarding OJT and Apprenticeship programs. In addition, an informational guide for Employers and Sponsors titled "Understanding On-The-Job Training and Apprenticeship Approval" was created and posted to the GI Bill website (see http://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/docs/job_aids/OJT_APPInfoGuide.pdf). In addition, the Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity released information related to On-the-Job training and Apprenticeship training to veterans and stakeholders, which is available on VBA's website (see http://www.benefits.va.gov/VOW/docs/On_the_Job_Training_OJT_and_Apprenticeship_Programs).

- 2. Recommendation:** To help address challenges veterans and employers reported facing in using the OJT and apprenticeship programs, the Secretary of VA should identify and implement cost-effective steps to ease administrative challenges in submitting paperwork or receiving payments as the new automated Veterans Approval, Certification, Enrollment, Reporting and Tracking System to process program approvals and benefit payments is being developed and implemented.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Status: Closed - Implemented 

Comments: To reduce the administrative challenges of submitting monthly certification forms using paper-based systems (fax, postal mail), in January 2017 VBA informed all training institutions that monthly certifications could be submitted electronically via the Right Now Web (RNW) application until this capability is available in the VA-ONCE application. Specifically, VBA released a Procedural Advisory regarding the RNW application and how it can be used to electronically submit monthly certification claims for OJT or Apprenticeship programs. Previously, in the fall of 2016, VA announced that it had updated two other systems (VA-ONCE

and ECAP) so that Post-9/11 OJT and apprenticeship enrollments could be processed electronically.

3. **Recommendation:** To increase accountability for program performance, the Secretary of VA should establish measures to report on program outcomes for Post-9/11 GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs, including considering relevant data sources and seeking legislative authority to gain access to data, if necessary.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Status: Open 

Comments: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) agrees that program performance metrics should be developed to report on program outcomes. In March 2016, VBA officials said that VBA's Education Service is working with DoD, ED, and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to determine the feasibility of collecting and publishing post-graduation data to include data for OJT and apprenticeship programs. The target completion date was June 1, 2016.