

VA Needs Help Reaching Veterans

An independent government institution reported that VA needs to do a better job in contacting newly separated veterans.

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A government watchdog organization reported that VA is not working with veterans service organizations to contact veterans as part of the Solid Start program.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that VA needs to work with organizations, such as VFW, to help department representatives contact newly separated veterans. Doing so is required by law.

The review, titled “Veterans Benefits: VA Could Enhance Outreach for Its Solid Start Program by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations,” stated that VA is failing to work with veterans service organizations, even though they are “well-positioned” to reach veterans.

“VA may be better able to connect with hard-to-reach veterans by further collaborating with veterans organizations,” according to the report. “VA agreed with the recommendation.”

VA’s Solid Start program, which began at the end of 2019, allows department representatives to contact veterans to help them better understand the benefits available to them. The representatives call newly discharged veterans three times — 90, 180 and 365 days — after military service.

The GAO is an agency — part of the legislative branch — that audits and investigates services required by law. In its report, it was recommended that VA further assess Solid Start’s strategy to contact veterans who are experiencing homelessness, struggling to use a computer to find resources and hesitant to speak with a VA representative.

The Department of Labor says that about 200,000 military members leave their service and transition into civilian life each year. The VA reported that representatives had connected with nearly 70,000 veterans through the then-pilot program in fiscal year 2020.

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VA officials have said that the Solid Start program aims to connect newly separated veterans with VA resources and benefits, including home loans and health care services.

As part of Solid Start, VA representatives also tell transitioning veterans about free mental health resources available for up to a year to all who left the military, regardless of discharge status or service history.

Last year, Congress and President Joe Biden approved the Solid Start Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-205), making the program a permanent entity of VA.

The legislation, which was supported by VFW, requires VA to:

- Ensure calls by VA representatives are “truly tailored to the needs of each veteran’s unique situation.”
- Provide women veterans with information about their specific health care and benefit needs.
- Give information on access to state and local veterans resources, including veteran service organizations, such as VFW.
- Assess the “effectiveness” of the Solid Start program.
- Encourage transitioning military service members to give other contacts who can be reached in case representatives are unable to contact veterans directly.
- Follow up missed phone calls with mailings to “ensure” veterans receive information from VA.

VFW has touted that VA’s Solid Start program helps to ensure veterans are making a successful transition into civilian life.

This article is featured in the June/July 2023 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.