

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Gene Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street NW Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Department of Defense data show that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 50 men experienced Military Sexual Trauma (MST) at some point during their military service. Victims of MST—which includes incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault that occurred during military service—may suffer from chronic behavioral health conditions that cause them to seek disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Processing veterans' disability claims related to MST poses challenges for VA because evidence can be difficult to produce or validate. As part of VA's ongoing efforts to improve the timeliness and quality of processing MST disability claims, VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) instituted specially trained teams to process disability claims related to MST. VBA had set up these specialized teams in each of its regional offices but has since consolidated these specialized teams into the San Juan Regional Office in Puerto Rico. However, VBA has used temporary "surge sites" at other regional offices – notably, the Roanoke Regional Office in Virginia - because of increased workload demands for MST claims.

Processing disability compensation claims involves reviewing a claimant's medical history and other personal details that, for MST claimants, include details about sexual harassment or assault. Claims processors who review these details may experience associated emotional stress that can lead to fatigue, absenteeism, or illness, which may affect their well-being, retention, and ability to meet the needs of veterans throughout the claims process.

I have questions about the stressors specializing in MST claims may pose on the mental health and well-being of the VBA workforce and VBA's practices for addressing MST-related workload challenges.

As such, I would like GAO to examine the following questions:

- (1) What is VA's strategy for processing MST disability compensation claims, and what associated workload and workforce-related challenges does VA face?
- (2) What implications, if any, do these challenges have for recruitment or retention of VBA's workforce?
- (3) What, if any, mental health services does VA provide to claims processors who handle MST-related disability claims, and how has VA planned and evaluated these resources and claims processors' ability to access them?
- (4) What training has been provided to MST claims processors and quality review teams that are tasked with reviewing the quality of this training as well as MST claims decisions? Additionally, is the training they receive specific to their individual role within VBA?
- (5) Has VA established an effective feedback loop between VBA claims decisions on MST claims if and when these claims are remanded for additional development and, if so, how has this process improved the quality of future decisions on initial claims?

Sincerely,

Jerry Moran

**Jerry Moran**

Chairman