



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Office of Audits and Evaluations

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

VA Improved the
Transparency of Mandatory
Staffing and Vacancy Data

REVIEW

REPORT #20-00541-149

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Executive Summary

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted this review to assess VA's reporting of staffing and vacancy data on its public-facing website. VA is required to publicly release this information each quarter by the VA MISSION Act of 2018 (the Act). The Act also requires the OIG to review the data-reporting website periodically and to make any recommendations for improvement. The Act is one of several laws passed since 2014 that require reporting of vacancies within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Since 2015, the OIG's Office of Healthcare Inspections has issued annual reports on VHA occupations with severe staffing shortages. In the 2019 report, the occupations listed most often were physicians, nurses, human resources specialists, police officers, general engineering, and custodial workers.

The OIG issued its first review in accordance with the Act on June 25, 2019. In that review, the team determined that VA partially complied with the Act by reporting current personnel and time-to-hire data. However, the OIG recommended that the assistant secretary for human resources and administration take appropriate action to ensure that vacancies and employee gains and losses are reported as required by the Act.

The review team also identified opportunities for VA to improve its data reporting. During the review, VA only reported data for the current quarter on its public website. However, posting historical data would increase transparency and allow trending or comparisons over time. Additionally, the review team determined that the VA Office of Human Resources and Administration should include quality control steps to verify the accuracy of its data labeling.

What the Review Found

As of February 2020, the review team found that VA partially complied with the requirements of Section 505 of the Act. VA reported time-to-hire data using an alternative 100-day measure instead of the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) 80-day target as required. However, VA implemented sufficient corrective actions to close three of the five OIG recommendations from the June 2019 report. In doing so, VA ensured compliance with the reporting requirements for vacancies and employee gains and losses. Vacancies were reported by specific occupational series as required, which allows the public to see whether unfilled positions were greater in clinical occupations or nonclinical roles. Additionally, VA properly published staffing gains and losses by quarter, as opposed to fiscal year-to-date.

VA also improved the transparency and usefulness of its data. All seven quarterly staffing and vacancy publications were posted on VA's public website. Furthermore, in the three most recent quarterly releases, VA provided an executive summary that contained a brief synopsis of the data elements for each of its administrations and for staff offices. Finally, VA added a summary page to the staffing and vacancy spreadsheets that provided the reader with information on how to

interpret the data, overall figures for the previous quarterly data releases, and the top five vacant occupations in VHA.

However, action is still needed to close recommendations on disclosing data limitations and updating the methodology for aggregation and reporting. The review team will continue to monitor VA's efforts to improve its staffing and vacancy reporting.

What the OIG Recommended

The OIG recommended the assistant secretary for human resources and administration / operations, security, and preparedness ensure that time-to-hire data are reported as required and confer with the Office of General Counsel to ensure that changes in reporting methodology adhere to the Act.

Management Comments

The assistant secretary for human resources and administration / operations, security, and preparedness concurred with all recommendations and submitted acceptable corrective action plans. The OIG will monitor implementation of planned actions and will close the recommendations when VA provides sufficient documentation demonstrating progress in addressing the issues identified.



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Contents

Executive Summary	i
Abbreviations	iv
Recommendations 1–2	11
Appendix A: Scope and Methodology	14
Appendix B: VA MISSION Act of 2018, Section 505	15
Appendix C: Management Comments—Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration / Operations, Security, and Preparedness	16
Appendix D: Management Comments—Executive in Charge, Office of the Under Secretary for Health	18
OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	19
Report Distribution	20

Abbreviations

FY	fiscal year
HR&A	Office of Human Resources and Administration
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
VHA	Veterans Health Administration



Why the OIG Did This Review

Congress has shown an interest in VA's occupational shortages by passing at least three laws since 2014 requiring a periodic accounting of vacancies within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).¹ Beginning in 2015, the VA Office of Inspector General's (OIG) Office of Healthcare Inspections has issued annual reports that identified occupations in VHA with severe staffing shortages. In the 2019 report, the most commonly identified severe occupational shortages were physicians, nurses, human resources specialists, police officers, general engineering, and custodial workers.²

The VA MISSION Act of 2018 (the Act) established a permanent community care program, a capital asset review process, and several initiatives to minimize healthcare provider shortages with improved recruitment and retention.³ To monitor whether VA is effectively addressing these staffing shortages, the Act requires the Secretary to report annually on steps taken to achieve full staffing capacity and the additional funds needed to achieve this staffing level. The Act also requires the Secretary to publish a report by January 31, 2022, that recommends modernization and realignment of VHA facilities based on a variety of factors, including the extent to which VHA "has appropriately staffed the medical facility."

To provide transparency on VA's progress in achieving full staffing capacity, the Act establishes a requirement for VA to publish staffing and vacancy information on an internet website.⁴ Specifically, Section 505 of the Act requires VA to publish by departmental component, or by medical facility for VHA,

- The number of current personnel,
- The number of employment gains and losses processed during the previous quarter,
- The number of staff vacancies by occupation, and

¹ Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, Pub. L. No. 113-146, § 301 (2014); VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-46, § 201 (2017); and VA MISSION Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-182, § 505 (2018).

² VA Office of Inspector General, *OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration's Occupational Staffing Shortages, FY 2019*, 19-00346-241, September 30, 2019. This report summarized a survey of VHA medical center directors that identified occupations experiencing severe staffing shortages and the reasons for those shortages. The OIG identified the primary reasons for these shortages, including a lack of qualified candidates, noncompetitive salary, geographical recruitment challenges, private sector competition, and high staff turnover.

³ VA MISSION Act of 2018, §§ 101, 202, 203, and 301 through 306.

⁴ VA MISSION Act of 2018, § 505. The full text of this section is in Appendix B.

- The percentage of new staff who were hired within the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) time-to-hire target of 80 days.⁵

The Act requires VA to publish the data 90 days after enactment of the law with updates each following quarter. VA's Office of Human Resources and Administration (HR&A) coordinates the quarterly retrieval and aggregation of data required under Section 505 of the Act. Subsequently, HR&A sends these data to representatives from each departmental component for verification and quality review.⁶ Once the data have been validated, HR&A publishes them on a public-facing website.

The data are drawn from two systems—HR Smart and USA Staffing. HR Smart is VA's human resources information system that supports personnel suitability, payroll, and position management. HR Smart organizes data by position, rather than by employee, and allows for real-time human resources transaction processing for all of VA. Data pertaining to current staff, gains and losses, and vacancies are obtained from HR Smart. USA Staffing is an OPM-administered system that federal agencies use to recruit, assess, certify, select, and bring employees into their organizations. The system provides related tools, including data analytics, which allow VA to calculate time-to-hire percentages for new employees.

Section 505 of the Act also mandates the OIG periodically review the administration of VA's website and make any recommendations for improvement. Therefore, the OIG conducted this review to assess the mandatory staffing and vacancy reporting on VA's public-facing website and evaluate corrective actions taken in response to previous OIG findings.

Results of First OIG Report Mandated by Section 505 of the Act

The OIG issued its first report in accordance with the Act's requirements on June 25, 2019.⁷ In that report, the review team determined that VA partially complied with the law's requirements by reporting current personnel and time-to-hire data as prescribed. However, VA's reporting of staff vacancies and employee gains and losses was not sufficiently transparent to allow tracking, as vacancies were reported in broad occupational groupings and gains and losses were reported in aggregate numbers. The OIG recommended that the assistant secretary for HR&A take

⁵ OPM's End-to-End Hiring Initiative defined time-to-hire as the number of elapsed calendar days between when the hiring need is established and when the new employee arrives for the first day of work. This initiative also set the time-to-hire target as 80 days.

⁶ Departmental components include VHA, the Veterans Benefits Administration, the National Cemetery Administration, and various staff offices, such as the Office of General Counsel and the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs.

⁷ VA Office of Inspector General, *Staffing and Vacancy Reporting under the MISSION Act of 2018*, 19-00266-141, June 25, 2019.

appropriate action to ensure that vacancies and employee gains and losses are reported as required by the Act.

The review team also identified opportunities for VA to improve its data reporting. During the review, VA's public website only reported data for the current quarter. However, maintaining historical versions of the data would improve the transparency of the public website by allowing trending or comparisons over time. Additionally, the review team determined that HR&A should update its methodology for aggregating and reporting the staffing and vacancy data to include quality control steps to verify the accuracy of its data labeling.

What the OIG Found in This Review

As of February 2020, the review team found that VA partially complied with the requirements of Section 505 of the Act. VA reported time-to-hire data using an alternative 100-day measure instead of OPM's 80-day target as required. However, VA had implemented sufficient corrective actions to close three of the five OIG recommendations from the June 2019 report. In doing so, VA ensured compliance with the vacancy reporting and gains and losses reporting requirements.

VA also improved the transparency and utility of its staffing and vacancy data by providing additional elements to its reporting that allow a reader to more easily interpret and analyze the data. However, action is still necessary to close recommendations related to VA's disclosure of limitations in the HR Smart data and updating the methodology to ensure consistency in future releases.

Time-to-Hire Percentages Not Reported as Required

VA's February 2020 data release did not follow the Act's specifications for reporting time-to-hire percentages. OPM's End-to-End Hiring Initiative defined time-to-hire as the number of elapsed days between when the hiring need is established and when the new employee arrives for the first day of work. This initiative also set the time-to-hire target as 80 days. The Act specifically required VA to use OPM's metric and publish the percentage of new staff who were hired within that timeframe. However, the review team found that VA introduced an alternative target of 100 days for certain positions. VA's publication did not explain why it used this alternative 100-day target.

VA reported Title 38 hires using an internally developed VHA target. Title 38 provides special hiring authority primarily used to fill clinical positions. This authority allows VA to hire clinicians based upon individual qualifications, whereas other positions are generally filled based upon a competitive process that considers how well applicants' qualifications align with the position's requirements.⁸

⁸ 38 U.S.C. § 7402.

An OPM official told HR&A and the review team that the 80-day time-to-hire model is an example of what a hiring process may look like and is a standard that agencies should aim to achieve. However, the review team did not find any OPM guidance that specifically states that federal agencies may adopt their own unique targets. Additionally, the review team did not identify any legal opinions related to deviations from OPM's 80-day model. Without authoritative guidance, the review team has no basis to conclude whether the use of an alternative time-to-hire target is permissible.

HR&A committed to requesting a legal opinion from VA's Office of General Counsel regarding the use of an alternative time-to-hire target as it pertains to the Section 505 reporting requirements. However, until HR&A obtains that opinion, VA should adjust its methodology for reporting time-to-hire figures to ensure the published data comply with the Act's requirements. Further, if VA wishes to supplement the time-to-hire percentages with an alternative target, then VA should explain why this additional information is provided so that an end user can understand why the internally developed metric is meaningful.

Most Elements of VA's Staffing and Vacancy Reports Now Comply with the Act

In response to the recommendations from the June 2019 report, VA changed its methods for aggregating and reporting human resources data to comply with the Act. Specifically, VA reorganized its presentation of vacancy figures by specific occupational series, instead of broad occupational groupings. Additionally, VA now calculates gains and losses by quarter instead of fiscal year-to-date.

Vacancies Were Reported by Occupational Series as Required

From August 2018 through May 2019, VA improperly reported vacancy data by broad occupational groupings that were not in compliance with the Act and did not sufficiently identify positional staffing needs in VA. In this format, occupations sharing broad characteristics were aggregated within their parent occupational groups and job families. For example, the 0600-occupational group—the Medical, Hospital, Dental, and Public Health Group—contained clinical positions, such as physicians, nurses, and pharmacists, as well as nonclinical positions in medical records administration, housekeeping management, and consumer safety. Table 1 illustrates the ambiguity of reporting vacancies under these broad occupational groupings.

Table 1. Occupational Groupings with the Highest Vacancies at the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System

Occupational group	Occupational group title	Vacancies (full-time equivalent)
0600	Medical, Hospital, Dental, and Public Health	319
0100	Social Science, Psychology, and Welfare	44
0000	Miscellaneous Occupations	41
0300	General Administrative, Clerical, and Office Services	35
3500	General Services and Support Work	29
7400	Food Preparation and Serving	11
2000	Supply	10
4700	General Maintenance and Operations Work	10
1100	Business and Industry	8
1700	Education	6

Source: Published HR Smart vacancy data, as of March 31, 2019

The OIG subsequently recommended that HR&A ensure that VA vacancy data were reported by occupation as required by the Act.⁹

Beginning August 2019, VA presented its vacancy data by occupational series. For example, in this format, the 0600 occupational group was broken down into 43 separate occupational series, which consisted of physicians, nurses, medical supply aides, medical records administrators, pharmacists, and other healthcare occupations. Table 2 shows the ten series with the highest vacancies that fall under the 0600 occupational group at the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System and illustrates the level of detail this format provides.

Table 2. Healthcare Occupations with the Highest Vacancies at the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System

Occupational series	Occupational title	Vacancies (full-time equivalent)
0610	Nurse	92
0602	Physician	45
0679	Medical Support Assistant	41

⁹ VA OIG, *Staffing and Vacancy Reporting under the MISSION Act of 2018*. Also, in implementing 5 U.S.C. § 51, OPM identified 675 occupational series (or occupations) divided into 59 occupational groups and job families as of December 2018.

Occupational series	Occupational title	Vacancies (full-time equivalent)
0640	Health Aid and Technician	27
0620	Practical Nurse*	26
0621	Nursing Assistant	21
0622	Medical Supply Aide and Technician	19
0601	General Health Science†	12
0675	Medical Records Technician	8
0660	Pharmacist	5

Source: Published HR Smart vacancy data, as of September 30, 2019

* Unlike the 0610-nursing series, the practical nurse occupation does not require a full professional nurse education. The incumbent must still have the knowledge and skills necessary to obtain the practical nurse license.

† The 0601 occupational series covers positions that involve research or other professional and scientific work that is health oriented and cannot be appropriately classified in any other existing series or group.

The specificity provided by these occupational series allows the public to see whether vacancies are predominant in clinical positions, such as nurses and physicians, or nonclinical roles, such as medical supply aides and medical records technicians.

Staffing Gains and Losses Data Were Reported by Quarter as Required

From August 2018 through May 2019, VA’s published data improperly included all gains and losses that had been processed during the fiscal year-to-date. The Act required that VA publish all gains and losses processed during the quarter. The OIG recommended that HR&A ensure that VA staffing gains and losses data were reported by quarter as required by the Act.¹⁰

In the August and November 2019 and February 2020 data releases, VA presented its gains and losses data by quarter. In addition to being compliant with the Act, reporting in this manner allows the reader to readily see the gains or losses actions that occurred in the most recent three months preceding the posting of the data without having to perform further calculations. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the differences between reporting fiscal year-to-date and by quarter.

¹⁰ VA OIG, *Staffing and Vacancy Reporting under the MISSION Act of 2018*.

Table 3. Comparison of VA’s Method of Reporting Staffing Gains

VA component	Gains FY 2019 year-to-date	Gains FY 2019 quarter 2
VHA	18,695	10,248
Veterans Benefits Administration	938	396
National Cemetery Administration	164	85
Staff Offices	620	355
VA Total	20,417	11,084

Source: OIG analysis of the VA staffing and vacancy data report released on November 25, 2019

Table 4. Comparison of VA’s Method of Reporting Staffing Losses

VA component	Losses FY 2019 year-to-date	Losses FY 2019 quarter 2
VHA	14,314	8,544
Veterans Benefits Administration	837	508
National Cemetery Administration	139	76
Staff Offices	469	285
VA Total	15,759	9,413

Source: OIG analysis of the VA staffing and vacancy data report released on November 25, 2019

VA Improved the Transparency of Its Reporting

Since the publication of the OIG’s June 2019 report, VA adjusted its methodology for aggregating and reporting staffing and vacancy data to enhance the clarity and utility of the information. VA has published and maintained all seven quarterly iterations of the data on its public website. Additionally, VA has begun providing the public with executive summaries that present a high-level synopsis of the data in one document. Finally, VA added a summary page to the reporting spreadsheets that shows overall statistics from its previous reporting iterations and displays the top five vacant occupations within VHA.

Historical Data Were Maintained on the Public Website

Prior to August 2019, each iteration of the published staffing and vacancy data replaced the previous publication, which limited a user’s ability to track and analyze the information. The

OIG recommended that HR&A ensure that the staffing and vacancy reporting website maintains historical information on the data elements required by the Act.¹¹

As of February 2020, VA has published all seven quarterly iterations of the staffing and vacancy data on its public website, as shown in figure 1.

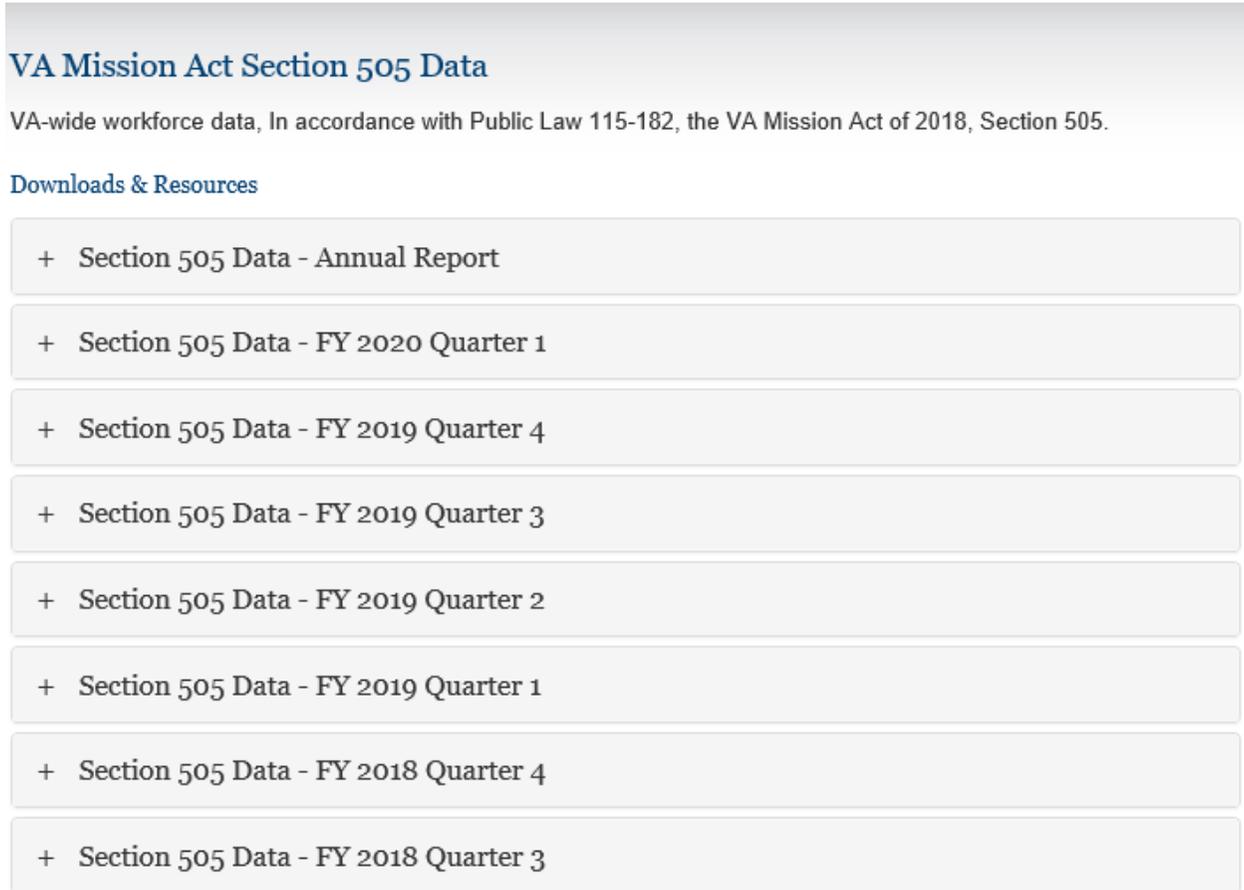


Figure 1. Website of historical VA staffing and vacancy data

Source: Screenshot of the HR&A Section 505 data website (<https://www.va.gov/employee/va-mission-act-section-505-data/>), taken on February 21, 2020

Other Improvements Were Made to VA’s Reporting

In the August and November 2019 and February 2020 staffing and vacancy publications, VA included an executive summary that provided a brief synopsis of the data elements for each administration and for staff offices. Specifically, it presented a bullet for each organizational component that noted the number of onboard employees, gains and losses, vacancies, and percentage of new employees hired within a time-to-hire target. Additionally, VA included its calculation of the change in onboard employees and vacancies from the previous quarter.

¹¹ VA OIG, *Staffing and Vacancy Reporting under the MISSION Act of 2018*.

Overall, these items provided a user with a quick reference to key data elements without having to search through the supporting spreadsheet.

VA also added a summary page to the staffing and vacancy spreadsheets. This offered the reader guidance on how to interpret the data being reported. The page also included the overall numbers for the previous quarterly iterations of the report, enhancing a user’s ability to compare and identify trends using VA’s figures. Tables 5 and 6 display screenshots of the summary tables for onboard employees and vacancies, respectively.¹²

Table 5. Onboard Employees from Quarter 3 FY 2018 through Quarter 4 FY 2019

	FY 2018	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2019	FY 2019	FY 2019
Onboards	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
VHA	335,497	338,574	341,223	342,911	346,166	349,646
VBA	23,582	23,292	23,559	23,461	23,569	23,986
NCA	1,946	1,939	1,973	1,992	2,038	2,009
Staff Offices	13,089	13,405	13,498	13,632	13,988	14,247
VA	374,114	377,210	380,253	381,996	385,761	389,888

Source: Screenshot of the VA staffing and vacancy data report released on November 25, 2019

Table 6. Vacancies from Quarter 3 FY 2018 through Quarter 4 FY 2019

	FY 2018	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2019	FY 2019	FY 2019
Vacancies	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
VHA	40,456	41,372	42,790	44,413	43,031	43,406
VBA	1,978	2,333	3,089	2,300	2,425	2,461
NCA	233	242	216	153	157	148
Staff Offices	2,572	2,575	2,890	3,335	3,514	3,190
VA	45,239	46,522	48,985	50,201	49,127	49,204

Source: Screenshot of the VA staffing and vacancy data report released on November 25, 2019

Additionally, the summary tab of VA’s staffing and vacancy spreadsheet now lists the top five vacant occupations within VHA as well as the facility that had the highest vacancy numbers for each occupation. For example, in the November 2019 quarterly release, the summary noted that the 0610-nursing series was one of the most critical vacancies in VHA and that the North Florida / South Georgia Veterans Health System had the most vacancies for that occupation. This information allows a reader to readily determine which occupations and locations have the greatest staffing need.

¹² The review team assessed VA’s presentation of the staffing and vacancy spreadsheet only and does not make any claims regarding the accuracy of the data.

Action Still Needed to Address Two Recommendations

In the June 2019 report, the OIG recommended that HR&A annotate limitations clearly within the staffing and vacancy quarterly publication to improve the transparency and usability of the data, including changes from HR Smart data-cleansing efforts. Additionally, the OIG recommended that HR&A update its methodology for aggregating and reporting VA's data to ensure that consistency is maintained in future releases.¹³ However, VA's implementation remains in progress and additional action is necessary to close these recommendations.

Data Limitations Were Not Clearly Annotated

VA has informed the public that position vacancy data do have limitations, but it did not indicate the effect that these issues have on the reliability of the data at a facility level. VA has made incremental improvements to its disclosures but needs additional information to achieve the necessary transparency.

As previously noted, the August 2019 data release included an executive summary that consolidated data for VA's organizational components and referred to changes that had been implemented in response to the OIG report's recommendations. However, the document did not specify how HR Smart data-cleansing efforts impacted data reliability at the facility level. Rather, it stated,

[...] VHA implemented an aggressive action plan to address recent increases in the position inventory and to ensure that vacant position data are an accurate reflection of authorized and budgeted positions approved for recruitment. VA is committed to accurate position management together with efficient staffing to fill vacancies and increase the size of the workforce to meet Veteran demand for healthcare, benefits, and memorial services.¹⁴

The November 2019 and February 2020 executive summaries also did not contain sufficient information pertaining to the data-cleansing efforts and instead stated,

Most of the vacancies are the result of average turnover in such a large organization, in addition to new positions that are added to increase capacity. VA is making progress on its manpower management capabilities, to fine tune staffing data and to better identify staffing gaps.¹⁵

However, VHA is still undergoing data reconciliation by comparing facility organizational charts with HR Smart personnel data. As of February 2020, facilities have had HR Smart position

¹³ VA OIG, *Staffing and Vacancy Reporting under the MISSION Act of 2018*.

¹⁴ VA, "VA MISSION Act of 2018: Section 505–Personnel Transparency–Executive Summary," August 22, 2019.

¹⁵ VA, "VA MISSION Act of 2018: Section 505–Personnel Transparency–Executive Summary," November 22, 2019, and February 14, 2020.

counts that were overstated as much as 20 percent and understated as much as 12 percent. These disclosures are necessary to ensure that the reader understands that vacancy figures may not accurately reflect resource needs at specific VA medical facilities.

HR&A's Methodology Has Not Been Updated

HR&A has not revised its methodology to include quality control steps necessary to ensure that labeling errors are prevented. In discussions with the review team, HR&A officials indicated that the revisions were ongoing. The OIG will continue to monitor the progress of the revisions and will close the recommendation when HR&A has provided the revised methodology.

Conclusion

VA partially complied with Section 505 of the Act by taking sufficient action to report vacancies by occupational series and staffing gains and losses by quarter as mandated. However, action is needed to ensure VA properly reports time-to-hire metrics using OPM's 80-day target. Additionally, VA made improvements to the transparency of published data that enhanced the value and utility of those data. VA posted all previous quarterly publications on its website and added information to aid the reader in analyzing the material. However, actions are still needed to address two open recommendations related to the disclosure of data limitations and the aggregation and reporting methodology. The review team will monitor VA's continued efforts to improve its staffing and vacancy reporting.

Recommendations 1–2

The OIG made two recommendations to improve the administration of VA's staffing and vacancy reporting. The assistant secretary for human resources and administration / operations, security, and preparedness should take the following actions:

1. Ensure VA time-to-hire percentages are reported using the Office of Personnel Management's target as required by Section 505(a)(1)(D) of the MISSION Act.
2. Confer with the VA Office of General Counsel to ensure that changes to the reporting methodology comply with Section 505 of the MISSION Act.

Office of Human Resources and Administration / Operations, Security, and Preparedness Comments

The assistant secretary for human resources and administration / operations, security, and preparedness concurred with the OIG's recommendations. For Recommendation 1, the assistant secretary stated that, for the FY 2020 Quarter 2 report and subsequent reports, VA will report time-to-hire percentages using OPM's 80-day target and disaggregate them by administration. For Recommendation 2, the assistant secretary stated that VA verbally conferred with the Office

of General Counsel on changes to the reporting methodology for the annual and FY 2020 Quarter 2 reports. The assistant secretary also stated that HR&A will continue to coordinate with the VA Office of General Counsel as part of the staffing and vacancy reporting process. Appendix C provides the full text of the assistant secretary's comments.

OIG Response

The assistant secretary's comments and corrective action plans are responsive to the intent of the recommendations. The OIG will close Recommendation 1 after verifying that the FY 2020 Quarter 2 time-to-hire percentages are reported as required. However, the corrective action plan for Recommendation 2 did not establish specific steps to allow the OIG to assess the sufficiency of the actions taken. To close that recommendation, HR&A should document any key legal decisions that affect the staffing and vacancy reporting to ensure that those steps are verifiable. The OIG will monitor implementation of planned actions and will close the recommendations when VA provides sufficient evidence demonstrating progress in addressing identified issues.

VHA Comments

The executive in charge, Office of the Under Secretary for Health, provided technical comments related to Recommendation 1. The executive in charge stated that OPM's 80-day time-to-hire model was geared toward the hiring of Title 5 employees and did not include steps required for hiring Title 38 employees (clinical positions) such as credentialing and privileging. Additionally, the executive in charge stated that it would not be appropriate to report Title 38 hiring against the same model when the steps involved are substantially different and lengthier.

Accordingly, the executive in charge stated that VHA developed a custom 100-day time-to-hire model for Title 38 positions to accommodate the additional time needed for credentialing and privileging those clinical professionals. The executive in charge acknowledged that OPM did not incorporate the VHA-customized model into its time-to-hire guidance, but noted that OPM was fully aware of and supported VHA's work to create the custom model and workflows for Title 38 hiring in USA Staffing. Appendix D provides the full text of the executive in charge's comments.

OIG Response

The OIG did not comment on the appropriateness of VHA's 100-day target for Title 38 hires. As indicated on pages 3 and 4 of this report, the review team found that VA's February 2020 data release did not follow the Act's specifications that require VA to use OPM's metric for reporting time-to-hire percentages. That metric is currently set at 80 days. Despite numerous requests and discussions with VA and OPM officials, the review team did not find any VA or OPM legal opinions or other guidance that granted federal agencies the ability to adopt their own unique targets or deviate from the 80-day time-to-hire model. Without authoritative guidance, the OIG

has no basis to conclude whether the use of an alternative time-to-hire target is permissible for satisfying the specific requirements of the Act.

Further, as indicated on page 4 of this report, the review team noted that transparency is needed if VA wishes to supplement its publicly posted staffing and vacancy data with alternative time-to-hire percentages. VA should explain why the additional information is provided and why the internally developed metric is meaningful.

Finally, HR&A committed to requesting a legal opinion from VA's Office of General Counsel regarding the use of an alternative time-to-hire target. However, as indicated on pages 11 and 12 of this report, the assistant secretary for human resources and administration / operations, security, and preparedness stated that, for the FY 2020 Quarter 2 report and subsequent reports, VA will report time-to-hire percentages using OPM's 80-day target. VHA should coordinate with HR&A and ensure compliance with the Act until sufficient and appropriate guidance or legal opinions establish the basis to use an alternative time-to-hire metric.

Appendix A: Scope and Methodology

Scope

The review team conducted its review work from December 2019 through April 2020. The team reviewed three quarterly iterations of VA staffing and vacancy data posted on VA's public website:

- Data as of June 30, 2019, posted August 23, 2019
- Data as of September 30, 2019, posted November 25, 2019
- Data as of December 31, 2019, posted February 14, 2020

Methodology

To conduct this review, the review team identified and reviewed applicable laws, OPM guidance, and HR&A's methodology for obtaining the staffing and vacancy data. The team reviewed publicly released staffing and vacancy information and data definitions. The team also discussed the status of recommendations with HR&A officials.

Data Reliability

The review team did not evaluate the reliability of computer-processed data or use VA's staffing and vacancy reporting data to support the findings or conclusions. The review team accepted VA's data at face value and assessed the presentation of the reported figures without performing substantive analysis or testing of the data's accuracy. As such, the OIG does not make any claims about the validity of the information being published.

Government Standards

The OIG conducted this review in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*.

Appendix B: VA MISSION Act of 2018, Section 505

Sec. 505. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PERSONNEL TRANSPARENCY.

(a) PUBLICATION OF STAFFING AND VACANCIES.—

(1) WEBSITE REQUIRED.—Subject to paragraph (2) and not later than 90 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall make publicly available on an Internet website of the Department of Veterans Affairs the following information, which shall, subject to subparagraph (D), be displayed by departmental component or, in the case of information relating to Veterans Health Administration positions, by medical facility:

(A) The number of personnel encumbering positions.

(B) The number of accessions and separation actions processed during the quarter preceding the date of the publication of information.

(C) The number of vacancies, by occupation.

(D) The percentage of new hires for the Department who were hired within the time-to-hire target of the Office of Personnel Management, disaggregated by administration.

(2) EXCEPTIONS.—The Secretary may withhold from publication under paragraph (1) information relating to law enforcement, information security, or such positions in the Department that the Secretary determines to be sensitive.

(3) UPDATE OF INFORMATION.—The Secretary shall update the information on the website required under paragraph (1) on a quarterly basis.

(4) TREATMENT OF CONTRACTOR POSITIONS.—Any Department of Veterans Affairs position that is filled with a contractor may not be treated as a Department position for purposes of the information required to be published under paragraph (1).

(5) INSPECTOR GENERAL REVIEW.—On a semi-annual basis, the Inspector General of the Department shall review the administration of the website required under paragraph (1) and make recommendations relating to the improvements of such administration.

(b) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall submit to Congress an annual report on the steps the Department is taking to achieve full staffing capacity. Each such report shall include the amount of additional funds necessary to enable the Department to reach full staffing capacity.

Appendix C: Management Comments–Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration / Operations, Security, and Preparedness

Department of Veterans Affairs Memorandum

Date: May 12, 2020

From: Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security and Preparedness (HRA/OSP) (006)

Subj: OIG Draft Report, VA Improved the Transparency of Mandatory Staffing and Vacancy Data (Project Number 2020-00541-D2-0001)

To: Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations (52)

1. Thank you for the opportunity to review the Office of Inspector General draft report regarding the assessment of VA's reporting of staffing and vacancy data on its public-facing website. I concur with the report's recommendations and we are complying with the recommendations for the MISSION Act, Section 505 fiscal year 2020, Quarter 2 report.
2. For questions or additional information requests, please contact Mr. Joseph Thele, Executive Director, Human Resources Information Technology, Systems and Analytics, Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer at (202) 461-7803 or via email at Joseph.Thele@va.gov.

(Original signed by)

Daniel R. Sitterly

Enclosure

Enclosure

OIG Draft Report, VA Improved the Transparency of Mandatory Staffing and Vacancy Data

Date of Draft Report: April 8, 2020

Recommendation 1. Ensures VA time-to-hire percentages are reported using the Office of Personnel Management's target as required by Section 505(a)(1)(D) of the MISSION Act.

VA Comment: For the FY 2020 Quarter 2 report and for all Section 505 reports moving forward, VA reported time-to-hire percentages using the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) December 2019 instructions for reporting time-to-hire. While the Office of Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security and Preparedness (HRA/OSP) supports the Veterans Health Administration's need to implement a 100-day time-to-hire model to better reflect the need to credential clinical professionals, for the purpose of MISSION Act reporting we will comply with the OPM instructions and the percentage of new hires will be based on an 80-day target and disaggregated by administration.

Recommendation 2. Confers with the VA Office of General Counsel to ensure that changes to the reporting methodology comply with Section 505 of the MISSION Act.

VA Comment: VA verbally conferred with the Office of General Counsel (OGC) on the changes to the reporting methodology in the Section 505 of the MISSION Act Annual and Quarter 2 reports. Discussions did not raise concerns with methodology on vacancies or indicate that changes were not in compliance with Section 505. As this report is being finalized, OGC had no legal objections to the MISSION Act Section 505(b) draft annual report, and the quarterly report will soon go to OGC for formal coordination. HRA/OSP will continue to coordinate with OGC as part of our MISSION Act reporting process.

For accessibility, the original format of this appendix has been modified to comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

Appendix D: Management Comments–Executive in Charge, Office of the Under Secretary for Health

Department of Veterans Affairs Memorandum

Date: May 1, 2020

From: Executive in Charge, Office of the Under Secretary for Health (10)

Subj: OIG Draft Report: Follow-up Review of Staffing and Vacancy Reporting under the MISSION Act of 2018 (OIG Project No. 2020-00541-D2-0001) (VIEWS 02681369)

To: Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations (52)

1. Thank you for the opportunity to review the Office of Inspector General draft report, Follow-up Review of Staffing and Vacancy Reporting under the MISSION Act of 2018.
2. Regarding recommendation 1, the Office of Personnel Management’s (OPM) 80-day time to hire model was geared toward hiring of Title 5 employees and did not include steps required for hiring Title 38 employees (i.e., doctors, nurses, dentists), such as credentialing and privileging. It would not be appropriate, to report Title 38 hiring against the same model used for Title 5 hiring when the steps involved are substantially different from and lengthier than Title 5 hiring.
3. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) developed a custom 100-day time to hire model for Title 38 positions to accommodate the additional time needed for credentialing and privileging of these clinical professionals. VHA also developed workflows to track these critical steps in USA Staffing. Though OPM did not incorporate the VHA customized model into its general guidance OPM was fully aware of and supported VHA’s work to create the custom model and workflows for Title 38 hiring in USA Staffing.

The OIG removed point of contact information prior to publication.

(Original signed by)

Richard A. Stone, M.D.

For accessibility, the original format of this appendix has been modified to comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

Contact	For more information about this report, please contact the Office of Inspector General at (202) 461-4720.
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