ISSUE BRIEF: VA HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Situation

- Two decades ago VA created an electronic health record that was the gold standard for the health care industry. As a national health care provider, VA was able to access patient information across the system and aggregate much of its outcome data to create quality standards still used by much of the industry.
- As a modern health care system increasingly providing access to veterans through community providers, VA must upgrade its information technology (IT) systems to ensure it is able to exchange timely and accurate health care information with other systems commonly used in the health care industry.
- VA has recently made a decision to adopt DOD's platform that will allow the Department to develop the architecture necessary to support its health IT needs.

Challenge

- Unfortunately, VA's electronic health record system is unable to support a seamless exchange of medical care records with community providers or military treatment facilities.
- Many of the datasets VA uses to inform health care operations are difficult to access and manipulate causing serious inaccuracies and lags in access to timely information.
- VA has many datasets that use data definitions specific to its operations; these datasets are often critical to overseeing program operations, but can be difficult to populate and maintain and do not necessarily correspond to measures used by other providers (for example, VA defines "wait times" differently than other health care providers).
- Harmonizing VA's existing datasets to provide information comparable to those of other health care providers for its electronic health care records will require a massive investment of time and resources.
- As VA transitions to its new health information system, it must maintain its operations using existing platforms which also require investments of time and resources.

Solution

- Health information technology is critical to a seamless transition of patient records between health providers. Therefore, it is essential Congress fund and VA purchase an electronic health records system that ensures interoperability between VA, DOD and other systems commonly used in the health care industry. VA must also remain the primary provider of care for most veterans, serving as the care coordinator and ensuring the quality of services obtained when veterans must access care through community partners in its network.
- Modernizing its scheduling system must be a high priority for VA. Scheduling provides the tool to balance patient demand with capacity. If scheduling is problematic, veterans will have problems accessing needed health care.
- During its transition to the new architecture, Congress must provide appropriate resources to assure that VA is able to make adequate progress while still running the systems required to maintain its operations.