

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-617T](#), a testimony before the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The PSOB program, administered by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, provides three types of benefits (death, disability, and education) to public safety officers and their eligible family members in cases of line-of-duty death or disability. GAO's 2009 report (GAO-10-5) examined the timeliness of claims processing and the extent to which the program followed government guidelines for monitoring program performance. The report made two recommendations to DOJ. DOJ's OIG issued a report in 2015 that provided updated information on the concerns raised by GAO in 2009.

This testimony summarizes key findings of GAO's October 2009 report on the PSOB program and DOJ's actions to implement GAO's recommendations from that report. For its 2009 report, GAO reviewed a generalizable sample of 233 PSOB claims that were opened during fiscal years 2006 to 2008, reviewed relevant agency documents, and interviewed PSOB program officials, representatives of advocacy organizations, and state and local officials in five selected states. For this statement, GAO also reviewed DOJ's actions to date and the findings from the DOJ OIG's 2015 report on the PSOB program.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations in this testimony.

View [GAO-16-617T](#). For more information, contact Andrew Sherrill at (202) 512-7215 or sherrilla@gao.gov

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PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS' BENEFITS PROGRAM

Improvements Made but Information on Performance Goals Still Needed

What GAO Found

GAO's 2009 report on the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) program—created to provide certain benefits in cases of public safety officers' death or total disability in the line of duty—identified issues with the timeliness of claims processing, program awareness, and performance measurement. Specifically, GAO found that death and education claims were processed faster than disability claims. GAO estimated that the Department of Justice's (DOJ) PSOB Office generally had processed education and death claims in under a year while disability claims took between 17 and 26 months. In 2009, most claims were being processed on paper, and DOJ had plans to establish an automated claims system to help ensure more efficient claims processing and improve available claims data. This system has since been established.

GAO's 2009 report also identified issues with awareness of program benefits and adherence to federal guidelines for performance monitoring. In particular, representatives of 15 of the 44 public safety organizations GAO spoke with mentioned a lack of awareness about disability or education benefits, while officials from another 6 organizations were concerned that their constituents had a general lack of knowledge of the program. Moreover, GAO found that because DOJ had not set strategic goals and measures for the program, monitored performance, or reported results, the program had little accountability. To enhance claimant awareness and program accountability, GAO recommended that DOJ establish appropriate performance measures and goals for the PSOB program and use reliable data to monitor and report on program performance.

DOJ agreed with GAO's recommendations and has taken some steps to address them. Specifically, by 2014, DOJ had established two PSOB performance measures and posted data for these measures on its public website. DOJ subsequently posted data for additional performance measures on its website, including average number of days to assign a PSOB Outreach Specialist and percentage of claims determined within 1 year. While posting data on these measures represents an improvement, as of April 2016, DOJ had not taken the additional step of publishing performance goals—which specify the desired level of performance—for the PSOB program. GAO continues to believe that publishing performance goals is a key step in gauging how well the program is working and enhancing stakeholder awareness of the program.

Findings from a 2015 report by DOJ's Office of Inspector General (OIG) highlighted the program's continuing problems in the timeliness of claims processing and reporting of reliable program performance data. The OIG concluded that it did not believe that the PSOB Office's database, as a management tool, was adequate to evaluate efficiencies in processing or to identify potential causes of timeliness problems. The OIG made four recommendations to DOJ to address these concerns, and DOJ agreed with the recommendations. Continued attention to these issues by DOJ is needed to help ensure accountability for achieving the program's goals.