

New rule sets veteran hiring goal for contractors
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Agencies have a new mandate to set goals for hiring veterans.

New rules that took effect Monday require federal contractors to adopt benchmarks for hiring certain groups of veterans and disabled workers.

One of those rules updates the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act, which prohibits contractors and their subcontractors from discriminating against protected veterans when hiring. Under the new regulation, contractors are now required to set annual benchmarks and measure their progress in hiring and recruiting disabled veterans and other vets protected by law.

The benchmark can be based on the national percentage of veterans in the workforce, which is currently about 8 percent, or using the companies' best available data, according to the Labor Department. The new rule applies to companies with at least \$100,000 in federal contracts.

"It establishes — for the first time ever — real metrics against which federal contractors and subcontractors will measure the success of their affirmative action programs when it comes to hiring protected veterans," Patricia Shiu, director of the department's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, said in an email. "Failure to achieve a goal is not a violation. Failure to try is."

Shiu said companies will not be cited for a violation if they fail to achieve the benchmark, but investigators will look for evidence that companies are trying to meet the benchmark through meaningful outreach, recruitment and other means.

The other rule updates regulations under section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and sets a hiring goal that 7 percent of each job group within a company's workforce be qualified individuals with disabilities, according to the Labor Department. The rule applies to contractors and subcontractors with at least \$50,000 in contracts and 50 or more employees.

The final rules were published in September 2013 but took effect March 24. There are efforts underway to ensure the government's contracting regulations reflect the new changes.

"If every contractor subject to VEVRAA [Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act] were to achieve the national benchmark, we estimate that nearly 200,000 veterans would be added to or identified in the American workforce," Shiu said. "And that's just in the first year."