The Disability Evaluation System (DES) is the Department of Defense management tool used to determine the disposition of a service member who develops a physical or medical condition that calls into question the member’s ability to perform the duties of his or her office, grade, rank, or rating. A service member enters the DES when a medical evaluation calls into question his or her ability to meet medical retention standards to perform military duties. A member who does not meet medical retention standards progresses to a physical disability evaluation, which results in findings and a disposition decision.

The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy) asked RAND to examine how training DES primary participants could help provide more-consistent disability evaluation results for similarly situated members of the military services. This report documents the requested DES training analysis and recommended changes in training along with other recommendations to improve system performance.

The findings in this report should be of primary interest to the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, and the Secretaries of the military departments. This report should also be of interest, to varying degrees, to the Surgeons General, commanders of military treatment facilities, Medical Evaluation Board approving authorities, physicians who convene Medical Evaluation Boards, physicians who refer service members to Medical Evaluation Boards (referring physicians), Physical Evaluation Board (PEB) approving authorities, PEB members, PEB Liaison Officers (PEBLOs), patient administrators who support Medical Evaluation Boards and/or PEBLOs, PEB administrative action officers, appellate review board members, active component unit commanders and Reserve unit commanders who interact with the DES, and attorneys who represent service members during appeals before the Formal Physical Evaluation Board.

This research was conducted for the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness within the Forces and Resources Policy Center of RAND’s National Defense Research Institute (NDRI). NDRI is a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the unified commands, and the defense agencies.