

STAFFING

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** To establish Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) qualification standard for the occupation of Social Science Specialist (Crisis Responder), GS-0101, appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3), Appointments in Veterans Health Administration, and 38 U.S.C. § 7405(a)(1)(B), Temporary full-time appointments, part-time appointments, and without-compensation appointments.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This handbook contains mandatory procedures on staffing. This new policy establishes the Social Science Specialist (Crisis Responder) occupation under VA's title 38 hybrid excepted service employment system in accordance with the authority established under the "Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010" P. L. 111-163. Authority is given to the Secretary of VA under 38 U.S.C. § 7402(b), Qualifications of appointees, to prescribe qualifications for occupations identified, in or established under, 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3), Appointments in Veterans Health Administration, and 38 U.S.C. § 7405(a)(1)(B), Temporary full-time appointments, part-time appointments, and without-compensation appointments. These changes will be incorporated into the electronic versions of VA Handbook 5005 maintained on the [Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer Website](#) and the [VA Publications Website](#).
- 3. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5005, Staffing.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** Recruitment and Placement Policy Service (059), Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** None.

CERTIFIED BY:

/s/
Karen L. Brazell
Principal Executive Director, Office of
Acquisition, Logistics and Construction
and Chief Acquisition Officer, and Acting
Assistant Secretary for Enterprise Integration

BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS:

/s/
Daniel R. Sitterly
Assistant Secretary for
Human Resources and Administration/
Operations, Security, and Preparedness

DISTRIBUTION: Electronic only

NOTE: This transmittal page accompanied the former VA Handbook 5005, Staffing publication. It is provided for reference to the establishment of this qualification standard.

FORMER VA HANDBOOK REFERENCE: PART II APPENDIX G64
EFFECTIVE DATE: November 3, 2020

**SOCIAL SCIENCE SPECIALIST (CRISIS RESPONDER)
QUALIFICATION STANDARD
GS-0101
Veterans Health Administration**

1. **COVERAGE.** The following are requirements for appointment as a Social Science Specialist (Crisis Responder) within the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) component in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The VCL connects Veterans and Service members in crisis, along with their families and others, with qualified Social Science Specialists (also known as Crisis Responders) through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text. Crisis Responders are trained to assist Veterans and Service members through various kinds of behavioral health crisis situations by providing support and referrals to VA and local services.

2. **AUTHORITIES.**
 - a. [P.L. 111-163, Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010;](#)
 - b. [38 U.S.C. § 7401, Appointments in Veterans Health Administration;](#)
 - c. [38 U.S.C. § 7402, Qualifications of appointees;](#)
 - d. [38 U.S.C. § 7403, Period of appointments; promotions;](#)
 - e. [38 U.S.C. § 7405, Temporary full-time appointments, part-time appointments and without-compensation appointments;](#)
 - f. [38 U.S.C. § 7407, Administrative provisions for section 7405 and 7406 appointments.](#)

3. **DEFINITIONS.**
 - a. **Journey Level.** The full performance level for this qualification standard is GS-11.
 - b. **Paraprofessional.** A job title given to persons in various occupational fields, such as education, healthcare, engineering, and law, who are trained to assist professionals, but do not themselves have professional licensure.
 - c. **Creditable Experience.** To be creditable, the experience must have required the use of knowledge, skills, and abilities, (KSAs), also referred to as core competencies, associated with the Social Science Specialist (Crisis Responder) duties. A person could acquire specialized experience and skills in behavioral health crisis intervention while working on a paid or volunteer basis, adhering to the technical and ethical standards of the field; and spending at least part of his/her time providing crisis intervention services. Aspects of the

crisis management process could be carried out by occupations such as, and similar to, a crisis worker, social worker, nurse, police officer, psychotherapist, counselor, or minister.

- d. **Part-Time Experience.** Part-time experience is creditable according to its relationship to the full-time work week. For example, one week of full-time credit is equivalent to two weeks of part-time work.

4. BASIC REQUIREMENTS.

- a. **Citizenship.** Citizen of the United States (U.S.). Non-citizens may be appointed when it is not possible to recruit qualified candidates in accordance with 38 U.S.C. § 7407(a).
- b. **Education and experience.** The candidate must meet at least one of the requirements below:
 - (1) Successful completion of a bachelor's degree or higher from an accredited college or university. The degree must be in a behavioral health or social science related field appropriate to the work of the position (e.g., psychology, social work, sociology, family counseling, mental health counseling, nursing, ministry and criminal justice); OR,
 - (2) Two years of specialized experience as a first responder (e.g., Police, Medic, Emergency Medical Technician, Emergency Dispatch, etc.) or in a social science related field that included behavioral health crisis response, and two years of higher education (i.e., above the high school level) from an accredited college or university in a behavioral health or social science related field appropriate to the work of the position (e.g., psychology, social work, sociology, family counseling, mental health counseling, nursing, ministry and criminal justice); OR,
 - (3) Successful completion of a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university in any field and, one year of specialized experience that included behavioral health crisis response or mental health counseling.
- c. **Grandfathering Provision.** All persons employed in VHA in this occupational series, or in another occupational series, who perform the duties as described in the qualification standard are considered to have met all qualification requirements for the grade held, including positive education and licensure/certification/registration that are part of the basic requirements of the occupation. For employees who do not meet all the basic requirements required in this standard, but who met the qualifications applicable to the position at the time they were appointed to it, the following provisions apply:
 - (1) Employees in an occupation not requiring a licensure/certification/registration, may be reassigned, promoted, or demoted within the occupation.
 - (2) Employees in an occupation requiring a licensure/certification/registration, may be reassigned, promoted up to and including the full performance level, or demoted within the occupation, but may not be promoted beyond the full performance level or placed in supervisory or managerial positions.
 - (3) Employees in an occupation requiring a licensure/certification/registration only at

higher grade levels must meet the licensure/certification/registration requirement before they can be promoted to those higher-grade levels.

- (4) Employees who are appointed on a temporary basis prior to the effective date of the qualification standard may not have their temporary appointment extended or be reappointed, on a temporary or permanent basis, until they fully meet the basic requirements of the standard.
- (5) Employees initially grandfathered into this occupation, who subsequently obtain additional education and/or licensure/certification/registration that meet all the basic requirements of this qualification standard, must maintain the required credentials as a condition of employment in the occupation.

NOTE: Employees who are converted to title 38 hybrid status under this provision and subsequently leave the occupation lose protected status and must meet the full VA qualification standard requirements in effect at the time of reentry to the occupation.

- d. **Physical Requirements.** See VA Directive and Handbook 5019, Employee Occupational Health Service.
- e. **English Language Proficiency.** Social Science Specialists (Crisis Responders) must be proficient in spoken and written English. See 38 U.S.C. § 7403(f).

5. GRADE DETERMINATION. In addition to the basic requirements for employment, the following criteria must be met when determining the grade level.

a. **Social Science Specialist (Crisis Responder), GS-7**

- (1) **Experience.** None beyond the basic requirements.
- (2) **Assignment.** At the GS-7 entry level developmental position, Social Science Specialists (Crisis Responders) provide evidence-based paraprofessional skilled intervention services to assist with any crisis a caller or contact may be facing. Under close supervision, Crisis Responders work with contacts experiencing an emotional crisis, some of which may result in harm to themselves or others. Crisis Responders receive guidance from more experienced staff members for more complex cases/contacts and require direct supervision.
- (3) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition, the candidate must demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Ability to use critical thinking skills to solve problems in crisis situations.
 - (b) Ability to communicate using a variety of modalities (e.g., correspondence, telephone interviews, chat/text services, and social media forums).
 - (c) Ability to recognize individual and cultural differences and respond appropriately in all aspects of services.

- (d) Ability to clearly and concisely document/record so that it accurately reflects the content of the call or contact.
- (e) Ability to implement call center protocol. This includes the ability to carry out crisis management steps while withholding judgment on controversial behaviors and not imposing one's values during the contact.

b. Social Science Specialist (Crisis Responder), GS-9

- (1) **Experience or Education.** The individual must meet at least one of the requirements below.
 - (a) **Experience.** In addition to the basic requirements, must have one year of creditable experience equivalent to the GS-7 grade level, which is directly related to the position to be filled; or
 - (b) **Education.** Master's degree from an accredited college or university in a behavioral health or social science related field appropriate to the work of the position (e.g., psychology, social work, sociology, and family counseling, mental health counseling, nursing, ministry, criminal justice).
- (2) **Assignment.** At the GS-9 grade level developmental position, Social Science Specialists (Crisis Responders) provide evidence-based paraprofessional skilled intervention services to assist with any behavioral health crisis a caller or contact may be facing. Crisis Responders at this level require general supervision and receive limited guidance from more experienced staff members for more complex assignments. Crisis Responders work with contacts experiencing an emotional crisis and as a result, may harm themselves or others. Work is accomplished through telephone interviews, chat/text services, and social media forums. Crisis Responders coordinate with team members to initiate emergency services or create facility transportation plans, as clinically appropriate. Crisis Responders are responsible for providing best practice crisis care by engaging multiple entities, including law enforcement, medical and mental health providers, and third parties. Crisis Responders consistently communicate with contacts in a courteous, respectful, and clinically helpful manner, often under stressful conditions. Crisis Responders use current standards of practice to complete a risk assessment. Crisis Responders ensure accurate and efficient record keeping. Duties are performed in accordance with established crisis line policies, procedures, and standards.
- (3) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition, the candidate must demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Ability to use evidenced based crisis intervention skills.
 - (b) Ability to collaboratively solve problems under stressful circumstances. This includes the ability to work effectively with a team.
 - (c) Ability to learn call center protocol and available approved VCL resources.

- (d) Ability to use a variety of technology to gather information. This information could be used for locating resources and assessing needs of the caller.

c. **Social Science Specialist (Crisis Responder), GS-11**

- (1) **Experience or Education.** Individual must meet at least one of the requirements below.
 - (a) **Experience.** In addition to the basic requirements, must have one year of creditable experience equivalent to the GS-9 grade level, which is directly related to the position to be filled; or
 - (b) **Education.** Ph.D. or equivalent degree from an accredited college or university in a behavioral health related field appropriate to the work of the position (e.g., psychology, social work, sociology, or family counseling).
- (2) **Assignment.** At the GS-11 full performance level, Social Science Specialists (Crisis Responders) receive minimal guidance to manage complex interactions with contacts. They independently provide evidence-based paraprofessional skilled intervention services to assist with any behavioral health crisis a contact may be facing. Crisis Responders work with contacts experiencing an emotional crisis, which may present with varying levels of lethality. Work is accomplished through telephone interviews, chat/text services, and social media forums. The employee provides peer consultation as needed. Crisis Responders work to establish and maintain the safety of those who present with complex medical, and/or mental health care needs. Crisis Responders use current standards of practice to complete a comprehensive risk assessment. They coordinate with team members to initiate emergency services or create facility transportation plan as clinically appropriate. Crisis Responders promote the safety of callers by engaging multiple entities to provide crisis intervention, including law enforcement, medical and mental health providers, as well as, other third parties. Crisis Responders collaborate with Suicide Prevention Coordinators to expedite connections to treatment programs. They consistently communicate with contacts in a courteous, respectful, and clinically helpful manner, often under stressful conditions. Crisis Responders use current standards of practice to complete a comprehensive risk assessment. Crisis Responders ensure accurate and efficient record-keeping. All duties are performed in accordance with established crisis line policies and professional standards.
- (3) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition, the candidate must demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Ability to provide an evidenced based crisis intervention through a variety of modalities (e.g., telephone interviews, chat/text services, or social media forums).
 - (b) Ability to carry out crisis management steps while withholding judgment on controversial behaviors and not imposing one's values during the contact.

(c) Ability to effectively prioritize complex problems quickly and respond appropriately in a crisis situation.

d. **Supervisory Social Science Specialist, GS-12**

- (1) **Experience.** In addition to the basic requirements, one year of experience comparable to the GS-11 grade level.
- (2) **Assignment.** For all assignments above the full performance level, the higher-level duties must consist of significant scope, complexity, difficulty, and a range of variety that the incumbent must perform at least 25% of the time. Employees at the GS-12 level provide direct supervision to Social Science Specialists (Crisis Responders). Supervisors provide oversight for evidence-based paraprofessional skilled intervention services, trainers, and silent monitors. Supervisors must possess clinical expertise to serve as a consultant to other Crisis Responder supervisors and any other staff assigned to the VCL. They troubleshoot and solve any unique problems or challenges that occur while connecting Veterans to the appropriate level of care. Supervisors resolve work problems presented by staff and recommends or implements methods to improve production/quality of work in the unit. Supervisors provide subordinates with performance requirements and expectations. They track and evaluate progress providing feedback to the Crisis Responder. Supervisory responsibilities include making recommendations for employee promotions or reassignments; approving leave requests; addressing leave issues; and taking disciplinary action in accordance with established policy and negotiated labor agreements. Supervisors assign work to be accomplished by subordinates. Supervisors manage stressful, complex, or emergent situations that may arise within the workplace. Supervisors assist in the development and implementation of policies and procedures to ensure efficient and safe operation of the VCL. Supervisors ensure policies, training, and clinical procedures of the VCL are up to date and consistent with crisis intervention practice, clinical practice, and effective coordination of care. Supervisors communicate business goals, procedures, and quality standards and provides leadership with guidance regarding clinical standards, training, policy development, and data analysis. Supervisors identify career development and training needs of employees. Supervisors promote an environment that encourages staff well-being. After an emotionally charged contact, the supervisor supports staff to ensure the Crisis Responder managed the situation in an appropriate manner, including post event review.
- (3) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to the experience above, the candidate must demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Knowledge and skill in management/administration, which includes supervision, consultation, negotiations, and monitoring.
 - (b) Ability to write policies, procedures, and or/practice guidelines.
 - (c) Ability to effectively interact with individuals and groups with cultural differences to problem-solve and negotiate complex issues and obtain cooperation.

- (d) Ability to provide training, orientation, consultation, and guidance within clinical specialization of practice.
- (e) Skill in developing interpersonal relationships including the ability to address the unique needs of Crisis Responders. This includes the provision of postvention as professionally indicated.
- (f) Ability to evaluate program effectiveness and make recommendations for change, as appropriate.

6. DEVIATIONS.

- a. The approving official may, under unusual circumstances, approve reasonable deviations to the grade determination requirements for an employee whose composite record of accomplishments, performance, and qualifications, as well as current assignment warrants such action.
- b. The placement of individuals in grade levels or assignments not described in this standard must be approved by the Under Secretary for Health or designee in the VA Central Office pursuant to delegated authority from the Secretary.
- c. Under no circumstances will the educational or credential requirement be waived for those occupations with a positive education requirement, or when specific credentials are identified as necessary to meet minimum requirements.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICE: Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security and Preparedness (HRA/OSP) (006), Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (OCHCO) (05), Recruitment and Placement Policy Service (059)