

STAFFING

1. **REASON FOR ISSUE:** To revise the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) qualification standard for the occupation of Genetic Counselor GS-0601, 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 revised qualification standard updates the Genetic Counselor qualification requirements in VA Handbook 5005, Appendix II-G51 under VA's title 38 hybrid excepted service employment system in accordance with the authority established under P.L. 111-163, Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010. VA Secretary has authority under 38 U.S.C. § 7402 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. The revised standard is effective on the date of this publication. This qualification standard will be incorporated into the electronic version of VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, which is maintained on the [Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer website](#) and [VA Publications website](#). Significant changes:
 - a. Remove licensure as a basic requirement for the occupation.
 - b. Clarify that uncertified Genetic Counselors appointed under the authority of 38 U.S.C. § 7405(c)(2) may be supervised by other occupations with the appropriate training and expertise.
3. **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).
4. **RELATED DIRECTIVES:** VA Directive 5005, Staffing.
5. **RESCISSIONS:** VA Handbook 5005/97 Part II, Appendix G51, February 7, 2018.

Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, DC 20420

VA HANDBOOK 5005/163
Transmittal Sheet
[Month, day, year]

CERTIFIED BY:

**BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS:**

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

GENETIC COUNSELOR
QUALIFICATION STANDARD GS-0601
Veterans Health Administration

1. **COVERAGE.** The following are requirements for appointment or placement as a Genetic Counselor in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). These requirements apply to all VHA Genetic Counselors in the GS-0601 General Health Science series. Genetic Counselors are health professionals with specialized graduate degrees and experience in genetic counseling. Genetic Counselors work as a part of a healthcare team in collaboration with physicians to assess genetic risk based on personal and family history, determine if and what type of genetic testing may be useful, interpret results of genetic testing and help patients make informed choices, and adapt to a genetic risk or diagnosis. Genetic Counselors contribute to the translation of important genomic findings and other genetics research to patients with hereditary conditions predisposing to disease in a variety of ways.
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. **Appointing Official.** The Human Resources (HR) Officer is delegated appointing authority to process and authenticate notifications of personnel actions and authority to effect management approved employment actions on behalf of officials, employees, and facilities for which service is provided.
 - b. **Approving Official.** The Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Director, Facility Director or Under Secretary for Health or designee (for VHA central office appointments) is the approving official and will determine whether to approve or disapprove the appointment of employees in the hybrid occupations.

c. **Experience.**

- (1) **Creditable Experience.** To be creditable, experience must have required the use of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) associated with current professional Genetic Counseling practice. The experience must be post-master's degree or above. Experience satisfying this requirement must be active professional practice, which is paid/non-paid employment as a professional Genetic Counselor.
- (2) **Part-Time Experience.** Part-time experience is creditable according to its relationship to a full-time workweek. For example, an individual employed 20 hours per week or on a half time basis, would receive one full-time work week of credit for each two weeks of service.
- (3) **Quality of Experience.** Experience is only creditable if it is obtained following graduation with a master's or higher degree in Genetic Counseling from an accredited training program. Qualifying experience must also be at a level comparable to Genetic Counseling experience at the next lower grade level. For all assignments above the full performance level, the higher-level duties must consist of significant scope, administrative independence, complexity, and range of variety as described in this standard at the specified grade level and be performed by the incumbent at least 25% of the time.

d. **Journey Level.** The full performance level for this qualification standard is the GS-11 grade level.

4. **BASIC REQUIREMENTS.** To qualify for appointment to this position, all applicants must possess the following:

- a. **Citizenship.** Be a citizen of the United States (U.S.). Non-citizens may be appointed when it is not possible to recruit qualified citizens in accordance with 38 U.S.C. § 7407(a).
- b. **Education.** Master's degree or higher in genetic counseling from a program in the United States or Canada accredited by the Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling (ACGC). Coursework typically includes clinical genetics, population genetics, cytogenetics and molecular genetics coupled with psychosocial theory, ethics and counseling techniques. Clinical rotations in medical genetics centers approved by the ACGC are an integral part of the degree requirements. Individuals who graduated prior to 1993 must have graduated from a program accepted by the American Board of Genetic Counseling (ABGC) as equivalent for certification purposes at that time.

c. **Certification.**

- (1) Persons hired or reassigned to Genetic Counselor positions in VHA must be board certified in the field of Genetic Counseling by the American Board of Genetic Counseling (ABGC). The board certification must be current, and the applicant must abide by the certifying body's requirements for continuing education.
- (2) Exception for Non-Certified Genetic Counselors.
 - (a) Non-certified applicants designated by the certifying agency (ABGC) as "board eligible", who otherwise meet the eligibility requirements, may be given a temporary appointment for no more than 2 years as a graduate Genetic Counselor under the authority of 38 U.S.C. § 7405(c)(2).
 - (b) Non-certified individuals shall only provide care under the supervision of a board-certified Genetic Counselor at or above the full performance level or other designated occupation (a physician, for example) with the appropriate training and expertise.
 - (c) Non-certified individuals may only be appointed at the entry level and may not be promoted until certification is obtained.
 - (d) Temporary appointments of non-certified Genetic Counselors may not be extended beyond two years or converted to a new temporary appointment.
- (3) **Failure to Obtain Certification/Registration.** In all cases, uncertified Genetic Counselors must actively pursue meeting requirements for certification from the date of their appointment. At the time of appointment, the HR Office staff in collaboration with the supervisor will provide the uncertified Genetic Counselor written notification of the requirement to become certified, including the date by which board certification must be obtained and the consequences for not becoming board certified by the deadline. Failure to obtain board certification during this period may result in termination of employment.
- (4) **Loss of Credential.** Management officials, in collaboration with HR Office staff, must immediately relieve employees of the duties and responsibilities associated with this occupation who fail to maintain the required certification, which may also result in separation from employment.
- (5) HR Office staff must appoint Genetic Counselors according to the provisions in Chapter 3, Section B, paragraph 16 of this part, who have, or

have ever had, their Genetic Counseling certification revoked suspended, denied, restricted, limited, or issued/placed in a probationary status.

- d. **Grandfathering Provision.** All individuals employed in VHA in this occupational series or in another occupational series performing the duties as described in the qualification standard on the effective date of the qualification standard are considered to have met all qualification requirements for the grade held including positive education and certification. 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 may be reassigned, promoted up to and including the full performance (journey) level, or changed to lower grade within the occupation, but may not be promoted beyond the journeyman level or placed in supervisory or managerial positions.
 - (2) Employees in an occupation that requires a certification only at higher grade levels must meet the certification requirement before they can be promoted to those higher grade levels.
 - (3) 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.
 - (4) Employees retained in this occupation 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 re-entry to the occupation.
 - (5) Employees initially grandfathered into this occupation who subsequently obtain additional education and/or certification that meet all the basic requirements of this qualification standard must maintain the required credentials as a condition of employment in the occupation.
- e. **Foreign Education.** To be creditable, education completed outside the U.S. must be deemed at least equivalent to that gained in a conventional U.S. program by a private organization specializing in the interpretation of foreign educational credentials.
- f. **Physical Requirements.** See [VA Directive and Handbook 5019](#), Employee Occupational Health Service for requirements.
- g. **English Language Proficiency.** Genetic Counselor candidates must be proficient in spoken and written English in accordance with 38 U.S.C. § 7403(f).

5. OFFICIAL POSITION TITLES. All official documents relating to a position (e.g., functional statements and personnel actions) must use the approved official title and grade level as described below.

- a. Genetic Counselor, GS-09.
- b. Genetic Counselor, GS-11.
- c. Genetic Counselor (Clinical), GS-12.
- d. Supervisory Genetic Counselor, GS-13.
- e. Genetic Counselor (Program Coordinator), GS-14.

6. GRADE DETERMINATIONS. In addition to the basic requirements outlined in paragraph 4, the following criteria must be met when determining the grade of candidates.

a. **Genetic Counselor, GS-09.**

- (1) **Experience.** None beyond the basic requirements.
- (2) **Assignment.** Individuals assigned as GS-09 grade level Genetic Counselors are at the entry level and are closely supervised, including co-signatures where required, as they are not functioning at the full performance level. Under supervision, Genetic Counselors at this level may provide genetic counseling services.

b. **Genetic Counselor, GS-11.**

- (1) Experience or Education.
 - (a) One year of creditable experience equivalent to the next lower grade.OR
 - (b) A doctoral degree in clinical genetic counseling or a related field.
- (2) **Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs).** In addition to the experience above, the candidate must demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Knowledge of various federal and state regulations (i.e., documentation of informed consent) related to provision of care.
 - (b) Skill in oral and written communication necessary to communicate with a variety of different audiences (i.e., patients, referring providers, colleagues).

- (c) Ability to synthesize personal and family history, test results, and other pertinent information to determine the risk of conditions with a genetic component and make appropriate recommendations regarding genetic testing.
 - (d) Ability to efficiently use primary resources (i.e., guidelines, webinars, journal articles) and secondary resources (i.e., Gene Reviews) to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant scientific literature.
 - (e) Ability to evaluate genetic test selection and methodology available at different laboratories, including the analytic validity, clinical validity, and utility of a genetic test and order germline genetic test.
 - (f) Ability to select the best test strategies while balancing the various needs of stakeholders (i.e., VA pathology departments, the patient, the referring providers).
- (3) **Assignment.** Employees at this grade level serve as Genetic Counselors at the full performance level. At this level they are qualified to independently practice and provide genetic counseling services. Genetic counselors work as a part of a healthcare team in collaboration with physicians to assess genetic risk based on personal and family history, determine if and what type of genetic testing may be useful, interpret results of genetic testing, and help patients make informed choices and adapt to a genetic risk or diagnosis. Genetic Counselors contribute to the translation of important genomic findings and other genetics research to patients with hereditary conditions predisposing to disease in a variety of ways. Genetic Counselors guide patients and other providers who seek more information about how inherited diseases and conditions might affect patients or their families. This includes ordering appropriate genetic tests and interpreting genetic test results based on personal and family history to help patients make informed choices and adapt to a genetic risk or diagnosis. At the full performance level, Genetic Counselors participate in evaluating the effectiveness of genetic counseling services to include any changes in methods and procedures.

c. **Genetic Counselor (Advanced Clinical), GS-12.**

- (1) **Experience.** One year of creditable experience equivalent to the next lower grade.
- (2) **Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs).** In addition to the experience above, the candidate must demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Advanced knowledge of genetic conditions with specific expertise in targeted conditions.

- (b) Skill in applying general learning/teaching principles.
 - (c) Skill in identifying educational resources available for genetic counselors, as well as other medical specialties, as appropriate.
 - (d) Ability to identify national genetic counseling services and most current methods and practices, as well as services available in VA including program infrastructure and operations.
 - (e) Ability to organize, synthesize, and select relevant clinical and programmatic information to effectively manage time and priorities.
 - (f) Ability to mentor and train genetic counseling students as well as newly hired genetic counselors.
 - (g) Ability to identify target audiences within and outside VA for whom genetics educational material would be relevant.
- (3) **Assignment.** For all assignments above the full performance level, the higher-level duties must consist of significant scope, administrative independence, complexity (difficulty), and range of variety as described in this standard at the specified grade level and be performed by the incumbent at least 25% of the time. This is the advanced performance level for Genetic Counselors. Genetic Counselors at the advanced level may be responsible for specific clinical programs such as educational programming, clinical program evaluation, and/or research activities. Genetic Counselors at this level demonstrate advanced knowledge of genetic conditions. In addition, they can provide mentorship and education to students and newly hired genetic counselors.

d. **Supervisory Genetic Counselor, GS-13.**

- (1) **Experience.** One year of creditable experience equivalent to the next lower grade.
- (2) **Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs).** In addition to meeting the experience or educational requirements for this grade level, the candidate must fully demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Advanced knowledge of genetic practice guidelines and evidence-based practices and the ability to use these resources to make judgments and decisions associated with program management to guide program staff.
 - (b) Knowledge and skill in management/administration which includes supervision, collaboration, and monitoring.

- (c) Skill in effectively speaking and making presentations in public.
 - (d) Ability to develop productivity standards for provision of services.
 - (e) Ability to conduct outreach to create and foster collaborative relationships.
- (3) **Assignment.** For supervisory assignments, the Supervisory Genetic Counselor must spend 25% or more of their time providing technical and administrative supervision over staff one grade level below. Supervisory Genetic Counselor plans, schedules and assigns work, accepts, amends, or rejects completed work, assures production and accuracy requirements are met, interviews and selects candidates; recommends performance standards and appraises performance, approves leave, hear, and resolve complaints, and effects minor disciplinary actions. Supervisory Genetic Counselors manage the daily operations, develop and implement program policies and procedures and/or serve as Chief or Principal Counselor to other genetic counselors. They are responsible for the supervision, administrative management and direction of Genetic Counselors and other subordinate staff. They have responsibility for staffing, work assignments, budget, ensuring availability and timeliness of clinical services provided, day-to-day program operations, and all reporting requirements. They monitor outcomes and prepare reports and statistics. They develop and implement work plans. Supervisory Genetic Counselors are involved in providing feedback and instruction to trainees, residents, and other medical students. They may serve as consultants to other management officials at the national level.

e. **Genetic Counselor (Program Coordinator), GS-14.**

- (1) **Experience.** One year of creditable experience equivalent to the next lower grade.
- (2) **Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs).** In addition to meeting the experience or educational requirements for this grade level, the candidate must fully demonstrate the following KSAs:
 - (a) Knowledge of global genetic counseling practice to develop, maintain, and oversee programs.
 - (b) Skill in management/administration of a wide range of programs encompassing the operation and management of key clinical, training, or administrative functions at complex facilities and/or across multiple sites.

- (c) Ability to provide consultation on policy implementation, qualification standards, counseling practice, and competency that are consistent with organizational goals and objectives.
 - (d) Ability to influence high level officials in adoption of, and conformance to, performance measures, monitors, and other policy guidelines.
- (3) **Assignment.** For all assignments above the full performance level, the higher level duties must be of significant scope, administrative independence, complexity, and range of variety as described in this standard at the specified grade level and be performed by the incumbent at least 25% of the time. In addition to supporting the Supervisory Genetic Counselor with operational guidance, they oversee human and financial resources on a broad scope. They are responsible for oversight of administrative and programmatic resources. They may direct genetic counseling or organizational development. Their decisions may affect staff and other resources associated with the programs managed and are made while exercising wide latitude and independent judgment. They monitor outcomes and have delegated authority to determine long range work plans and assure that implementation of the goals and objectives are achieved. They may serve as consultants to other management officials at the national level.

7. DEVIATIONS.

- a. An 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 based on demonstrated competence to meet the requirements of the proposed grade and/or assignment.
- b. The placement of individuals in grade levels or assignments not described in this standard must be approved by the Under Secretary for Health in VHA Central Office prior to placement in the position.
- 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 unless an exception is annotated in the qualification standard.]

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)