

LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH

1. REASON FOR ISSUE: This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive provides direction and policy in recruitment of leadership positions in mental health.

2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CHANGES: This updated directive adds responsibilities for VISN Chief of Human Resources (see paragraph 4).

3. RELATED ISSUES: Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Handbook 5005 Staffing, dated April 15, 2002, Part II Appendices G18 (Psychologist Qualification Standards dated February 7, 2018); G39, (Social Work Qualification Standards dated September 10, 2019); G43 (Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor Qualification Standards dated February 7, 2018); G44 (Marriage and Family Therapist Qualification Standards dated February 7, 2018; G6 (Nursing Qualification Standards dated March 17, 2009) and G2 (Physician Qualification Standards dated April 1, 2020); VHA Directive 1161, Productivity and Staffing in Clinical Encounters for Mental Health Providers, dated April 28, 2020.

4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE: The Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) (11MHSP) is responsible for the contents of this directive. Questions may be referred to OMHSP at vha11mhspmentalhealthandsuicidepreventionaction@va.gov.

5. RESCISSION: VHA Directive 1165, Leadership Positions in Mental Health, dated November 4, 2015, is rescinded.

6. RECERTIFICATION: This VHA directive is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of May 2026. This VHA directive will continue to serve as national VHA policy until it is recertified or rescinded.

**BY DIRECTION OF THE OFFICE OF THE
UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH:**

/s/ Kameron Matthews, MD, JD
Assistant Under Secretary for Health
for Clinical Services

NOTE: All references herein to VA and VHA documents incorporate by reference subsequent VA and VHA documents on the same or similar subject matter.

DISTRIBUTION: Emailed to the VHA Publications Distribution List on May 14, 2021.

CONTENTS

LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH

1.PURPOSE 1

2.BACKGROUND..... 1

3.POLICY 2

4.RESPONSIBILITIES..... 2

5.TRAINING 5

6.RECORDS MANAGEMENT 5

7.REFERENCES 5

LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive provides direction and policy in filling leadership positions in mental health. **AUTHORITY:** 38 U.S.C. § 7301(b).

2. BACKGROUND

a. Providing high quality mental health services and suicide prevention remain a VHA priority. To support this mission, it is essential to recruit and hire the most qualified individuals, regardless of their mental health discipline, for leadership positions in mental health. This will allow for VHA to provide high quality, industry-leading mental health services for Veterans.

b. This principle helps to ensure both a high-quality corps of mental health leaders and an appropriate diversity of professional backgrounds. Further, this approach is most consistent with interprofessional practice, which is the cornerstone of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mental health programs. Interprofessional practice as it relates to mental health programs is provided in an integrated environment that allows health care team members to use complementary skills to effectively manage the physical and mental health of their patients, using an array of tools that supports information sharing. High functioning teams addressing behavioral and mental health needs require collaboration among diverse professions.

c. Mental health leadership positions require a set of skills that are not limited to or necessarily inherent in any one of the core mental health professions of psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing, marriage and family therapy, and licensed professional mental health counseling within VHA.

d. It is important to create and support innovative leadership models for all mental health professions. Promoting interprofessional recruitment for these important leadership roles supports VHA's goal of being the employer of choice in the health care industry and assists with recruitment and retention.

e. The provisions of this directive apply to mental health leadership positions in which the incumbent has responsibility for an interprofessional mental health work force, typically involving direct clinical and administrative supervision of interprofessional staff.

f. This directive does not apply to leadership positions that oversee a single, specific profession (e.g., a Psychology Service Chief) or to positions that do not require a clinical license, such as those that oversee research, program evaluation, informatics, quality improvement, implementation, communications, and other components of care delivery and public health beyond diagnosis and treatment of patients.

(1) Specific positions that are always considered to be mental health leadership positions include leadership positions in VA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, Veterans Integrated Services Networks (VISNs) Chief Mental Health

Officers (CMHOs), and the Chief and Assistant Chief of a mental health service line at the VA medical facility level. This directive must be considered for leadership positions for mental health programs, regardless of how they are aligned locally, to include, but not limited to, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) Clinics, Mental Health Intensive Case Management, Outpatient Mental Health and Inpatient Mental Health.

3. POLICY

It is VHA policy to recruit and hire the most qualified individuals for key leadership positions in mental health to provide high quality, industry-leading mental health services for Veterans.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. **Under Secretary for Health.** The Under Secretary for Health is responsible for ensuring overall VHA compliance with this directive.

b. **Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services.** The Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services is responsible for supporting the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention with implementation and oversight of this directive.

c. **Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations.** The Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management is responsible for:

(1) Communicating the contents of this directive to each Veteran Integrated Services Network (VISN).

(2) Assisting VISN Directors to resolve implementation and compliance challenges in all VA medical facilities within that VISN.

(3) Providing oversight of VISNs to ensure compliance with this directive and its effectiveness.

d. **Executive Director, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.** The Executive Director for Health for the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) is responsible for:

(1) Providing programmatic support and guidance to all VHA mental health staff regarding this directive.

(2) Ensuring consultation with this directive

(3) Ensuring all leadership positions that are posted for employment within OMHSP are posted in a manner consistent with this directive.

(4) Serving as liaison between various program stakeholders, including, but not limited to:

- (a) VA Central Office.
- (b) VHA program office.
- (c) VISNs.
- (d) VA medical facility Directors.
- (e) VA medical facility Mental Health Chiefs.
- (f) VA medical facility Psychology Service Chiefs.
- (g) VA medical facility Psychiatry Service Chiefs.
- (h) VA medical facility Social Work Chiefs and Social Work Executives.
- (i) VA medical facility Nursing Executives, Chiefs and Leads.

(5) Serves as national SME for interpretation of Mental Health discipline qualification standards in conjunction with other appropriate stakeholders.

e. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Director.** The VISN Director is responsible for:

(1) Communicating the contents of this directive to each of the VA medical facility Directors.

(2) Ensuring all mental health leadership positions that are posted for employment within the VISN are posted consistent with this directive.

(3) Ensuring that each VA medical facility Director has the sufficient resources to fulfill the terms of this directive in all VA medical facilities within that VISN.

(4) Providing oversight of VA medical facility Directors to ensure compliance with this directive.

f. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Chief of Human Resources.** The VISN Chief of Human Resources (HR) is responsible for:

(1) Ensuring that HR staff assist VA mental health hiring officials in posting leadership positions across disciplines and provide guidance whenever necessary. The VISN Chief of HR must ensure that mental health leadership positions are posted and filled promptly. **NOTE:** *Mental health leadership positions may include the six core mental health professions as well as disciplines described in 5.h.(1)(b).*

(2) Ensuring processes for recruitment of these positions are streamlined, clear and equitable for all disciplines, minimizing the need for mental health hiring officials to work with multiple HR staff to fill one position. There should not be a need for selecting officials to work with multiple HR teams to comply with these requirements.

(3) After posting, providing mental health hiring officials with qualified candidates that have training and experience in providing mental health care or mental health leadership. Previous mental health training and experience is required in order to provide mental health leadership. In addition, facility mental health chiefs should have knowledge of mental health clinical training programs, to ensure a robust workforce pipeline.

(4) Collaborating with the VA medical facility discipline-specific subject matter expert (e.g., Social Work Executive, Chief of Psychology) in reviewing and screening applicants for eligibility when the hiring authority is not the discipline-specific subject matter expert.

(5) Ensuring written rationale documents are retained and recorded and contain the necessary information on actions taken during hiring.

g. **VA Medical Facility Director.** The VA medical facility Director is responsible for:

(1) Ensuring that the Chief, Mental Health Services or Chief, Psychology Service, or Chief, Psychiatry Service at their VA medical facility implements the standardized leadership hiring process as described in this directive.

(2) Ensuring that the Chief of Staff, Associate Director of Patient Care Services/Nurse Executive and Chief Social Work Service or Social Work Executive and other stakeholders at the VA medical facility are aware of the contents of this directive.

(3) Ensuring that adequate staffing, funding, training, support, and resources are provided to the relevant program at the VA medical facility for implementing effective policies and requirements.

(4) Ensuring that any vacancies in mental health leadership positions are addressed as a HR priority.

h. **VA Medical Facility Chief, Mental Health Services.** The VA medical facility Chief, Mental Health Services is responsible for:

(1) Ensuring that announcements for mental health leadership positions (as described in paragraph 2.b.) must reflect a commitment to the principles outlined in this directive and invite applicants from as many of the six core mental health professions (psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing, marriage and family therapist, and licensed professional mental health counselor) as appropriate to the leadership requirements of the position. If all disciplines are not considered, a written rationale must be developed for each discipline that is not considered. This rationale must be retained and receive VA medical facility Director concurrence.

(a) The leadership requirements of the vacant position should always be the primary factor determining which professions are included in the posting for a leadership vacancy, but collateral clinical practice duties associated with the position may also be considered.

(b) Mental health leadership positions can be posted for disciplines other than the core mental health professions (e.g., Pharmacist; Rehabilitation Counselor; Physician Assistant) as long as it is clear that to qualify for the position, the individual must be a licensed independent provider or advanced practice provider with mental health experience.

(2) Ensuring that all applicants are reviewed in a fair and transparent documented process leading to selection of the most qualified applicant. Applicants for leadership roles must have demonstrated previous experience and meet minimum requirements in providing mental health care or mental health leadership.

5. TRAINING

There are no formal training requirements associated with this directive.

6. RECORDS MANAGEMENT

All records regardless of format (e.g., paper, electronic, electronic systems) created by this directive must be as required by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) approved records schedules found in VHA Records Control Schedule 10-1. Questions regarding any aspect of records management should be addressed to the appropriate Records Officer.

7. REFERENCES

a. 38 U.S.C. §§ 1706, 7401.