

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

1. **REASON FOR ISSUE:** To revise Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy regarding employee recognition and awards for podiatrists in accordance with the “VA MISSION Act of 2018” (Public Law 115-182, dated June 6, 2018).
2. **SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This policy update eliminates the eligibility of podiatrists to receive Special Advancements for Achievement (SAA) or Special Advancements for Performance (SAP) due to the conversion to the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) physician and dentist pay system. A podiatrist’s step determination is based solely on their number of years of creditable VHA service. Additionally, a few minor modifications have been made regarding physician assistants and cash awards granted under the provisions of 38 U.S.C. § 7452.
3. **RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** Employee Relations and Performance Management Service (051), Office of Human Resources Management.
4. **RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5017, “Employee Recognition and Awards.”
5. **RESCISSION:** None.

CERTIFIED BY:

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

/s/
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PART V. TITLE 38 SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS AND CASH AWARDS

- 1. SCOPE.** This part contains policies, procedures, and guidelines governing the advancement of [] optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, physician assistants, and expanded-function dental auxiliaries appointed under authority of 38 U.S.C. § 7401(1) or § 7405(a); and hybrid-title 38 employees appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3) or § 7405(a)(1)(B). Excluded are physicians[,] dentists and podiatrists appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(1) and § 7405(a)(1); facility directors, chiefs of staff, medical and dental residents appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7406; and health care executives appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7306.
- 2. REFERENCES.**
 - a. VA Directive 5017, [Employee Recognition and Awards.]
 - b. 38 U.S.C., Chapters 73 and 74.
- 3. OFFICIALS AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE ADVANCEMENTS.** The Under Secretary for Health, or a designee, shall approve all advancements of employees covered by this part. (See Appendix A of this part.)
- 4. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT [(SAA)] FOR CERTAIN TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES.**
 - a. Full-time, part-time, and intermittent [], optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, physician assistants and expanded-function dental auxiliaries appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(1) or § 7405(a) may be advanced within grade from one to five steps, on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment, provided that they have demonstrated a high level of performance and assumption of greater responsibility, as outlined in paragraph b below.
 - b. The following is a list of the types of professional accomplishment that may be achieved, and the criteria required. An employee is not eligible for a[n] [SAA] if the professional accomplishment was achieved prior to appointment or as a result of VA funding, e.g., paying for training, paying for certification.
 - (1) **Certification.** Attainment of certification by an appropriate national certifying body, unless such certification: is a condition of employment with VA for the current position held; is a qualification requirement for promotion to a higher grade; or is used to justify a higher-level grade or assignment. An employee may only receive an SAA for attainment of specialty certification the first time that it is received; it cannot be granted for a renewal or after a lapse in the certification.
 - (a) A technically appropriate certification must meet all of the criteria below:
 - i. Be issued by a national certifying body; and
 - ii. Required attendance, virtually or in person, at a training class or self-taught coursework/reading or other training required by the national certifying body; and

8. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (SAP).

- a. **Consideration.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent [] optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, physician assistants, and expanded-function dental auxiliaries who have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance and professional competence over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession, or who have made noted contributions in some phase of their profession, may be considered for SAPs. Hybrid-title 38 positions may be considered in accordance with subparagraph d of [] paragraph 8. Union officials serving on 100 percent official time, who do not perform sufficient management-assigned duties to receive an evaluation of their performance, are not eligible for SAPs.

NOTE: Supervisors and managers may only be considered for SAPs at the end of the Executive Career Field (ECF) rating cycle. (See VA Handbook 5013, Performance Management System, Part I, and Appendix F of Part I.)

- b. [] **Optometrists, Chiropractors, Physician Assistants, and Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.** An advancement of one step may be granted on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. (See NOTE below.) The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance, and demonstrate exceptional skills and aptitudes in the care and treatment of patients.
- c. **Registered Nurses and Nurse Anesthetists.** An advancement of one step within the grade may be granted to covered employees when there has been a demonstrated sustained high level of performance and ability over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession. (See NOTE below.) In addition, one or more of the criteria listed in VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, Part III, Chapter 4, paragraph 6 must be met.
- d. **Hybrid-Title 38 Employees in Occupations Identified in 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3).** The Quality Step Increase provisions in Part III, paragraph 3 of this handbook will be used to grant one-step special advancements for performance for employees in occupations listed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3). The step increase will be coded as 894G. Special advancement for performance recommendations for hybrid-title 38 employees will not require review by a PSB. Instead, recommendations will be forwarded directly to the appropriate approving official listed in Appendix A of this part. (See NOTE below.)
- e. **Discretion.** Approving officials may approve or disapprove awards, at their discretion, for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made by the employee to the Agency or its mission.
- f. **Combination Award.** Employees may receive a Superior Performance Award and an SAP, but the amount of the award cannot exceed the value of the accomplishment. Refer to Part I, paragraph 4 [of this handbook] for additional information.

NOTE: Individuals at the top step of their grade cannot receive an increase to base pay; however, they may be recognized with a Superior Performance Award in accordance with Part III of this handbook.

9. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE.

a. General.

- (1) Human Resources Management Officers shall assure that appropriate officials will be notified in anticipation of eligibility. Approximately 90 calendar days prior to the employee completing the waiting period for a periodic step increase or rate adjustment, the facility will receive from the Austin Automation Center[], VA Form 97, Notice of Pending Personnel Action, identifying the employee and stating that the employee is eligible for consideration for an SAP.
- (2) The immediate supervisor or higher-level official will submit appropriate justification as outlined in paragraph [8] of this part with a completed VA Form 4659, the performance appraisal or proficiency rating, and generate an SF-52. The award nomination will be forwarded to the service chief or equivalent, or Chief of Staff or Associate Director or Associate Director of Patient Care Services, who will submit it to Human Resources so that it will be received no later than 30 calendar days following the completion of the employee's waiting period for a periodic step increase or rate adjustment.
- (3) Human Resources will conduct an initial technical review of the award prior to submission to the appropriate PSB to ensure that all information has been provided by the supervisor, and the policy requirements have been met. If the award submission does not meet technical requirements due to lack of justification provided by the immediate supervisor, it will be returned to the supervisor within seven calendar days with an explanation as to what information is needed. Otherwise, if the award meets technical requirements, Human Resources will submit the nomination to the PSB within seven calendar days following receipt of the award submission and document whether the award nomination meets or does not meet technical requirements, with an explanation as to why it does not, when applicable.
- (4) The PSB will make a specific recommendation with the appropriate number of steps to be granted, when applicable. The board action, with supporting justification from the PSB recommending approval or disapproval of the award, will be forwarded to Human Resources on VA Form 10-2543.
- (5) Human Resources will review and sign the board action to certify that the board's recommendation meets technical and regulatory requirements before the board action and award justification is forwarded to the appropriate approving official, as outlined in Appendix A of this part.
- (6) SAPs will be processed as soon as possible after the end of the employee's rating cycle but typically no later than 90 calendar days after the end of the rating cycle.

b. []Optometrists[] and Chiropractors.

- (1) An advancement of one step, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. The advancement shall be

10. CRITERIA FOR CASH AWARDS FOR FULL-TIME, PART-TIME, AND INTERMITTENT REGISTERED NURSES, NURSE ANESTHETISTS[, AND PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS] APPOINTED UNDER 38 U.S.C. §§ 7306, 7401(1) AND 7405.

a. General.

- (1) Cash awards for specialty certification and cash awards for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement, as outlined under this paragraph, are in addition to special advancements mentioned previously in this chapter.
- (2) A registered nurse[,], nurse anesthetist[, or physician assistant] may not receive a:
 - (a) Special Advancement for Performance and a Special Contribution Award based on the same performance; or
 - (b) [Superior Performance Award] and a cash award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement during the same rating cycle; or
 - (c) Special Advancement for Achievement and a Special Contribution Award based on the same achievement or contribution.
- (3) When it is determined appropriate and the established criteria for each type of award has been met, a registered nurse[,], nurse anesthetist[, or physician assistant] may be granted a combination award such as:
 - (a) Special Advancement for Performance and a cash award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement as outlined below; or
 - (b) Special Advancement for Achievement and a cash award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement as outlined below; or
 - (c) Special Advancement for Performance and a Superior Performance Award; or
 - (d) Special Advancement for Achievement and cash award for specialty certification as outlined below.

b. Cash Award for Specialty Certification.

- (1) The Director or designee is required in accordance with 38 U.S.C. § 7452(b)(1)(A) to grant a cash award of up to \$2,000 to registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, and physician assistants who become certified while on VA rolls in a specialty related to the accomplishment of VA's health care mission.
- (2) A cash award for specialty certification is a mechanism for recognizing registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, and physician assistants who have been certified in a clinical specialty area by an appropriate national certifying body. Specialty certification does not include recertification or renewal of previously held certifications but does include second and subsequent certifications, as well as advanced certification, provided the requirements for

APPENDIX A. PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT OR PERFORMANCE/APPROVING OFFICIALS

1. **Under Secretary for Health or designee.** Advancements of those covered by the scope of this handbook when the Under Secretary for Health or designee is the appointing official.
2. **Network Directors.** Advancements of those covered by the scope of this handbook and VA Directive 5017 when the Network Director is the appointing official.
3. **Facility Directors.**
 - a. Advancements of optometrists.
[]
 - [b.] Advancements of expanded-function dental auxiliaries.
 - [c.] Advancements of chiropractors.
 - [d.] Advancements of registered nurses and nurse anesthetists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to the Associate Director for Patient Care Services the advancement of registered nurses and nurse anesthetists in noncentralized assignments below Nurse IV.
 - [e.] Advancements of physician assistants.
 - [f.] Advancements of pharmacists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to the Chief of Pharmacy Service the advancement of pharmacists in noncentralized assignments below GS-13 and assistant chiefs of Pharmacy Service at GS-13.
 - [g.] Advancements of occupational therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of occupational therapists in noncentralized assignments below GS-13.
 - [h.] Advancements of registered respiratory therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of registered respiratory therapists.
 - [i.] Advancements of certified respiratory therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of certified respiratory therapists.
 - [j.] Advancements of licensed practical or vocational nurses. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to nurse executives the advancements of licensed practical or vocational nurses.
 - [k.] Advancements of physical therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of physical therapists.

PART V

APPENDIX A

[l.] Advancements of other occupations covered by 38 U.S.C. [§] 7401(3), other than those listed in subparagraph 3g. through 3l., [of this appendix (]e.g., pharmacy technicians, medical instrument technicians, medical record technicians, dental hygienists, dental assistants, nuclear medicine technologists, occupational therapy assistants, therapeutic radiologic technologists, physical therapy assistants, diagnostic radiologic technicians, prosthetic representatives, and orthotist-prosthetists.[)] Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority for the advancement of these occupations to chiefs of staff.

*NOTE: Only the Facility Director may act as both the recommending and approving official for Special Advancements for Achievement or Special Advancement for Performance