

## SPECIAL EMPHASIS PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This VA Handbook provides guidance on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) procedures on creating a Model Equal Employment Opportunity, Diversity, and Inclusion Program in compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and directives.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This VA Handbook establishes procedures and guidance for creating and managing Special Emphasis Programs.
- 3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** Office of Diversity and Inclusion (06), Office of Human Resources and Administration (006).
- 4. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5975, Diversity and Inclusion
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** None

**CERTIFIED BY:**

*/s/*  
Melissa S. Glynn, Ph.D.  
Assistant Secretary for  
Office of Enterprise Integration

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

*/s/*  
Peter J. Shelby  
Assistant Secretary for  
Human Resources and Administration

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## SPECIAL EMPHASIS PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

### 1. PURPOSE

This handbook describes and provides guidance on carrying out Special Emphasis Programs (SEPs).

### 2. BACKGROUND AND SCOPE

a. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is committed to equal employment opportunity (EEO) and diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the VA workplace. VA defines diversity in its broadest context to include all that makes us unique: race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, disability, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, parental status, educational background, socioeconomic status, military affiliation, intellectual perspective, organizational level, and more. Numerous empirical studies have shown a positive correlation between workforce diversity and organizational performance. Research tells us that diverse teams are more creative, perform better in problem solving, and result in better decision-making than homogeneous teams. However, absent the facilitating conditions that integrate diverse perspectives in the organization, the aforementioned conditions are reversed. This is the inclusion imperative.

b. SEPs are programs designed to promote workplace inclusion and ensure EEO and prohibit discrimination in employment because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age or disability and to promote the full realization of EEO through a continuing affirmative program in each agency. The authorizing regulations, 29 CFR 1614.102 (b)(4), specifically state that Federal agencies must designate “such Special Emphasis Program Managers (SEPMS) (e.g., People With Disabilities Program, Federal Women's Program and Hispanic Employment Program), clerical and administrative support as may be necessary to carry out the functions described in this part in all organizational units of the agency and at all agency installations.” **Note that SEPs are not limited to statutorily protected groups or categories.** While age and disability do not fall under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended, these and other demographic categories may be considered for the purposes of SEPs. The programs generally focus on groups with less than expected representation or low participation rates in the workforce; experience barriers to EEO; or otherwise have unique needs that warrant attention. To this end, VA has established SEPs, work groups, and committees that include, but are not limited to the following:

- (1) African American/Black Employment Program
- (2) American Indian/Alaska Native Employment Program
- (3) Asian American/Pacific Islander Employment Program
- (4) Disability Employment Program
- (5) Federal Women's Program

- (6) Hispanic Employment Program
- (7) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Program

c. Together, the D&I programs and SEPs provide a comprehensive and synergistic framework for creating a Model EEO, and D&I Program in VA, in accordance with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Management Directive (MD) 715.

### **3. SEP OBJECTIVES**

a. The primary objective of the VA's SEP is to take affirmative steps to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices and policies and to ensure that all VA employees and applicants for employment have an equal opportunity to compete fairly in all aspects of their recruitment, hiring, training, upward mobility, career counseling, developmental details, promotions, and any other condition of employment. This includes ensuring that the workplace is welcoming and inclusive of all groups. To this end, offices and facilities must perform the following functions:

b. Analyze agency workforce data, identify potential employment barriers in the areas of recruitment, hiring, promotion, career development, reasonable accommodation and retention affecting the full representation of protected groups, and develop and implement viable solutions to help eliminate identified barriers to employment.

c. Compile, develop, and disseminate workforce statistical reports and information for senior level officials, managers, supervisors, and the workforce at large to facilitate the development of human capital strategic plans and to increase knowledge of diversity, EEO and issues of accessibility and reasonable accommodation of persons with disabilities.

d. Develop and conduct EEO and diversity-related training, educational programs, cultural observances and other activities to enhance awareness and understanding of the issues affecting employment and retention of diverse groups, particularly of those groups having low participation rates in the VA workforce.

### **4. CULTURAL OBSERVANCES AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS**

a. SEPs may utilize cultural observances and educational programs to promote the employment, advancement and retention of workforce members, particularly those with less than expected participation rates, as compared to the established benchmarks in the VA's workforce. Cultural observances are opportunities to recognize the accomplishments of individuals or groups in our collective American history. Educational programs focus on the needs of VA employees and provide opportunities for professional and career development. Senior leaders should encourage attendance at cultural observances and participation in educational programs.

b. Appropriated funds may be used in support of activities that further the EEO objectives of cultural observances. A small sampling of ethnic foods may be provided. Questions on expenditure of funds for cultural observance events should be directed to the organization's EEO Director.

c. SEP observances are events held on the date or within the month designated to honor such special emphasis groups, generally though not exclusively, through Presidential Proclamation. The purpose of these events is to raise awareness and increase education about the diversity of our Nation's population. Through these SEP events, VA acknowledges the invaluable contributions of all Americans, and fosters D&I in all aspects of agency operations. The annual calendar of SEP observances follows:

Date	Observance
January	Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Annual Holiday
February	National African American History Month
March	National Women's History Month
May	Asian Pacific American Heritage Month
June	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Month
August 26	Women's Equality Day
September 15 - October 15	National Hispanic Heritage Month
October	National Disability Employment Awareness Month
November	American Indian/Alaska Native Heritage Month

## 5. PROGRAM MANAGEMENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

a. SEPMs are an integral component of affirmative employment programs, and as such, should have access to agency senior officials, human resources (HR) staff, workforce data and workforce reports (i.e., MD-715 annual reports and workforce tables; monthly and quarterly EEO and HR workforce reports; D&I Reports, etc.). In reviewing facility-specific reports, SEPMs should identify and address concerns of applicants and employees from the group they are representing. They strengthen the organization by providing advice and assistance to management officials and employees in an effort to help VA meet EEO and D&I program goals and objectives and to help make VA an "employer of choice."

b. Responsibilities for effective agency SEPs are not limited to the SEPM. The following outlines the key roles and responsibilities for other agency officials and employees with respect to SEPs:

c. Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key Officials, within their respective organizations will:

(1) Ensure that the organization or facility has designated a SEP for any group experiencing barriers or potential barriers to EEO. In support of the Disability Employment Program, a Selective Placement Program Coordinator (SPPC) should also be designated.

(2) Provide sufficient resources to ensure that the SEPMs have the time, training, and support needed to perform their SEP functions and responsibilities; create an appointment letter and addendum to their position description allowing at least 20 percent of the employee's time for SEP duties is recommended (see language in sample SEPM Appointment Letter in Appendix A). SEPMs should receive training within 60 days of their appointment (TMS "EEO Special Emphasis Program Training/VA 1324578" or the equivalent.)

(3) Ensure that EEO and HR officials, as well as other key managers and supervisors, are held accountable for supporting and cooperating with the SEPMs in identifying and addressing any identified barriers.

(4) Encourage and provide support for robust data analysis and examination of the EEO program for a comprehensive MD-715 report, and establishment of strategic MD-715 and/or SEP actionable/measurable plans to address potential barriers.

(5) Ensure that all hiring officials are aware of any deficiencies and barriers identified in the organization's MD-715 report and that appropriate SEP plans are developed and implemented.

(6) Monitor all activities and ensure regular communications with all parties involved.

d. The Deputy Assistant Secretary for Diversity and Inclusion will:

(1) Develop, implement, and enforce Department-wide SEP policy and program initiatives.

(2) Ensure SEP requirements and guidance are communicated to SEPMs across VA.

(3) Oversee the National SEPMs and ensure that barrier analyses are conducted and action plans are developed to address any possible barriers to EEO.



(4) Lead the development and implementation of the annual EEOC MD-715 Plan and Report, the Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program (FEORP) report, Minority Serving Institutions report and the VA's D&I report, to include demonstration of SEP responsibilities.

(5) Monitor the progress of the planned SEP initiatives outlined in the EEO and diversity action plans at the National level and the Administration level.

e. HR Managers will:

(1) Work with the facility's SEPMs, EEO, and D&I Managers to conduct barrier analysis for their serviced facility as requested, and analyze data and other information to identify any unlawful or unintended barriers created by personnel policies, practices and procedures.

(2) To the extent possible, include the SEPM in planned targeted outreach efforts to groups having low participation rates in their respective organizations.

(3) Implement and monitor the effectiveness and progress of any MD-715 planned action items for which HR has responsibilities.

(4) Cooperate with other facilities that are trying to provide a reasonable accommodation (RA) to an employee.

f. EEO/Diversity & Inclusion Managers will:

(1) Recruit and appoint the SEPMs, provide technical guidance and oversee their efforts in conducting barrier analysis and creating plans to address any potential barriers to EEO.

(2) Ensure all SEPMs have the appropriate training to carry out programmatic responsibilities.

(3) Enlist the cooperation of the HR Manager and any other key officials to conduct the barrier analysis or create and implement the plans.

(4) Oversee the compilation of the annual MD-715 report and brief the "State of the Agency" to top officials and key staff.

(5) Recruit employees for an EEO Advisory Committee, which serves as a way to collect feedback regarding employment practices and other workplace concerns faced by employees; network and share support for the program; and assistance in identifying possible barriers. Some SEP committees also contribute to barrier analysis and action plans for the MD-715 report and/or workforce succession plan.

g. Administration and facility level managers and supervisors will:

(1) Assist and support the barrier analyses efforts.

(2) Maintain clearly defined, well-communicated, consistently applied and fairly implemented personnel policies, merit based selection and promotion procedures, evaluation procedures, award and recognition procedures, rules of conduct, and training systems.

(3) Ensure collateral duty time is clearly identified and allowed for SEPMS, consistent with this Directive.

h. Administration and facility level SEPMS will:

(1) Be knowledgeable of the plans and reports, such as: Current VA D&I Strategic Plan; Facility MD-715; Facility FEORP; and Facility Workforce Succession Strategic Plan.

(2) Be knowledgeable of the laws, regulations, policies, and other guidance that govern their assigned program.

(3) Contribute to the analysis of workforce data to identify any discrepancies in the hiring, pay distribution, promotion, training, awards, retention of their targeted group, and create an action plan to address any identified discrepancies or barriers.

(4) Work with the EEO Manager to communicate to all senior level and hiring officials the SEP goals and objectives, best practices, accomplishments, and program challenges.

(5) Assist the EEO Manager or HR in targeted recruitment outreach activities that will add qualified individuals from the targeted group to the VA's applicant and candidate pool.

(6) Identify suitable organizations that can be contacted in the recruitment effort.

(7) Assist in educating employees, from the groups with low participation rates in the workforce or senior pay levels, on career opportunities, encouraging them to participate in self-development, and continuing education when suitable.

(8) As appropriate, hold events or observances that provide information on barriers or challenges unique to the Administration or facility. Alternatively, the events may feature a speaker or a panel of employees who can share their experiences as Federal employees, including any barriers they faced.

i. The Disability Program Manager will:

(1) Be knowledgeable of Section 501, 504, and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended; the VA's hiring goal, the facility's on board ratio, and people can be hired via Schedule "A" for title 5 positions, and the non-competitive options for Title 38 positions.

(2) Assist in processing requests for RA, if requested, as described in VA Handbook 5975.1 and EEOC guidance.

(3) Work with the facility staff to ensure that the facility is in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines.

(4) If designated by the facility, serve as the Local Reasonable Accommodation Coordinator (LRAC), advising management and employees on the RA process.

(5) Be familiar with VA Directive 5975 and Handbook 5975.1 on RA process and the Department of Defense's Computer/Electronics Accommodation Program (CAP).

j. The SPPC will:

(1) Be knowledgeable of and perform the recommended duties specified by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) guidance, at: <<http://www.opm.gov/disability/SSPCoord.asp>>.

(2) Be aware of the facility's on-board and hiring ratios for people with targeted disabilities, and the average pay level.

(3) Maintain and appropriate system of records for the collection and handling of resumes from qualified individuals with disabilities for dissemination to hiring officials when a suitable vacancy opens.

(4) Maintain knowledge of the Schedule "A" Excepted appointment process for Title 5 positions, and the non-competitive Title 38 options.

(5) Ensure that people hired via Schedule "A" are converted to career conditional after the requisite period of satisfactory performance.

(6) Work with applicants who are disabled Veterans and people with disabilities to identify appropriate vacancies and guide them in preparing resumes or application packages. The SPPC may not refer Schedule "A" applicants for Title 5 positions to USAJOBS in lieu of accepting an application directly.

(7) Work with selecting officials and managers to use the special hiring authorities, as appropriate, and advocate their use to meet the agency's hiring goals.

(8) Advise managers about candidates with disabilities who are available for placement in jobs under special hiring authorities.

(9) When a person with a disability will be interviewed or hired and needs an RA, provide managers with information on RAs.

(10) When a tentative job offer is made, and an RA is needed, help the manager identify possible modifications in the work environment or in the work processes that will allow the candidate to perform the essential duties of the job.

(11) Work with HR and EEO to ensure promotion opportunities are marketed and all employees, including those with disabilities, are encouraged to apply.

## 6. IDENTIFYING AND APPOINTING SEPMs

a. When determining who to appoint as a SEPM, the appointing official should consider whether the prospective appointee has the desired knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet program goals and objectives. Some, knowledge, skills and abilities that will lead to successful program implementation are listed as follows:

(1) Ability to analyze workforce data and identify trends;

(2) Organizational and time management skills;

(3) Basic project management skills;

(4) A broad knowledge of EEO laws, regulations, policies, directives, and tenets;

(5) Knowledge and understanding of VA diversity goals and objectives;

(6) Ability to communicate tactfully and cooperatively with the workforce and VA stakeholders in order to successfully maintain a quality work environment;

(7) Knowledge of HR policies relating to recruitment and outreach, Veterans and special hiring authorities;

(8) The ability to communicate with senior management officials, managers/supervisors and the workforce at large, verbally, and in writing; and

(9) Knowledge of Microsoft Office products such as: Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and other software programs.

## 7. SPECIFIC SEP DESCRIPTIONS

**a. African American/Black Employment Program (AAEP).** The AAEP is focused on identifying and eliminating barriers to EEO for African American/Black applicants and employees, in accordance with Title 5 CFR, Subpart B, 720.204; 5 U.S.C. 7201; and 38 U.S.C. 4214. The focus of the AAEP is to ensure that African Americans do not experience barriers to full employment within the VA workforce and to address cultural issues related to employment. The VA's AAEP Managers will monitor and assess the workforce in keeping with MD-715 (includes analysis of hiring, promoting, training, separations, etc.), EEO tenets, and ensures adherence with the VA's EEO and other workplace policies in order to maintain a quality work environment. Outreach activities and initiatives should be developed and implemented to address less than expected participation rates for African American employees at the senior pay levels, as compared to the pay distribution in the VA workforce. Annual AAEP action plans should be consistent with VA Human Capital Plans, MD-715 and FEORP Plans. Information on the VA's AAEP is available at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/aa.aspx>.

**b. American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) Employment Program.** The AI/AN Employment Program is focused on identifying and eliminating barriers to equal opportunity for applicants and employees who are AI/AN accordance with Title 5 CFR, Subpart B, 720.204; 5 U.S.C. 7201; and 38 U.S.C. 4214. The focus of the AI/AN Employment Program is to ensure that AI/ANs do not experience barriers to full employment within the VA's workforce and to address gender/cultural issues related to employment. The AI/AN Employment Program Managers will monitor and assess the workforce in keeping with MD-715 (includes analysis of hiring, promoting, training, separations, etc.), EEO tenets, and ensures adherence with the VA's EEO and other workplace policies in order to maintain a quality work environment. Outreach activities and initiatives should be developed and implemented to address less than expected participation rates of AI/ANs, as compared to the established benchmarks, in the VA workforce where they exist. Annual AI/AN action plans should be consistent with VA Human Capital Plans, MD-715 and FEORP plans. Information on VA's AI/AN Employment Program is available at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/aian.aspx>.

**c. Asian American-Pacific Islander (AAPI) Employment Program.** The AAPI Employment Program is focused on identifying and eliminating barriers to EEO for applicants and employees who are AAPI, in accordance with Title 5 CFR, Subpart B, 720.204; 5 U.S.C. 7201; and 38 U.S.C. 4214. The focus of the AAPI Employment Program is to ensure that AAPIs do not experience barriers to full employment within

the VA's workforce and to address gender/cultural issues related to employment. The AAPI Employment Program Managers will monitor and assess the workforce in keeping with MD-715 (includes analysis of hiring, promoting, training, separations, etc.), EEO tenets, and ensures adherence with the VA's EEO and other workplace policies in order to maintain a quality work environment. Outreach activities and initiatives should be developed and implemented to address less than expected participation rates of AAPIs, as compared to the established benchmarks, in the VA's workforce where they exist. Annual AAPI action plans should be consistent with Human Capital Plans, MD-715 and FEORP plans. Information on the VA's AAPI Program is available at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/aapi.aspx>.

**d. Disability Employment Program (DEP).** VA actively recruits and hires persons with disabilities and is committed to providing RA throughout the hiring and employment process. The Secretary of VA establishes annual hiring goals for persons with targeted disabilities. People with disabilities may be appointed to Federal jobs non-competitively through Schedule "A" appointing authority. VA hiring officials may also hire candidates through traditional competitive hiring processes. (Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act; Title 5 U.S.C. Subpart B, Chapter 31, Subchapter I-3102; 5 CFR 213.3102(t) and (u); 5 CFR 315.709.). For additional information about the DEP and/or hiring or accommodating persons with disabilities, contact the local SPPC in the Office of HR and/or refer to VA Handbook on RA. Annual Disabled Veteran Affirmative Action Program reports are developed by the Office of HR. DEP plans should be developed in conjunction with MD-715, FEORP and human capital plans. Information on the VA's Disability Program is available at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/pwd.aspx>.

**e. Federal Women's Program (FWP).** The FWP program is focused on identifying and eliminating barriers to EEO for women applicants and employees, in accordance with Title 5 CFR, Subpart B, 720.204; 5 U.S.C. 7201; and 38 U.S.C. 4214. The focus of the FWP is to ensure that women do not experience barriers to full employment within the VA's workforce and to address gender/cultural issues related to employment. The FWP Managers will monitor and assess the workforce in keeping with MD-715 (includes analysis of hiring, promoting, training, separations, etc.), EEO tenets, and ensures adherence with the VA's EEO and other workplace policies in order to maintain a quality work environment. Outreach activities and initiatives should be developed and implemented to address less than expected participation rates of women, as compared to the established benchmarks, in the VA's workforce where they exist. Annual FWP action plans should be consistent with the VA Human Capital Plans, MD-715, and FEORP plans. Information on the VA's FWP is available at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/women.aspx>.

**f. Hispanic Employment Program (HEP).** The HEP is focused on identifying and eliminating barriers to EEO for Hispanic applicants and VA Hispanic employees, in accordance with Title 5 CFR, Subpart B, 720.204. The VA's HEP Managers will monitor and assess the workforce in keeping with MD-715 (includes analysis of hiring, promoting, training, separations, etc.), EEO tenets, and ensures adherence with the

VA's EEO and other workplace policies in order to maintain a quality work environment. HEPMs should: (1) seek to conduct outreach to Hispanic Serving Educational Institutions, Hispanic professional organizations and/or Hispanic affinity groups to establish partnerships and expand targeted outreach efforts; (2) provide input for agency-wide affirmative employment and FEORP plans; (3) facilitate and/or promote professional development and mentorship opportunities for VA employees; (4) establish HEP committees where feasible to assist with implementation of HEP goals and objectives; and (5) sponsor events and training which promote cultural competency skills in the VA's workforce. Information on the VA's HEP is available at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/Hispanic.aspx>.

**g. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Program.** Since 2009, VA has included EEO protections for employees on the basis of sexual orientation in the Secretary's Annual EEO, Diversity, and No FEAR Policy Statement. In 2010, VA implemented an internal complaint process to provide formal redress for complaints based on sexual orientation. In 2011, VA added gender identity and parental status to the list of protected bases in the Secretary's Policy Statement (signed on June 13, 2011). In 2012, in response to EEOC's issued ruling, VA updated the Secretary's Policy Statement to reflect that gender identity is now a protected category under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. The most recent Policy Statement signed by the Secretary of VA on July 5, 2017, reemphasized previous added protections based on gender identity and parental status as well. This applies to all terms and conditions of employment, including recruitment, hiring, promotions, transfers, reassignments, training, career development, benefits, and separation. To complement this, VA developed and implemented an internal complaint process to provide employees with an internal avenue of redress for complaints based on the protected groups plus gender identity and sexual orientation. Office of D&I is leading the effort to increase education and awareness of the LGBT community by establishing a formal LGBT SEP. To enhance that program, an LGBT employee resource group under the auspices of the Diversity & Inclusion VA Council was also established. Additionally, VA continues to develop and provide cultural competency training in this arena for employees, supervisors, and managers, VA-wide. Information on the VA's LGBT Program is available at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/lgbt.aspx>.

## 8. OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES

a. Outreach activities should be held consistent with VA Human Capital Plans, MD-715 and FEORP. SEP outreach should promote VA as an employer of choice in local communities; increase applicant pools for civilian job vacancies and ensure connectedness with under-served, under-represented communities. To assist in this effort, hiring officials are encouraged to proactively engage in recruitment outreach, to utilize varied recruitment sources, and to consider special hiring authorities/appointments and internship programs when filling positions. These recruitment and hiring options allow managers to expedite selections and streamline the hiring process.

**b. Targeted Outreach.** Targeted Outreach, also referred to as Focused Outreach or Special Outreach, is a diversity management strategy that can be utilized to broaden standard outreach and recruitment efforts to attract qualified applicants from identified groups with less than expected participation rates, as compared to the established benchmarks, in the VA's workforce. As part of our efforts to establish and maintain effective affirmative programs of equal employment opportunity, in compliance with Section 717 of Title VII, and effective affirmative action programs, in compliance with Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act, we want to make sure that we cast a wide net to reach, encourage, and include applicants who may not be reached through standard outreach and recruitment methods. The ultimate goal is to achieve a qualified, diverse applicant pool. Targeted outreach strategies include advertising career opportunities in publications, media outlets, at job fairs or other events that serve minorities, women, and people with disabilities. Also, networking and partnering with internal and external customers, including, but not limited to: minority serving colleges and institutions; professional and community organizations; affinity groups; faith-based organizations; community centers; military transition programs; Veterans Employment Coordination Service; Center for Minority Veterans; and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment.

### **c. Special Hiring Authorities**

**(1) Schedule "A".** Schedule A is an appointing authority, or hiring authority. It is an Excepted Service appointment for persons with disabilities. The regulations guiding the Excepted Service – Appointment of Persons with Disabilities, Career, and Career-Conditional Appointments – are found in the CFR. The citation is 5 CFR § 213.3102(u). These individuals may have a certification of job readiness issued by a VA vocational rehabilitation official or a state or Federal agency official may certify disability and employability of an individual. Disabled Veterans may also be eligible for appointment under Schedule A. (See following paragraph regarding Disabled Veterans.)

**(2) Disabled Veterans.** Disabled Veterans enrolled in the VA's vocational rehabilitation program and those with 30 percent or higher service connected disabilities have special appointment eligibility (and may also be eligible under the other Veterans hiring authorities listed below).

**(3) Veterans Preference.** Some Veterans seeking Federal civilian employment are eligible based on their military service to receive consideration for selection before applicants not entitled to Veteran's preference. Applicants must submit a DD-214 as proof of qualifying military service, and if separated, a letter from the appropriate branch of the armed services or VA. Web site: <http://www.opm.gov/staffingPortal/Vetguide.asp>.

**(4) Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA) Authority.** Agencies have the authority to appoint Veterans in the excepted service under the VRA. This is a special authority under which agencies can appoint an eligible Veteran up through the GS-11 or equivalent grade level without competition. The candidate must meet specific eligibility



requirements along with the applicable qualification requirements. The agency must convert the appointment to career or career-conditional after 2 years of satisfactory service (5 CFR Part 307). Agencies may also hire VRA eligibles on temporary and term appointments (5 CFR Part 316).

**(5) Veterans Employment Opportunities Act of 1998 (VEOA).** As amended. Veterans with 3 years military service and anyone eligible for Veteran's preference may be appointed if determined to be among the best qualified candidates under merit promotion announcement open to applicants outside of VA (5 CFR § 315.611). Web site: <<http://www.fedshirevets.gov/job/shav/index.aspx#veoa>>.

**(6) Career Transition Assistance Program (CTAP or Interagency CTAP).** Two types of career transition programs exist. One is for employees before they separate, called the Career Transition Assistance Plan (CTAP). The other is for interagency assistance before and after separation, called the Interagency Career Transition Assistance Plan (ICTAP).

**(a) CTAP.** These services are to be provided to VA employees who either have been or are likely to be separated from Federal service due to downsizing. The goal of such services is to assist VA employees in taking charge of their own careers by providing them with the support they need to find other job opportunities, either with government or in the private sector. In VA, under these procedures, transition assistance services will be available to impacted permanent Title 5 competitive and excepted service employees as well as [to permanent] Title 38 hybrid [and full Title 38] employees. Special selection priority, when filling competitive service vacancies, will be available to displaced and surplus competitive service employees. Managers and supervisors, in their administration of the VA's CTAP, should be sensitive to the needs of impacted employees and should approve requests for reasonable excused absence to use career transition services.

**(b) ICTAP.** ICTAP gives an eligible, well-qualified employee selection priority over almost any other applicant from outside the agency. Under ICTAP, for example, a VA employee with a Reduction in Force separation notice could apply for a competitive service vacancy in the local commuting area at the Department of Education. In most cases, Education must select this well-qualified person for the position before choosing another applicant from outside the agency. Consult with HR for guidance. Web site: <[http://www.opm.gov/rif/employee\\_guides/career\\_transition.asp](http://www.opm.gov/rif/employee_guides/career_transition.asp)>.

**(7) Direct-Hire.** This authority allows agencies with delegated examining authority to hire individuals without regard to Sections 3309-3318 of Title 5, United States Code. Requests for direct-hire authority must be submitted by the agency's Chief Human Capital Officer (or equivalent) at the agency's headquarters level (5 CFR § 337.201). Agency requests may be addressed to the Associate Director for Strategic HR Policy.

Agencies can expedite OPM processing by faxing the request to the Division for Strategic HR Policy, at (202) 606-2329. Web site: [http://www.opm.gov/Strategic\\_Management\\_of\\_Human\\_Capital/fhfrf/FLX03010.asp](http://www.opm.gov/Strategic_Management_of_Human_Capital/fhfrf/FLX03010.asp).

**(8) Internship Programs.** Internship programs are the means by which VA can recruit, train, and develop talent to fill important VA roles. Internship programs can provide both short and long-term benefits to students and employers. Many of these programs can also help VA meet its goal of hiring a workforce that is diverse and culturally represented.

**(9) Diversity Internships.** VA Offices and administrations provide students an opportunity to intern in a variety of career fields including, but not limited to, medical related fields, human resources, communications, business/finance, contracting, Veterans claims examiner, information technology, cemetery administration, and other occupations in VA by serving as mentors during the sessions. Student skills, knowledge, experience, and abilities will generally be matched with a suitable intern position. It should be noted that NDIP interns are not Federal employees and do not serve in Federal positions. NDIP internship sessions are 10-15 weeks long. Spring and fall sessions run from January to May and September to December, respectively. The summer session is 10 weeks long, and runs from June to August. For more information, please visit at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/internship.aspx>. In 2010, VA established the NDIP, a centrally funded student internship program operated under an Indefinite Delivery- Indefinite Quantity contracting vehicle administered by the ODI to fund the VA's internships. For more information and an updated list of these programs, please visit ODI's Web site: See "DVA National DIP" document at: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/files/ndip-student-handbook.pdf>.

**(10) Pathways Program:** The Pathways Program, established in 2012, has three components:

**(a) The Internship Program** is for current students. It replaces the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) and Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP). The new Internship Program provides students in high schools, colleges, trade schools, and other qualifying educational institutions with paid opportunities to work in agencies and explore Federal careers while completing their education for more information visit at: <http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-authorities/students-recent-graduates/#intern=&url=intern>.

**(b) The Recent Graduates Program** provides developmental experiences in the Federal government. It is intended to promote possible careers in the civil service to individuals who, within the previous 2 years, graduated from qualifying educational institutions with an associates, bachelors, masters, professional, doctorate, vocational or technical degree or certificate from qualifying educational institutions. To be eligible, applicants must apply within the previous 2 years of degree or certificate completion except for veterans precluded from doing so due to their military service obligation, who

will have up to 6 years after degree or certificate completion to apply. For more information visit: <http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-authorities/students-recent-graduates/#intern=&url=intern>. For information about Federal employment for Veterans, go to OPM's Feds Hire Vets (external link) Web site at <http://www.fedshirevets.gov/>.

**(c) Presidential Management Fellows** is a prestigious 2-year training and development program for U.S. citizens with a recent graduate degree. Applicants undergo an arduous multistage assessment and testing process. After completing the program, participants may be placed as a permanent Federal employee. For information on this program, please visit: <https://www.pmf.gov/>.

**(11) Technical Career Field (TCF).** The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) 2-year training program recruits journeyman-level staff from colleges and universities to fill vacancies in technical career fields where current and future shortages are expected. Each intern is placed with an experienced preceptor in a VHA facility. Within VHA, the Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP) authority is used for the TCF.

**(12) VA Advanced Fellowships.** These post-residency fellowships—which number about 160 to 200 per year—are awarded to licensed and board certified or board eligible physicians to undertake study in emerging health specialties of particular importance to VA (for example, spinal cord injuries). For additional resources, please refer to the *Best Practices in Recruitment Outreach and Retention* guide contained in the appendix. See *Appendix B: Best Practices in Recruitment Outreach and Retention* Web site: <http://www.diversity.va.gov/products/files/RSG.pdf>.

## 9. REFERENCES

For a listing of all references and legal authorities associated with this Handbook, please refer to Directive 5975, D&I.

## 10. DEFINITIONS

**a. Affirmative Employment:** A proactive plan and associated strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers to EEO for groups who have faced barriers in the workplace. Plans typically consist of problem assessment, statistical data, and planned activities for promoting full inclusion and eradicating barriers to EEO.

**b. Data Analysis:** Analysis of statistical information related to the employment, advancement, and training of a particular demographic group. The analysis must be based on comparisons to an appropriate benchmark, in accordance with EEOC MD-715.

**c. Observance:** An event held in recognition of a specific demographic group. The event is aimed at increasing awareness of challenges faced by that group; to educate the workforce on the history or culture of that group; or to acknowledge and recognize contributions and achievements made by members of that group.

**d. Schedule A:** An Excepted appointment authority for Title V positions that allows people with disabilities to be hired non-competitively and subsequently be converted to career conditional employment status after a period of satisfactory performance.

**e. SEP:** A program established to address barriers to the employment, training, and advancement of a particular group based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability status, sexual orientation, or other demographic category. SEPs are intended to focus on the unique needs, barriers, or challenges facing a specific group in the workforce.

**f. SEP Manager (SEPM):** The employee who is appointed to manage or administer one or more SEPs. (See Appendix A for sample.)

**g. Targeted Outreach:** Efforts aimed at increasing outreach to specific demographic groups that have less than expected representation or low participation rates in the VA's workforce. Outreach is typically aimed at affinity, professional, community, civic, religious, educational institutions, organizations, or media that serve a particular demographic group.

## Sample SEPM Appointment Letter

Date

Name of Employee, Title of Employee

Name of facility

Address

Dear Dr./Mr./Ms.:

1. It is my pleasure to notify you of your appointment as the Special Emphasis Program Manager (SEPM) of the (Name of SEP Program). Your appointment is effective immediately and will remain in effect for a period of (one or two years), which will expire (Month, day, year.)

2. The purpose of the (Name of SEP Program) is focused on identifying and eliminating barriers to equal opportunity for applicants and employees, in accordance with Title 5 CFR. The overall objective of the VA SEP is to take affirmative steps to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices and policies and to ensure that all VA employees and applicants for employment have an equal opportunity to compete fairly in all aspects of their recruitment, hiring, training, upward mobility, career counseling, developmental details, promotions, and any other condition of employment.

3. As a SEPM, your responsibilities include:

- a. Be knowledgeable of the plans and reports, such as VA Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan; VA Hispanic Employment, Retention and Outreach Strategic Plan; Facility Management Directive 715; Facility Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Plan; and Facility Workforce Succession Strategic Plan.
- b. Be knowledgeable of the laws, regulations, policies, and other guidance that govern their assigned program.
- c. Contribute to the analysis of workforce data to identify any discrepancies in the hiring, pay distribution, promotion, training, awards, and retention of their targeted group, and create an action plan to address any identified discrepancies or barriers.
- d. Work with the EEO Manager to communicate to all senior level and hiring officials the SEP goals and objectives, best practices, accomplishments and program challenges.

**SEPM Appointment Letter, Name of Employee**

- e. Assist the EEO Manager or HR in targeted recruitment outreach activities that will add qualified individuals from the targeted group to VA's applicant and candidate pool.
  - f. Identify suitable organizations that can be contacted in the recruitment effort.
  - g. Assist in counseling employees, from the groups with low participation rates in the workforce or senior pay levels, on career opportunities and encourage them to participate in self-development and continuing education when suitable.
  - h. If requested by the EEO Manager and the facility Director, hold events or observances that provide information on barriers or challenges unique to the Administration or facility. Alternatively, the event may feature a speaker or a panel of employees who can share their experiences as federal employees, including any barriers they faced.
  - i. Providing educational events and material that provides increase awareness and understanding of the supported group to the general population.
4. These programs are managed as a collateral duty assignment; you are required to devote approximately 20 percent of your work time on SEP activities. Your official position description will be amended to reflect these new duties. Please ensure that your assignment and duties have been coordinated with and approved by your supervisor and other officials concerned.
5. At this facility, we work to promote the ideals of diversity, inclusion and awareness through our special events, educational forums/materials and variety of other activities. I am excited about your interest and future participation in a valued program.
6. Please refer to VA Handbook 5975, SEP, for additional information. If you have any questions concerning this appointment, please contact (Name of EEO Program Manager).

(SIGNATURE BLOCK for Facility Director)

cc:  
First level supervisor

December 28, 2017

VA HANDBOOK 5975.5  
APPENDIX B

**APPENDIX B**  
**Recruitment & Selection Best Practices Guide**

Can be located on the Office of Diversity and Inclusion's Web site at:  
<<https://www.diversity.va.gov/>>