

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** To revise Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) procedures regarding employee recognition and awards.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This handbook contains VA policy on recognizing and rewarding VA employees. The pages in this transmittal replace the corresponding pages in Part V and in the appendices to Part V of VA Handbook 5017, dated April 15, 2002. These changes will be incorporated into the electronic version of the VA Handbook 5017 that is maintained on the [Office of Human Resources Management and Labor Relations website](#). Significant changes include:
 - a. Revisions to coverage based on additional Title 5 positions being converted to Title 38 hybrid positions.
 - b. The development of Special Advancement for Achievement criteria for all Title 38 hybrid occupations.
 - c. Special Advancement for Performance nominations for Title 38 hybrid employees no longer requires review by a Professional Standards Board.
- 3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Employee Relations and Performance Management Service (051), Office of Human Resources Management and Labor Relations.
- 4. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5017, Employee Recognition and Awards.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** None.

CERTIFIED BY:

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

/s/Robert N. McFarland
Assistant Secretary for
Information and Technology

/s/R. Allen Pittman
Assistant Secretary for
Human Resources and Administration

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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 physicians, dentists, podiatrists, 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, [Title 38 hybrid employees] appointed under [] 38 U.S.C. 7401(3) or 7405(a)(1)(B). Excluded are [facility directors, chiefs of staff,] medical and dental residents appointed under authority of 38 U.S.C. 7406, and health care executives appointed under 38 U.S.C. 7306.

2. REFERENCES

- a. VA Directive 5017
- b. 38 U.S.C., chapters 73 and 74

3. PERSONS 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)

a. **Physicians and Dentists.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent physicians and dentists may be advanced within the grade from one to five steps **on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment providing they have demonstrated a high level of performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Such achievement may be demonstrated by professional attainments in health care management, education, research, or patient care worthy of national or international recognition.**

b. **Podiatrists, Optometrists and Chiropractors.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent podiatrists, optometrists, and chiropractors may be advanced within the grade from one to five steps **on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment providing they have demonstrated a high level of performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Examples of professional achievement are:**

(1) Outstanding and exceptional achievement as evidenced by receipt of official recognition from a recognized professional or academic organization.

(2) Significant professional attainment in research or contributions to podiatric, optometric, or chiropractic science and patient care worthy of publication in a national or international journal of high regard within the respective professions.

(6) Independently producing or serving as a principal assistant or major contributing member on research producing publishable results that advance patient care or medical science; or

(7) Attainment of specialty certification within the occupation. This does not include certification as a physician assistant by the National Commission on Certification of Physician's Assistants, which is a condition of employment as a physician assistant in VHA.

e. **Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent expanded-function dental auxiliaries may be advanced within their grade from one to five steps on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment provided they have demonstrated excellence in performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Such achievement may be evidenced by:

(1) Completion of significant research in either the biomedical or health care delivery area and publication of these results in a recognized journal.

(2) Recognition of outstanding and exceptional achievement by receipt of an official award and publication of these results in a recognized journal.

(3) Academic achievement by completion of a postgraduate degree in a related health care field.

f. **Pharmacists[,], Occupational Therapists[,], Physical Therapists, Certified Respiratory Therapists, Registered Respiratory Therapists, Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurses, Audiologists, Speech Pathologists, Audiologist-Speech Pathologists, Dieticians, Kinesiotherapists, Medical Record Administrators/Specialists, Medical Technologists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Biomedical Engineers, 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.** These occupations] may be advanced within [the] grade from one to five steps [on the basis of] professional achievement [above that expected for the grade level or assignment providing] they have [demonstrated] a high level of performance and [] potential for assumption of greater [responsibility]. [Please note that the granting of four or five steps should be reserved for only the highest personal achievements, and should be rare.] To the extent possible, all employees should be encouraged to seek developmental opportunities that could enhance their personal qualifications and be afforded fair and equitable opportunity to accomplish such achievements. [Examples of professional achievement include]:

(1) Professional [attainments in health care management, education, research, and patient care that are recognized at the national or international level, or are published in a recognized journal within the employee's occupation, or]

(2) [Attainment of certification by an appropriate national certifying body, unless such certification is a condition of employment within VA or meets the criteria in the qualification standard for promotion to a higher grade, or]

(3) [Academic achievement by the completion of a higher-level degree in a field related to the Department's health care mission, unless the degree is a condition for promotion under the applicable qualification standard, or]

(4) [Election to office in a professional organization at the state or national level in recognition of significant and distinguished contributions to the employee's occupation, or

(5) Recognition of outstanding and exceptional achievement by a professional or academic organization, or

(6) Independently producing or serving as a principle assistant or major contributing member on research producing publishable results that advance patient care or medical science, or

(7) Appointment to a university faculty position, or

(8) Appointment to a State licensing board or national certifying or accrediting body related to the practice of the employee's occupation.

NOTE: Individuals at the top step of their grade cannot receive an increase to base pay; however, they can be recognized with a Special Contribution Award per Part III of this handbook providing they have demonstrated a high level of performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility, and by meeting one of the examples of professional achievement stated above.

NOTE: Local facilities are encouraged to develop criteria to ensure consistent application of Special Advancements for Achievement.]

5. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT (INCLUDING USE OF STANDARDS BOARDS). See appendices B and C of this part.

6. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (SAP)

a. **Consideration.** Full-time, part-time and intermittent physicians [(other than chiefs of staff)], dentists, podiatrists, optometrists and chiropractors in Executive grade and below and registered nurses (other than nurse executives), 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 []SAP[s]. [Hybrid Title 38 positions] may be considered in accordance with paragraph f. []. [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.]

b. **Physicians, Dentists, Podiatrists, Optometrists, and Chiropractors.** An advancement of three steps, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be granted in lieu of and on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. Two steps may be granted when employee is at the eighth step of the grade. The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance as evidenced by the following examples:

(1) Demonstration of exceptional skills and aptitudes in the care and treatment of patients.

(2) Actual assumption of greater professional and/or administrative responsibility. Faculty appointment (post residency) at the rank of instructor or above may be considered as a greater responsibility.

(3) Significant research.

(4) Significant clinical contribution (including publication).

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. In addition, one or more of the criteria listed in chapter 4, paragraph 6 of part III of VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, must be met.

d. **Physician Assistants.** The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance and ability over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession or there must have been noted contributions in some aspect of health care. Criteria for one-step advancement will be demonstrated [by] superior performance as evidenced by:

(1) Assumption of a major responsibility in administering a major patient care program.

(2) Significant accomplishments associated with an academic program conducted in affiliation with the facility where the physician assistant is employed

e. **Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.** The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance and ability over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession or there must have been noted contributions in some phase of health care. Criteria for 1-step advancement will be demonstrated by superior performance as evidenced by:

(1) Demonstration of exceptional skills and aptitudes in the care and treatment of patients.

(2) Significant accomplishments associated with an academic program conducted in affiliation with the VA facility where the person is employed.

f. **Pharmacists, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Certified Respiratory Therapists, Registered Respiratory Therapists, Licensed Practical or Vocational Nurses, [Audiologists, Speech Pathologists, Audiologist-Speech Pathologists, Dietitians, Kinesiotherapists, Medical Record Administrators/ Specialists, Medical Technologists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Biomedical Engineers, 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].** [T]he 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 these occupations. [Special advancement for performance recommendations for Title 38 hybrid employees will not require review by a Professional Standards Board. Instead, recommendations will be forwarded directly to the appropriate approving authority listed in appendix A of this part.

NOTE: Individuals at the top step of their grade cannot receive an increase to base pay; however, they can be recognized with a Special Contribution Award per Part III of this handbook.]

7. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE. See appendices C and D of this part.

a. Physicians, Dentists, Podiatrists, Optometrists and Chiropractors

(1) Approximately 90 days prior to the employee's completing the waiting period for a periodic step increase or rate adjustment, the facility will receive from the Austin Automation Center (AAC), VA Form 97, Notice of Pending Personnel Action, in duplicate, identifying the employee and stating that the employee is eligible for consideration for Special Advancement for Performance. An advancement of three steps, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be granted in lieu of and on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. Two steps may be granted when employee is at eighth step of the grade. Human Resource Management Officers shall assure that appropriate officials will be notified in anticipation of eligibility. **NOTE:** *For physicians and dentists only: Local officials may approve a Special Advancement for Performance retroactive to the date of the periodic step increase when, through administrative error, the advancement was not granted on the due date.*

(2) The advancement shall be regarded as an equivalent increase.

(3) No two such advancements may be granted in succession within the grade.

APPENDIX A. PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE ADVANCEMENTS

1. Under Secretary for Health or designee

a. 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

a. Advancements of those covered by the scope of this handbook and VA Directive 5017 when Network Director is the appointing official.

3. Facility Directors

a. Advancements of physicians.

b. Advancements of optometrists.

c. Advancements of podiatrists.

d. Advancements of dentists (staff dentists, service chiefs and positions comparable to service chief) and expanded-function dental auxiliaries.

e. Advancements of chiropractors.

f. Advancements of [] nurse anesthetists.

g. [Advancements of all Title 38 hybrid employees. Facility directors may delegate the authority to approve advancements for Title 38 hybrid employees below GS-13 to the appropriate service chief or equivalent position].

h. [Advancements of physician assistants].

i. [Advancements of all Title 38 hybrid employees. Facility directors may delegate the authority to approve advancements for Title 38 hybrid employees below GS-13 to the appropriate service chief or equivalent position.]

j. [Advancements of occupational therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chief of staffs the advancements of occupational therapists in noncentralized assignments below GS-13].

k. [Advancements of registered respiratory therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chiefs of staff the advancements of registered respiratory therapists].

l. [Advancements of certified respiratory therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chiefs of staff the advancements of certified respiratory therapists]

PART V

APPENDIX A

m. Advancements of [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 to chiefs of staff the advancements of 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].

[n.] Advancements of licensed practical or vocational nurses. Facility directors may also delegate to nurse executives the advancements of licensed practical or vocational nurses.

[o.] Advancements of physical therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chiefs of staff the advancements of physical therapists.

APPENDIX B. PROCESSING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT

HOW TO PROCESS A SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT		
A		B
S T E P S	If an employee meets criteria specified in part V, paragraph 4 and is	then take the following steps
1	a physician, dentist, podiatrist, optometrist, chiropractor, registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, physician assistant, expanded-function dental auxiliary [and Title 38 hybrid employees].	At the time of achievement, the employee may be recommended for advancement. Recommendations will be made to the Standards Board by the [] service [chief or equivalent,] Chief of Staff [, or Associate Director] as appropriate. [If the employee is in an occupation for which the facility has designated a discipline leader, the discipline leader may recommend the advancement of employees in their discipline for consideration by the recommending official.]
2		The Professional Standards Board will make specific recommendation as to the appropriate number of steps to be granted. The board action with supporting justification will be forwarded to the HRM office.
3		The HRM office will forward the file through channels to the appropriate approving official.
4		Special advancements for achievement will be made effective on the first day of the pay period following administrative approval of the advancement.

***NOTE:** *If an optometrist meets criteria specified in part V, paragraph 4, the employee may be recommended for advancement at the time of achievement. Recommendations will be made to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board through the facility HRM office by the chief of service or Chief of Staff as appropriate. The Director of Optometry Service and the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board may be contacted at and communications should be directed to:*

*Director, VA Optometry Service (111E1)
 Veterans Health Administration
 103 South Gay Street
 Room 714
 Baltimore, MD 21202-4061
 Telephone: 1-410-779-1576
 Fax: 1-410-779-1581*

**APPENDIX C. DOCUMENTATION OF ADVANCEMENTS ON SF 50-B,
 NOTIFICATION OF PERSONNEL ACTION**

Category of Employee	Appointment Authority	Nature of Action	Legal Authority	VA Required Remarks
physicians, dentists, podiatrists, optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, physician assistants, expanded-function dental auxiliaries and nurse anesthetists	38 U.S.C. 7401(1)	“Administrative Pay Increase” “Administrative Pay Increase”	38 U.S.C. 7403	“Special Advancement for Performance” “Special Advancement for Achievement”
the same Title 38 occupations listed above	38 U.S.C. 7405(a)(1) (A)	“Administrative Pay Increase” “Administrative Pay Increase”	38 U. S. C. 7405(b)	“Special Advancement for Performance” “Special Advancement for Achievement”
[Title 38 hybrid employees]	38 U.S.C. 7401(3)	“Administrative Pay Increase” “Administrative Pay Increase”	38 U.S.C. 7403	“Special Advancement for Performance” “Special Advancement for Achievement”

PART V
APPENDIX C

Category of Employee	Appointment Authority	Nature of Action	Legal Authority	VA Required Remarks
[Title 38 hybrid employees]	38 U.S.C. 7405(a)(1) (B)	“Administrative Pay Increase” “Administrative Pay Increase”	38 U.S.C. 7405(b)(2)	“Special Advancement for Performance” “Special Advancement for Achievement”

APPENDIX D. PROCESSING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE

HOW TO PROCESS A SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE		
A		B
S T E P S	If employee meets the criteria specified in part V, paragraph 6 and is a	then take the following steps
1	physician, dentist, podiatrist, optometrist or chiropractor	Upon receipt of VA Form 5-97, Notice of Pending Personnel Action, the HRM office will forward the original VA Form 5-97 to the employee’s service chief through the Chief of Staff, or to the Chief of Staff, as appropriate. The duplicate copy of the notice will be placed in the pending file in the HRM office.
2		Upon receipt of the advance SF-50B, for the periodic step increase or rate adjustment, the HRM Office will remove the duplicate VA Form 5-97 from the pending file. This will be sent with SF-50B to the service chief through the Chief of Staff, or to the Chief of Staff as appropriate.
3		If the employee is recommended for advancement, recommendation will be submitted to the [Professional] Standards Board.
4		The [Professional] Standards Board will submit its recommendation on VA Form 10-2543, Board Action, to the HRM Office through the Chief of Staff.
5		The HRM office will forward the board action through channels to the appropriate approving authority listed in appendix A of this part.

HOW TO PROCESS A SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (CONTINUED)	
A	B
6	In the absence of recommendation for advancement, or if the recommendation for special advancement for performance is disapproved, the normal procedures for periodic step increases or rate adjustments will be followed. (See VA Handbook 5007, part III, chapter 5, paragraph 1.)
7	If the recommendation is approved, Standard Form 52, Request for Personnel Action, will be initiated by the operating official. The effective date will be the same as the due date for the periodic step increase or rate adjustment.
8	If the employee is recommended for advancement, the recommendation will be submitted to the appropriate [Professional] Standards Board by the chief of service or Chief of Staff, as appropriate.
9	See steps 4 and 5 above.
10	A Standard Form 52, Request for Personnel Action, will be initiated by the operating official once the recommendation is approved. The effective date will be the first day of the pay period following administrative approval.

***NOTE:** *To process special advancements for performance for optometrists, follow steps 1 & 2 shown above. In step 3, recommendations will be made to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board by the chief of service.*

[HOW TO PROCESS A SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (CONTINUED)]		
A		B
S T E P S	If employee meets the criteria specified in part V, paragraph 6 and is a	then take the following steps
11	Title 38 hybrid employees appointed under 38 U.S.C. 7401(3) or 7405(a)(1)(B)	If the recommendation is approved, Standard Form 52, Request for Personnel Action, will be initiated by the operating official. The effective date will be the same as the due date for the periodic step increase or rate adjustment.
12		If the employee is recommended for advancement, the recommendation will be forwarded directly to the appropriate approving authority listed in appendix A of this part.
13		A Standard Form 52, Request for Personnel Action, will be initiated by the operating official once the recommendation is approved. The effective date will be the first day of the pay period following administrative approval.]