

STAFFING

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** To establish a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) qualification standard for Marriage and Family Therapist, GS-101, appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3).
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This handbook contains mandatory procedures on staffing. This revision establishes the Marriage and Family Therapist occupation under VA's Title 38 Hybrid excepted service employment system in accordance with the "Veterans Benefits, Health Care, and Information Technology Act of 2006" (Public Law 109-461). Authority is given to the Secretary of the VA under 38 U.S.C. § 7402 to prescribe qualifications for occupations identified in 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3). The pages in this policy are to be inserted in part II of VA Handbook 5005. This new qualification standard will be incorporated into the electronic version of VA Handbook 5005 that is maintained on the [Office of Human Resources Management Web site](#).
- 3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Recruitment and Placement Policy Service (059), Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources Management.
- 4. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5005, Staffing.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** None.

CERTIFIED BY:

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**BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY
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*Use in conjunction with the OPM Standard.

[APPENDIX G42. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST QUALIFICATION STANDARD
GS-101
Veterans Health Administration

1. COVERAGE. The following are requirements for appointment as a Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT) in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). These requirements apply to all VHA MFTs in the GS-101 series, including those assigned to VA Medical Centers, Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), Vet Centers, Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) offices, and VHA Central Office.

2. BASIC REQUIREMENTS. The basic requirements for employment as a VHA MFT are prescribed by statute in 38 U.S.C. § 7402(b)(10), as amended by section 201 of Public Law 109-461, enacted December 22, 2006. To qualify for appointment as an MFT in VHA, all applicants must:

a. **Citizenship.** Be a citizen of the United States. (Non-citizens may be appointed when it is not possible to recruit qualified citizens in accordance with chapter 3, section A, paragraph 3g, this part.)

b. **Education.** Hold a master's degree in marriage and family therapy from a program approved by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) or have graduated from a nationally accredited program conferring a comparable mental health degree as specified in the qualification standards of those disciplines (Social Work, Psychiatric Nursing, Psychology, and Psychiatry). All additional course work taken to be accepted for MFT licensure must come from a nationally accredited program in one of the above areas.

NOTE: *A doctoral degree in marriage and family therapy from a COAMFTE approved program is considered to be a comparable mental health degree.*

c. **Licensure.** Persons hired or reassigned to MFT positions in the GS-101 series in VHA must hold a full, current, and unrestricted license to independently practice marriage and family therapy in a State.

(1) **Exception.** The appointing official may waive the licensure requirement for persons who are otherwise qualified, pending completion of state prerequisites for licensure examinations for a period not to exceed 2 years from the date of employment on the condition that MFTs appointed on this basis provide care only under the supervision of a fully licensed MFT. Non-licensed MFTs who otherwise meet the eligibility requirements may be given a temporary appointment as a graduate MFT under the authority of 38 U.S.C. § 7405(c)(2)(B). This exception only applies at the entry level (GS-9). For grades at or above the full performance level, the candidate must be licensed.

(2) **Failure to Obtain License.** In all cases, unlicensed MFTs must actively pursue meeting state prerequisites for licensure starting from the date of their temporary appointment. At the time of appointment, the supervisor will provide the unlicensed MFT with the written requirements for licensure, the date by which the license must be obtained, and the consequences for not becoming licensed by the deadline. Failure to obtain a license by the prescribed date will result in removal from the GS-101 MFT series and **may** result in termination of employment.

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(3) **Loss of Licensure.** Once licensed, MFTs must maintain a full, valid and unrestricted license to remain qualified for employment. Loss of licensure **will** result in removal from the GS-101 MFT series and **may** result in termination of employment.

d. **Physical Requirements.** See VA Directive and Handbook 5019.

e. **English Language Proficiency.** MFTs must be proficient in spoken and written English in accordance with VA Handbook 5005, part II, chapter 3, section A, paragraph 3j.

3. GRADE REQUIREMENTS

a. Creditable Experience

(1) **Knowledge of Current Professional Marriage and Family Therapy Practices.** To be creditable, the experience must have required the use of knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with current professional marriage and family therapy practice. The experience must be post-master's degree or above. Experience satisfying this requirement must be active professional practice, which is paid/non-paid employment as a professional MFT, as defined by the appropriate state licensing board.

(2) **Quality of Experience.** Experience is only creditable if it is obtained following graduation with a master's degree in marriage and family therapy or comparable degree in mental health (Social Work, Psychiatric Nursing, Psychology, and Psychiatry) from an accredited training program and includes work as a professional MFT directly related to the position to be filled. Qualifying experience must also be at a level comparable to marriage and family therapy experience at the next lower grade level. For all assignments above the full performance level, the higher level duties must consist of significant scope, administrative independence, complexity (difficulty) and range of variety as described in this standard at the specified grade level and be performed by the incumbent at least 25% of the time.

(3) **Part-Time Experience.** Part-time experience as a professional MFT is creditable according to its relationship to the full-time workweek. For example, an MFT employed 20 hours a week, or on a 1/2-time basis, would receive 1 full-time workweek of credit for each 2 weeks of service.

(4) **Fellowships or Post-Graduate Training.** Fellowship and post-graduate training programs are typically in a specialized area of clinical practice, e.g., group or family practice. Training as a fellow or post-graduate may be substituted for creditable experience on a year-for-year basis.

(5) **Practicum in a VA Setting.** A VHA practicum experience **may not** be substituted for experience, as the practicum (field placement) is completed prior to graduation with a master's degree in marriage and family therapy or comparable mental health degree.

b. **Grade Determinations.** In addition to the basic requirements for employment, the following criteria must be met when determining the grade of candidates.

(1) GS-9 Marriage and Family Therapist (Entry Level)

(a) Experience, Education and Licensure. GS-9 is the entry level grade for the GS-101 Marriage and Family Therapist series and is used for licensed MFTs with less than one year of experience (post-master's degree) **or** for MFTs (master's or doctoral level) who are graduates not yet licensed at the independent practice level. Unlicensed MFTs at the GS-9 level have completed the required education listed in paragraph 2b above, and are working toward completion of prerequisites for licensure. In addition, the candidates must demonstrate the KSAs in subparagraph (b) below.

(b) Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

1. Basic knowledge of human development throughout the lifespan, including interventions based on research and theory, family and system interaction formal diagnostic criteria, risk assessment, evidence-based practice and assessment tools.

2. Ability to assess, with supervision, the psychosocial functioning and needs of patients and their family members, and the knowledge to formulate, implement, and re-evaluate a treatment plan through continuous assessment identifying the patient's problems, strengths, readiness to change, external influences and current events surrounding the origins and maintenance of the presenting issue, and interactional patterns within the client system. This includes the utilization of testing measures where appropriate.

3. Ability to provide counseling and/or psychotherapy services to individuals, groups, couples and families in a culturally competent manner that facilitates change through restructuring and reorganizing of the client system with supervision.

4. Ability to establish and maintain effective working relationships with clients, colleagues, and other professionals, with supervisory guidance as needed. This includes the ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, with people from varied backgrounds, and to communicate the MFT perspective in interdisciplinary staff meetings while respecting the roles and responsibilities of other professionals.

5. Basic knowledge and understanding of existing relevant statutes, case law, ethical codes, and regulations affecting professional practice of marriage and family therapy. This includes the ability, under close supervision, to assist clients in making informed decisions relevant to treatment, including limits of confidentiality.

6. Ability to organize work, set personal priorities and meet multiple deadlines as assigned by the supervisor.

7. Ability to use computer software applications for drafting documents, data management, maintaining accurate, timely and thorough clinical documentation, and tracking quality improvements.

(c) Assignments. Individuals assigned as GS-9 MFTs are considered to be at the entry level and are closely supervised, as they are not yet functioning at the independent practice level conferred by independent licensure. MFTs at the GS-9 entry level are typically assigned to VHA program areas that

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do not require specialized knowledge or experience. Since these MFTs are not practicing at an independent level, they should not be assigned to program areas where independent practice is required, such as in a CBOC, unless there is a licensed MFT in the program area who can provide supervision for practice. GS-9 MFTs provide mental health services under close supervision and within the ethics and guidelines of the professional standards set by AAMFT.

(2) GS-11 Marriage and Family Therapist (Full Performance Level)

(a) **Experience, Education and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, the GS-11 full performance level requires completion of a minimum of 1 year of post-master's degree experience in the field of health care marriage and family therapy work (VA or non-VA experience) and licensure in a state at the independent practice level. In addition, the candidate must be licensed to practice at the independent practice level and must demonstrate the KSAs in subparagraph (b) below.

OR

A doctoral degree in marriage and family therapy or comparable degree in mental health from an accredited training program (see note in paragraph 2b) may be substituted for the required 1 year of professional marriage and family therapy experience in a clinical setting. In addition, the candidate must be licensed to practice at the independent practice level and must demonstrate the KSAs in subparagraph (b) below.

(b) Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

1. Knowledge of human development throughout the lifespan, interventions based on research and theory, family and system interaction, formal diagnostic criteria, risk assessment, evidence-based practice and assessment tools.
2. Ability to independently assess the psychosocial functioning and needs of patients and their family members, and the knowledge to formulate, implement, and re-evaluate a treatment plan through continuous assessment identifying the patient's problems, strengths, readiness to change, external influences and current events surrounding the origins and maintenance of the presenting issue, and interactional patterns within the client system. This includes the utilization of testing measures where appropriate.
3. Ability to provide counseling and/or psychotherapy services to individuals, groups, couples and families in a culturally competent manner that facilitates change through restructuring and reorganizing of the client system.
4. Ability to establish and maintain effective working relationships with clients, colleagues, and other professionals in collaboration throughout treatment regarding clinical, ethical and legal issues and concerns. This includes the ability to represent and educate others regarding the MFT perspective in interdisciplinary staff meetings while respecting the roles and responsibilities of other professionals working with the client.

5. Knowledge and understanding of existing relevant statutes, case law, ethical codes, and regulations affecting professional practice of marriage and family therapy. This includes the ability to assist clients in making informed decisions relevant to treatment to include limits of confidentiality.

6. Ability to provide orientation, training and consultation to new MFTs including clinical oversight of MFT graduate students, and/or provide supervision to pre-licensure MFTs.

7. Skill in the use of computer software applications for drafting documents, data management, maintaining accurate, timely and thorough clinical documentation, and tracking quality improvements.

(c) **Assignments.** This is the full performance level for MFTs. GS-11 MFTs are licensed to independently practice marriage and family therapy and to provide other mental health services within the ethics and guidelines of the professional standards set by AAMFT. They may be assigned to all program areas that provide mental health services. MFTs at this level may also be involved in program evaluation and/or research activities.

(3) **GS-12 Marriage and Family Therapist Supervisor**

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, completion of 1 year of progressively responsible assignments and experience equivalent to the GS-11 level which demonstrates knowledge, skills, and abilities that are directly related to the specific assignment. In addition, the candidate must demonstrate the professional KSAs in subparagraph (b) below.

(b) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities**

1. Ability to assess qualifications and abilities of current and prospective employees to include staff performance evaluation.

2. Ability to identify professional development needs of other MFTs and guide them in current practice guidelines.

3. Ability to collaborate with members of other disciplines and supervisors and to represent the profession both in and outside of VHA. This includes knowledge of the roles, contributions, and interrelationships with other disciplines.

4. Ability to administratively supervise in areas related to the provision of marital and family services. This includes knowledge of VA policy and procedures as well as fair, principled, and decisive leadership practices.

5. Ability to clinically supervise in areas related to the provision of marital and family therapy services to accomplish organizational goals and objectives.

(c) **Assignments.** MFT Supervisors typically supervise MFT professional staff which may include experienced MFTs and program coordinators. Supervisory MFTs at this level may be assigned to any program area and may be involved in program evaluation and/or research activities. Supervisory MFTs

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are licensed to independently provide marital and family therapy services which may include coordinator responsibilities and to supervise for licensure other MFTs within the ethics and guidelines of the professional standards set by AAMFT.

(4) GS-12 Marriage and Family Therapist Program Coordinator

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, completion of 1 year of progressively responsible assignments and experience equivalent to the GS-11 level which demonstrates knowledge, skills, and abilities that are directly related to the specific assignment. In addition, the candidate must demonstrate the professional KSAs in subparagraph (b) below.

(b) Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

1. Ability to organize work, set priorities, meet multiple deadlines, delegate tasks and facilitate team building.

2. Ability to manage and direct the work of others to accomplish program goals and objectives.

3. Ability to devise innovative ways to adapt work operations to new and changing programs, to develop staffing and budget requirements, and to translate management goals and objectives into well coordinated and controlled work operations and ensure compliance with pertinent VHA policies.

4. Ability to establish and monitor production and performance priorities and standards and program evaluation criteria.

(c) **Assignments.** MFT Program Coordinators are administratively responsible for a clinical program providing treatment to patients in a major specialty such as, but not limited to homeless Veterans program and mental health intensive case management (MHICM). They may be the sole mental health practitioner in this specialty at the facility and typically provide direct patient care services in the program area. They manage the daily operations of the program, develop policies and procedures for program operation and prepare reports and statistics for facility, VISN and national use. They may be responsible for the program's budget. At this level, GS-12 MFTs are licensed to independently provide mental health services and to supervise for licensure other MFTs within the ethics and guidelines of the professional standards set by AAMFT. Other assignments of equal complexity and responsibility may be approved on an individual basis where warranted.

(5) GS-13 Marriage and Family Therapist Program Manager

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, completion of 1 year of progressively responsible assignments and experience equivalent to that obtained at the GS-12 level which demonstrates knowledge, skills, and abilities that are directly related to the specific assignment.

(b) Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

1. Skill in assessing qualifications and abilities of current and prospective employees to include staff performance evaluation.

2. Ability to facilitate professional development of other MFTs and guide them in current practice guidelines.
3. Ability to contribute to professional development of staff members across a variety of disciplines within program specific area.
4. Ability to collaborate with leaders of other disciplines within facilities, the community, VISN, and VACO.
5. Skill in managing and directing the work of others to accomplish program goals and objectives, reporting requirements and ability to devise ways to adapt work operations to new and changing programs, staffing and budget requirements. This includes knowledge of VA policy and procedures as well as fair, principled and decisive leadership practices.
6. Ability to analyze organizational and operational problems and to develop and implement solutions that result in sound operation of the program.
7. Ability to clinically supervise in areas related to the provision of marital and family therapy services to accomplish organizational goals and objectives.
8. Knowledge of the roles, contributions and interrelationships of other disciplines within the program.

(c) **Assignments**

1. MFT Program Managers have broad program management responsibilities which include the operation and management of key clinical, training, or administrative programs. Responsibilities include development and implementation of programs, policies and procedures; oversight of administrative and programmatic resources; and monitoring of outcomes using a data driven quality assurance process. Decisions made affect staff and other resources associated with the programs managed and are made while exercising wide latitude and independent judgment. Such programs deliver specialized, complex, highly professional services that are important program components and significantly impact the health care provided to Veterans. They have responsibility for staffing, work assignments, budget, clinical services provided and admission criteria for the program, day-to-day program operations and all reporting requirements. Additionally, program managers at this grade generally have collateral assignments determined by the needs of the local facility, the VISN, and or VACO.
2. Managers may also have full responsibility for oversight of the professional practice of MFTs to assure the highest quality of mental health care provided to Veterans throughout the facility and affiliated clinics. This responsibility also includes insuring that all MFTs in the facility and its affiliated clinics meet the requirements of this qualification standard. At this advanced performance level, GS-13 MFTs are licensed to independently provide marital and family therapy services with program management responsibilities.

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(6) GS-14 Marriage and Family Therapist Program Manager Leadership Assignments (Care Line Manager/VISN/National)

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, completion of 1 year of progressively responsible assignments and experience at the GS-13 level which demonstrates knowledge, skills, and abilities that are directly related to the specific assignment.

(b) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to meeting the KSAs for GS-13 level, the candidate must demonstrate the KSAs below:

1. Advanced knowledge and skill in management/administration of multidisciplinary mental health programs at complex facilities and/or across multiple sites which includes supervision, consultation, negotiation, and monitoring.

2. Demonstrated global knowledge of mental health counseling practice to develop, maintain, and oversee programs in all settings.

3. Ability to provide consultation on policy implementation, qualification standards, counseling practice, and competency with medical center director, VISN, or national program managers that are consistent with organizational goals and objectives.

4. Advanced knowledge of evidence-based practices and mental health practice guidelines in multiple professional areas, and the ability to use these resources to guide the program staff in providing appropriate treatment interventions.

5. Ability to influence high level officials in adoption of, and conformance to, performance measures, monitors, and other policy guidelines.

(c) **Assignments.** Typical assignments include serving at a facility as a care line manager or at the VISN /VACO level. A care line manager is assigned to manage, direct, and oversee complex treatment programs within the medical center. Supervisory responsibilities cover multiple disciplines that may be separated geographically or in multi-division facilities. They have responsibility for staffing, work assignments, budget, clinical services provided and admission criteria for the program, day-to-day program operation, and all reporting requirements. Leadership positions at the VISN or national level are characterized by their scope, level of complexity, significant impact on VHA mission, significant importance to the VISN, etc. They direct a mental health, behavioral science, other patient care program component at the VISN or national level or direct organizational development at the national level. Duties are exercised with wide latitude, autonomy, and independence. They have delegated authority to determine long range work plans and assure that implementation of the goals and objectives are carried out. They may serve as consultants to other management officials in the field, VISN, or national level.

4. DEVIATIONS

a. The appointing official may, under unusual circumstances, approve reasonable deviations to the grade determination requirements for MFTs in VHA whose composite record of accomplishments, performance, and qualifications, as well as current assignments, warrant such action based on demonstrated competence to meet the requirements of the proposed grade.

b. Under no circumstances will the educational or licensure requirements be waived for grade levels GS-11 or above.

c. The placement of individuals in grade levels not described in this standard must be approved by the Under Secretary for Health, or designee, in VHA Central Office.

Authority 38 U.S.C. 7402, 7403]