

**SOCIAL WORKER QUALIFICATION STANDARD INCLUDING LICENSURE
AND/OR CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENT**

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook implements changes in licensure and/or certification requirements for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) social workers mandated by the Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2000, Title II, Section 205, Qualifications of Social Workers, signed November 1, 2000.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS AND/OR MAJOR CHANGES:** This revision of the Social Worker Qualification Standard removes the requirement that social workers be licensed or certified in the state in which they practice and provides a more flexible timeframe for newly-appointed social workers to obtain licensure or certification. Prior law required that social workers be licensed or certified within 3 years of appointment, without exception. The revised standard would require a social worker to obtain a license or certification within 3 years of appointment or within 1 year from the date the social worker meets the full requirements for licensure or certification in a state. This revision also rescinds the requirement for a Condition of Employment Letter. These changes make the licensure and/or certification requirements for social workers consistent with those of other Title 38 clinical personnel.
- 3. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** None.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Human Resources Management Programs and Policies Service (051) is responsible for the contents of this Handbook. Questions about state licensure or certification requirements should be addressed to the Director, Social Work Service, VA Central Office (110B).
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** VHA Supplement, MP-5, Part I, Appendix 338A (Qualification Standard for Social Worker, GS-185, dated March 30, 2000) and the required Condition of Employment Letter, Example A, under the VHA Qualification Standard for Social Workers, is rescinded.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION:** This document is scheduled for recertification on or before the last day of December 2006.

S/ Timothy Buckley for
Thomas L. Garthwaite, M.D.
Under Secretary for Health

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SOCIAL WORKER QUALIFICATION STANDARD INCLUDING LICENSURE AND/OR CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENT

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook sets forth the qualifications for appointment as a social worker in VHA. It includes recent changes to the licensure and/or certification requirements for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) social workers made by section 205 of Public Law 106-419, the Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2000, November 1, 2000.

2. AUTHORITY

a. Section 7402 of Title 38, United States Code (U.S.C.), Qualifications of Appointees.

b. Section 7402(b)(9) as amended by section 205 of the Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2000, requires that social workers employed in VHA must be licensed or certified to independently practice social work in a state. Prior to this change, social workers were the only VA health care professionals required to obtain licensure and/or certification in the state of practice. The licensure requirement could be waived for new hires, but social workers had to complete the process and obtain their state license and/or certification within 3 years. Licensing requirements vary from state to state. In some states it was not possible to satisfy the social work licensure requirements within the 3-year time frame. Under the revised standard, those social workers who are not licensed and/or certified at the time of appointment are now required to obtain licensure and/or certification within 3 years or within 1 year from the date they meet the state prerequisites for examination; whichever is longer.

3. SCOPE

In 1991, Congress enacted legislation requiring that VA social workers be licensed under state law. Some states exempt Federally employed social workers from the state licensure and/or certification requirements. It is long-standing Department policy that all social workers employed in VHA be licensed or certified to independently practice social work (i.e., at the Master's level), regardless of such state law exemptions.

a. All persons hired or reassigned to social worker positions in the General Schedule (GS)-185 series in VHA must be licensed or certified to practice social work at the Master's level.

b. VA may waive the licensure and/or certification requirement for persons hired or reassigned to social worker positions in the GS-185 series pending completion of state prerequisites for examination. VA social workers who are not licensed at the time of appointment must be licensed or certified at the Master's level, within 3 years of their appointment as a social worker or 1 year from the day they meet the full requirements of the state for licensure or certification, whichever is longer. Individuals who fail to obtain licensure and/or

certification within the allotted time will be removed from the GS-185 series. This may result in termination of employment.

c. Prior employment as a VA social worker GS-185 series will count toward completion of the state licensure requirements. For example, if a state requires 5 years of supervised practice before a social worker can sit for the exam and an individual was previously employed as a social worker in VHA for 3 years, that employee would have 3 additional years to obtain licensure or certification. Counting the 3 years of prior service, the social worker would complete the state requirements within 2 years. Under the revised standard, the social worker must be licensed and/or certified within 1 year from that date.

NOTE: Persons, who were permanently employed as a social worker, GS-185 series, in VHA on or before August 14, 1991, do not have to satisfy the licensure and/or certification requirement. These employees may be promoted, demoted, or reassigned within the GS-185 occupational series. However, if an employee initially retained in this manner leaves this job series, either voluntarily or through adverse action, the employee loses protected status. If subsequently hired or reassigned as a social worker in VHA, that employee would have to meet the full requirements (including licensure and/or certification) in effect at the time of reentry.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. The Director, Social Work Service, VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420, is responsible for interpretation of the social worker licensure or certification requirements.

b. The Human Resources Management Programs and Policies Service (051), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420, is responsible for interpretation of the requirements for qualification as a VA social worker as stated in the Handbook 5338.4.

QUALIFICATION STANDARD FOR SOCIAL WORKER**GS-185-9and/or15**

1. **Duties.** Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) social workers provide clinical social service to veterans and other VA beneficiaries in VA medical centers, clinics, domiciliaries, nursing care facilities and in community care settings. In performing these duties, VA social workers use such methodologies as casework, group work, community organization, and social work research. Social work supervisors provide professional guidance to social work staff and students. Some supervisory positions have primary responsibilities in the areas of administration, education or research.

2. **Basic Requirements For All Grades.** The basic requirements for employment as a VA social worker are prescribed by statute, Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) §7409(b)(9), as amended by section 205 of Public Law 106-419, November 1, 2000.

(1) All applicants for the position of social worker in VHA, to qualify for appointment, must:

(a) Have a Master's degree in social work from a school of social work accredited by the Council on Social Work Education.

(b) Be licensed or certified at the Master's level to independently practice social work in a state.

(2) **Exception:** VA may waive the licensure and/or certification requirement for persons who are otherwise qualified, pending completion of state prerequisites for examination. VA social workers who are not licensed at the time of appointment must be licensed or certified at the Master's level, within 3 years of their appointment as a social worker or 1 year from the day they meet the full requirements of the state for licensure or certification, whichever is longer. Those who fail to obtain state licensure or certification within the required time frames must be removed from the General Schedule (GS)-185 social worker series. This may result in termination of employment.

***NOTE:** Persons, who were permanently employed as social workers, GS-185 series, in VHA on or before August 14, 1991, do not have to satisfy the licensure and/or certification requirement. These employees may be promoted, demoted, or reassigned within the GS-185 occupational series. However, if an employee initially retained in this manner leaves this job series, either voluntarily or through adverse action, the employee loses protected status. If subsequently hired or reassigned as a social worker in VHA, that employee would have to meet the full requirements (including licensure and/or certification) in effect at the time of reentry.*

3. Education And Experience Requirements

a. **GS-9:** Must meet all basic requirements.

b. **GS-11:**

(1) In addition to meeting all basic requirements, 1 year of professional social work experience, equivalent to the next lower grade level, under qualified social work supervision. This experience must have been in a clinical setting and must have demonstrated the potential to perform advanced assignments independently. **NON-QUALIFYING EXPERIENCE:** Clinical social work experience obtained prior to completion of the requirements for a Master's Degree in Social Work does not satisfy this requirement. **NOTE:** *A clinical setting is a medical center, clinic (medical or psychiatric), a residential treatment center, or any other type of facility where social work participates in collaborative treatment and is identified with the medical profession.*

or

(2) In addition to meeting basic requirements, a doctoral degree in social work from a school of social work. A doctoral degree in social work from a school of social work may be substituted for the required 1 year of professional social work experience in a clinical setting.

c. **GS-12 and Above:** In addition to meeting all basic requirements, applicants must have 1 year of professional social work experience equivalent to the next lower grade level. This experience must have demonstrated broad knowledge of social work and superior skill and judgment in professional practice. For research, education and program administration positions, the 1-year requirement must have been in social work research, social work education (class or field instruction) or program administration, as appropriate. Except for social work research positions, the requirement for 1 year of experience in a clinical setting must also be met.

4. Research Positions

a. For social work research positions, applicants must have knowledge of research methods and have demonstrated competence or observed skill in planning, developing, and carrying through studies of social work practice or of social work processes.

b. For social work research positions at GS-13 and above, applicants must have successfully completed all the requirements for a doctoral degree in social work or have otherwise fully demonstrated ability to perform this work at the professional level. Those with a master's degree from an accredited school of social work and a doctorate in a related social science field will be considered for appointment or promotion to this grade.

5. Education Positions. For positions with social work educational responsibilities, the required experience must have included experience in planning or conducting a staff development program for graduate social workers, extensive experience in field instruction of social work students or teaching in an accredited school of social work.

6. Program Administration. For positions with social work administration responsibilities, the required experience must have included supervision or program management in a social work program.

7. Personal Qualities. Persons selected for appointment must be suited in personal qualities and temperament for this type of work. They must have a sense of responsibility, initiative, respect for clients and colleagues, and a desire to help people. They must possess sound

judgment and sympathetic insights in dealing with those they serve, as well as patience in accommodating the behavior of others.

8. Recency. Recency in experience, education, training or other participation in professional social work will be considered.

9. Supervisory Positions. The Qualification Standard for Supervisory Positions, in the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM's) "Operating Manual for Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions," Section IV-A-29, is to be used in conjunction with this standard.

10. Physical Requirements. Applicants must be physically and mentally able to efficiently perform the essential functions of the position without hazard to themselves or others. Depending on the essential duties of a specific position, usable vision, color vision, hearing, or speech may be required. However, in most cases, a specific physical condition or impairment will not automatically disqualify an applicant for appointment. The loss or impairment of a specific function may be compensated for by the satisfactory use of a prosthesis or mechanical aid. Reasonable accommodation may also be considered in determining an applicant's ability to perform the duties of a position. Reasonable accommodation may include, but is not limited to, the use of assistive devices, job modification or restructuring, provision of readers and interpreters, or adjusted work schedules. All positions involving Federal motor vehicle operation carry the additional medical requirements specified in Title 5 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 930, subpart A.

11. Driver's License. For certain positions, a current driver's license may be required from the state in which assigned.

12. Basis of Rating. Applicants are rated on a scale of 100 on the basis of education, experience, and training in relation to the specific position for which being considered. Ratings will be based on evaluation of personal and professional qualifications from the information furnished in the application. Confidential inquiries to the applicant's supervisors and other professional references may be made to obtain information concerning the applicant's knowledge, skill, and ability in social work practice, supervision, and administration.