

Neutrals Certification Program Handbook: What's New?

Effective October 22, 2010, VA Directive 5978.2: Alternative Dispute Resolution Neutrals Certification Handbook ("the Handbook") describes the procedures for VA's certification of Mediators and other ADR Neutrals. The Handbook rescinds and replaces VA's Mediator Certification Program (MCP). Its publication marks a milestone in VA's efforts to encourage the use of ADR, and its purposes align with the goal of the ADVANCE Program to provide employees with the opportunity to develop new skills and avenues of professional development.

The Handbook, along with fillable forms to apply for certification and recertification, can now be found on the Workplace ADR Program website at <http://vaww1.va.gov/ADR/NCP.asp>. For reference, the following summarizes the features of the Neutrals Certification Program (NCP) that were not present in the MCP.

1. **Expanded range of certifications:** The Handbook now offers the possibility of becoming certified in a range of ADR processes. In addition to certification as a Mediator, an employee can become certified as a(n):
 - Facilitator, who assists interpersonal communication among parties.
 - Group Facilitator, who assists interpersonal communication among groups of employees.
 - ADR Mentor, who has significant experience in one of the three above processes and can serve as a mentor to beginning Mediators, Facilitators or Group Facilitators.

The Workplace ADR Program will soon begin offering specialized trainings for these new certifications, to give all VA employees the ability to pursue these new options. It is strongly encouraged that currently certified Mediators augment their ADR abilities by obtaining new types of certification. Consult the Handbook for information regarding the requirements for certification in these processes.

2. **Increased continuing education and experience standards for certification/recertification as a Mediator:** An employee seeking first-time certification as a Mediator must first take 32 hours of Basic Mediation Training, then co-mediate or mediate 4 disputes and receive positive evaluations on all four of them. Of these disputes, at least 2 must be EEO-related, and all should be co-mediated with a Certified Neutral.

For Certified Mediators to be recertified, the requirements now include both training and mediation experience, rather than just one or the other. In order to qualify for recertification, the Mediator must, during the two-year period of being certified, take 20 hours of mediation skills training and co-

mediate/mediate 4 disputes. (Of these disputes, at least 2 must be EEO-related, all must result in positive evaluations, and all should be co-mediated with a Certified Neutral.) The Workplace ADR Program will offer many opportunities for training and experience to achieve these requirements. **Note that all Mediators currently certified under the MCP will have their certifications carried over into the NCP, with their existing expiration dates unchanged. When a currently certified Mediator seeks recertification in the future, he/she will have to fulfill the requirements of the Handbook.**

3. **Supervisor's support for Neutral's ADR work:** Formerly, Mediators had to obtain the approval of only their ADR Coordinators in order to become certified. Under the Handbook, Neutrals will need the approval of both their ADR Coordinators and their supervisors, in order to ensure supervisory support for the employee's ADR work.
4. **Quality Assurance provision:** The MCP made no provision for the decertification of Mediators. Under the Handbook, in the rare occurrence of a complaint of misconduct against a Neutral during ADR, the Deputy Dispute Resolution Specialist for Workplace ADR or designee can decertify the Neutral for good cause and after providing an opportunity for him/her to be heard. This assures the overall quality of the NCP, and gives clear guidance about how misconduct can be addressed fairly if necessary.
5. **Changes to ADRTracker:** Some features of the ADRTracker system will be modified to reflect the new procedures of the NCP. ADR Coordinators will now be able to view Neutrals' types of certifications while selecting individuals for cases, and Neutrals will gain access to new online resources to aid their work. These features are under development and will be announced when finished.

The Workplace ADR Program hopes that the Neutrals Certification Program created by this Handbook will contribute to both the use of ADR within VA and the continuing education of VA employees who take on the role of ADR Neutrals. The Workplace ADR staff is committed to assisting these employees to obtain any certifications they would like to pursue, and we look forward to a collaborative relationship to help strengthen VA's ability to resolve workplace disputes at the lowest organizational levels.

If you have feedback, questions or concerns, please contact Zeke Reich, NCP Coordinator, at zeke.reich@va.gov or (202) 461-0513. The primary email address for the Workplace ADR Program is WorkplaceADR@va.gov. We welcome and value your thoughts as we continue to administer and develop the Neutrals Certification Program.