

VA Pathways Companion Guide for Participants

VALU RESOURCES

December 2015



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Pathways Companion Guide for VA Pathways Participants

This Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) Pathways Companion Guide for Pathways Interns, Recent Graduates and Presidential management Fellows (PMFs) is a supplement to the three introductory modules about Pathways at VA provided on the Pathways Onboarding page on MyCareer@VA and can be used as a general reference throughout the program.

The guide is divided into the following sections:

1. [Introduction to Pathways](#)
2. [Introduction to the Pathways Program Management Office](#)
3. [Pathways Program General Information](#)
4. [Program Specific Information](#)
5. [Exit or Conversion](#)
6. [How to Succeed in Your Pathways Program](#)

More information about Pathways can be found on MyCareer@VA or by contacting the Pathways Program Management Office (PPMO) at VALUPathwaysSupportMailbox@va.gov.

1 Introduction to Pathways

1.1 What is Pathways?

In December 2010, President Obama signed an Executive Order (E.O.) 13562 to address the difficulties of recruiting and hiring students and recent graduates of all ages and backgrounds into public sector. The Order established the Internship Program for current students, and the Recent Graduate program for individuals who have recently graduated from qualifying institutions. The Order also reinvigorated the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program for those who obtained an advanced degree (e.g., graduate or professional degree) within the preceding two years. These programs are collectively called the Pathways Program.

In May of 2012, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued final regulations for Pathways in the Federal Registry. (77 FR 28194). The final rule to implement the Programs went into effect on July 10, 2012 and provided a 180-day transition period for federal agencies to convert their current STEP, SCEP, and PMF employees into the equivalent Pathways Programs under the provisions of their existing appointment. This transition period ended January 6, 2013. You can learn more about

the Executive Order, final rule, and other relevant documentation on their website:

<http://www.opm.gov/HiringReform/Pathways>.

1.2 Why Pathways at VA?

The mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is to fulfill President Lincoln's promise "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan" by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's Veterans. Whether we serve directly or indirectly, many of us care about supporting our veterans. As the need for support grows, so does the need to recruit a new line of dedicated, talented and educated individuals who can replace an aging federal workforce and continue to fulfill the mission of VA in the most effective ways possible.

Benefits to You:

To continue learning, growing and serving in an organization with locations across the United States and abroad and in many different career fields, have the dedicated support of senior leadership committed to recruiting and retaining top talent and, to enjoy a lifelong career in public service.

1.3 Frequently Asked Questions about Pathways

The PPMO has provided some frequently asked questions (FAQs) and answers about Pathways on the [Pathways Tracker](#) and VA Pulse "Pathways @VA" site. (See more information below.) If you have a question not addressed in the FAQs, please submit a helpdesk ticket on the Tracker.

2 Pathways Program Management Office

2.1 PPMO Purpose

This Pathways Program Management Office (PPMO) was established by VA's Learning University (VALU) to provide VA-wide governance, administration, management, marketing and support for Pathways Programs across VA. This centralized office offers best practices, resources, metrics and support to those invested in Pathways whether you are a student, recent graduate, supervisor, mentor, human resource professional, program coordinator or officer. In addition, the PPMO is tasked with making sure Pathways Program requirements are met by participants and those who support them.

2.2 PPMO Roles and Responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of those supported by the PPMO include participants, supervisors and/or hiring managers and human resource officials. More information about how the PPMO serves each of these groups is outlined below.

2.2.1 For Participants

If you were hired via the Pathways Program, the PPMO is here to support you, if needed, beyond the support made available by your local Pathways office or supervisor. We can help you understand your program requirements and what it will take to convert to a full-time position either competitively or non-competitively depending on your performance and goals.

2.2.2 For Supervisors

Supervisors who are given the responsibility to oversee one or more Pathways participant can look to the PPMO for help in understanding program requirements, how to be an effective supervisor and how to plan projects for Interns.

2.2.3 For Human Resource Professionals

HR professionals help Pathways participants get settled in your new positions and work with your supervisors and hiring managers to ensure that the positions for which you are hired provide the appropriate work and clarification of expectations and responsibilities. The PPMO provides support to HR professionals by answering questions and offering guidance on Pathways policies, procedures and metrics.

2.2.4 For Administrative Pathways Program Officers

Administration Pathways Program Officers (APPOs) manage the Pathways Program at the local level. The PPMO provides support to these individuals in the implementation and management of Pathways Programs to ensure continuity, best practices and compliance with VA policy.

2.2.5 For PMF Coordinators

The PMF Coordinator is responsible for administering VA's PMF Program, including coordinating recruitment and onboarding, and ensuring mentors are assigned and IDPs are put in place. The PMF Coordinator serves as a liaison with OPM by providing OPM with implementation updates, clarifying technical and programmatic issues, sharing best practices and lessons learned, and submitting applicable reports. The PPMO provides support to the PMF Coordinator by providing program and technical support as needed.

2.3 PPMO Resources

PPMO resources include the following:

2.3.1 MyCareer@VA

MyCareer@VA was developed by VA to offer current and prospective employees access to career exploration and development resources and tools. This site was an obvious choice for information about Pathways at VA and for beginning the onboarding experience.

Career Hub – The Career Hub allows participants to create an account where you can establish goals, record accomplishments and save results when using the Career Fit and Career Mapping tools. A VA email account is not needed to set up and access a Career Hub account. This means you can get started right away exploring MyCareer@VA resources and how it might help you in your Pathways program. Once the Career Hub account is set up, use the goal, “Internship to Career” to view Pathways specific objectives and link to helpful resources.

Career Fit and Career Mapping Tools - The Career Fit and Career Mapping tools can help you determine the types of work activities that fit your talents and interests. For example, with the Career Fit tool, you can fill out a questionnaire about your work interests and the results match up with VA jobs that may be a good fit.

Career Development Training Series - MyCareer@VA has put together a series of training videos titled “[VA Career Development 101, 201 and 301](#).” Watch these videos and take the time to do the activities associated with them as part of the Pathways development activities.

2.3.2 Pathways Tracker

This Pathways Tracker is a secure online database and dashboard designed to help those involved directly with Pathways to manage their experience, track progress and view results. Participants are required to register on the Tracker and to invite your supervisor and HR representative to register as well in order to complete certain forms and track progress. Mentors are also invited to set up an account although it is optional.

The Pathways Tracker requires a VA email address to register. If you don’t have an account yet, you should contact the PPMO for assistance. It is recommended that you set up a Pathways Tracker account as soon as you get your VA email address. Use the Tracker to communicate with your supervisor and other officials connected to your account regarding important actions like updating and signing forms, and tracking and storing documents.

2.3.3 Pathways Programs Master Checklists

The **Master Checklists** provide an overview of major actions associated with each Pathways program from the first day through exit/and or conversion into a fulltime position. These checklists can be accessed via MyCareer@VA or on the Pathways Tracker.

2.4 PPMO Contact Information

It is best to contact the PPMO via the helpdesk on the Pathways Tracker for programmatic or technical questions. Otherwise, if you do not have a VA email address you can contact the PPMO through the following email: VALUPathwaysSupportMailbox@va.gov.

3 Pathways Programs General Information

The following is more detailed information about each of the Pathways Programs. If you do not find the information you are looking for, please refer to the Resources section of the Pathways Tracker, submit a helpdesk ticket or contact the PPMO directly for assistance.

3.1 Pathways Internship Program

The Pathways Internship Program is for current students and individuals accepted for enrollment in a qualifying educational program. It is designed to provide students enrolled in a wide variety of educational institutions, from high school to graduate school, with opportunities to work in agencies and explore Federal careers while still in school and to get paid for the work performed.

3.2 Pathways Recent Graduate Program

The Pathways Recent Graduates Program is for individuals who have recently graduated from a qualifying educational institution or program. This developmental program is one year in length with the possibility to convert into the same position depending on performance, the successful completion of program requirements and have met the OPM qualification standard for the position to which the Recent Graduate will be converted. On a limited basis, OPM may authorize a two year Recent Graduates program for specified occupational series, based on the rigor and intensity of the coursework and on-the-job training requirements.

3.3 Pathways Presidential Management Fellows Program

The Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program has been the Federal Government's premier leadership development program for advanced degree candidates for over three decades. It was designed to attract to the federal service talented men and women who demonstrated academic excellence, possessed management and leadership potential, and had a clear interest and commitment to public service. To learn more about the PMF program visit www.pmf.gov.

3.4 Pathways Program Requirements

The eligibility, program and conversion requirements for each of the VA Pathways Programs is available on MyCareer@VA at <https://mycareeratva.va.gov/va-pathways-program-requirements>.

3.5 Pathways Program Forms

Each Pathways participant must complete certain Pathways forms under the supervision of your supervisor. On-line versions of these forms are available on the Pathways Tracker once you register. Registration allows the forms to be pre-populated with your profile information and connects you to your supervisor, HR official and mentor if appropriate. (Your supervisor and HR official must already have a Tracker account in order to be added to your profile. If they don't ask them to set one up.) Filling out the forms on-line provides an easy and effective way to track and report progress.

Details about each of the forms is outlined below:

3.5.1 Pathways Participant Agreement

Each Pathways participant must sign a Pathways Participant Agreement (PPA) within 10 days of appointment date. The PPA serves as a contract between you and your supervisor and includes details around roles and responsibilities, work schedules, training and program requirements.

The PPA is the first document to be signed after setting up the Pathways Tracker profile. The PPA's for each program differ. Make sure to check that you are signing the one tailored to your program. (If you registered as an intern, you should automatically be presented with the intern PPA form.) If, for any reason, you are not able to sign your PPA within the required timeframe, please talk with your HR representative and then indicate the purpose for the delay on your PPA.

Ask your supervisor about the PPA when you come onboard and set up a meeting with him or her to discuss it as soon as it convenient for both of you.

3.5.2 Individual Development Plan

An Individual Development Plan (IDP) is required for Recent Graduates and PMF's and recommended by VA for Interns with an appointment of one year or more. If you are on a shorter appointment, you are encouraged to discuss development objectives and activities with your supervisor and include those on the PPA.

The IDP process is intended to identify the skill gaps and competencies or groups of skills you would like to develop during your program and that are associated with the position you would want to convert into if so desired given you meet all requirements and qualifications. (The Pathways Programs do not guarantee placement.) This "target" position is most often your current position though it could also be another position outside your current job series. (Review conversion options stated on the Pathways Job Opportunity Announcement (JOA) for more information.)

If you are required to do an IDP, work with your supervisor to develop an initial draft within the first 45 days after your appointment date. Once your supervisor approves the initial draft, you can update and edit your IDP over time. When you are done with your training, you will submit the final IDP to your supervisor and others as required for final approval.

To learn more about IDP best practices or access some helpful career development tools, visit MyCareer@VA. You can also contact the PPMO to request an IDP template or ask assistance if for any reason you are not able to access the on-line form. However, once you access the on-line form, transfer the information to the Tracker in order to ensure consistency, track progress and make final production of documentation easier and most effective.

IDPs for Interns –

An IDP is not required for Interns under the Pathways program. However, it is recommended that supervisors who work with Interns with an appointment of one year or more help the Intern set up an IDP within the first 45 days of appointment date.

IDPs for Recent Graduates –

Recent Graduates are required to complete and record a minimum of 40 hours of formal, interactive training during your one year appointment. When complete, the IDP is formally submitted and approved by your supervisor.

IDPs for PMFs –

PMFS are required to complete a minimum of 80 hours of formal, interactive training per year for a minimum of 160 hours over two years. Note, even if you complete 100 hours of training in the first year, you must still complete 80 hours in the second year. When complete, the IDP is formally approved by the supervisor as well as the PMF coordinator.

Development assignments are required by the PMF program. Each PMF must complete at least one assignment that can last anywhere from four to six months in duration. This learning opportunity is intended to explore the occupation or functional discipline you are currently interested in converting to at the end of your program, and should include full-time management and/or technical responsibilities consistent with your current position description and IDP objectives. This assignment may be within VA or in another federal agency. Also, the assignment must be outside the PMFs direct chain of command.

As an alternative, PMFs may participate in a federal-wide initiative or other Presidential or Administration initiatives that provide you with the experience you would have gained through the developmental assignment. These initiatives must be approved by the PMF Coordinator.

Rotational assignments are shorter-term placements in occupations or functional areas different from the one that the PMF would most likely convert to. These rotations are intended to provide the PMF with a broader perspective of their mission. These assignments can be within their office or headquarters but must be outside the direct chain of command. Rotational assignments at VA are optional.

3.6 Performance and Evaluation

Both Recent Graduates and PMFs are expected to have a Performance Plan as part of being a VA employee. Interns who are in an internship that lasts 90 days or less in a 12 month period do *not* need one though their supervisor should still communicate in writing performance expectations. These can be addressed in the PPA. You should ask about the Performance Plan and discuss it with your supervisor to determine when you will be evaluated and to learn more about the Performance Standards at VA.

3.7 Mentors

Only Recent Graduates and PMFs require a mentor be assigned to them within 90 days of appointment date. However, for interns with longer assignments, mentors are encouraged. You can ask your mentor to register on the Pathways Tracker so they can view your progress if this is something both of you agree to. Mentors are not required to register on the Tracker.

4 Program Specific Information

4.1 Internship Program

The following items relate specifically to the Pathways Internship Program. For more information, contact the PPMO for assistance.

4.1.1 *Work Schedules*

Interns may work a full-time or part-time schedule. Your VA office is responsible for establishing a formally-arranged schedule of school and work that does not interfere with their academic schedule or performance and so that completion of the educational requirements and the Internship Program are accomplished in a reasonable timeframe. The work schedule is recorded in the PPA.

4.1.2 *Breaks in Program*

A “Break in Program” is defined as a period of time when an Intern is working but is unable to go to school, or is neither attending classes nor working in VA. While breaks in program are not common, they are permissible in certain circumstances. Check with your HR representative to see if there is written process to receive and consider a request for a break in the Internship Program.

5 Exit and or Conversion

Service in the Pathways Programs does not guarantee further employment in VA or in any other federal agency or department. Under any circumstance, non-competitive conversion into a term or permanent competitive service position is at the discretion of VA. However, Pathways is designed to help give you a leg up to a federal career and there are a variety of ways

Conversion eligibility requirements are available on MyCareer@VA at <https://mycareeratva.va.gov/va-pathways-program-requirements>.

5.1 Separations

Separations are actions that end employment with an agency. The most common forms of separations of Pathways participants are resignations and terminations.

5.1.1 Resignations

You may resign at any time during your Program. When doing so, you should submit a resignation letter that states the effective date of resignation and provides both forwarding contact information (address, phone number, email) and, if desired, a reason for the resignation.

5.1.2 Terminations

Participants may be terminated from their Pathways Program for misconduct, poor performance or “suitability” issues outlined in the [VA Employee Handbook and Guide to Processing Personnel Actions](#). Additional factors may include failure to maintain good academic standing as defined by your academic institution, provide adequate proof of current academic status during the allotted timeframe or meet the requirements set forth in the PPA.

6 How to Succeed in Your Pathways Program

In the busy day-to-day of working, it is easy to forget that you are in a program designed to help “test-drive” a career, develop skills, get exposed to the business environment and gain valuable references and network contacts. It’s can also be easy for your supervisor to forget that he or she is as much a guide and teacher as much as a manager and leader.

Ideally, this experience should be focused your partnership and learning where questions are welcome and communication key. The following are suggestions for laying the groundwork for success.

6.1 Set the Stage for Success

One of the most common breakdowns between employees and supervisors is the lack of clarity about responsibilities and expectations. In the rush of onboarding and the eagerness to please, assumptions can be made by both parties that if not checked, can lead to confusion or even disappointment. In addition, when we don’t know what we are being evaluated on or talk about “indicators for success” it can be difficult to establish priorities.

The PPA should be signed within the first 10 days of coming on board. This is an excellent opportunity to review responsibilities, ask clarifying questions and establish indicators for success. Setting the stage for this behavior at the beginning of the program helps to foster a good working relationship as does understanding that it can take time to feel comfortable in a new situation.

6.2 Know What You Bring to the Table

We all want to fit in and be accepted. We also want to be true to who we are as individuals. One way to do both is to know what you bring to the table and to communicate that to others. If you struggle with how to articulate this in the workplace, the following are a few quick tips for getting started:

List your top five personality traits (what others might say about you). Examples: Determined, dependable, persistent, organized, precise, cooperative, logical, resourceful, funny, honest, sympathetic, etc.

List your top five values (what you care most about). Examples: Helping others, learning new things, challenging myself physically, being with my family, being creative, making a contribution, etc.

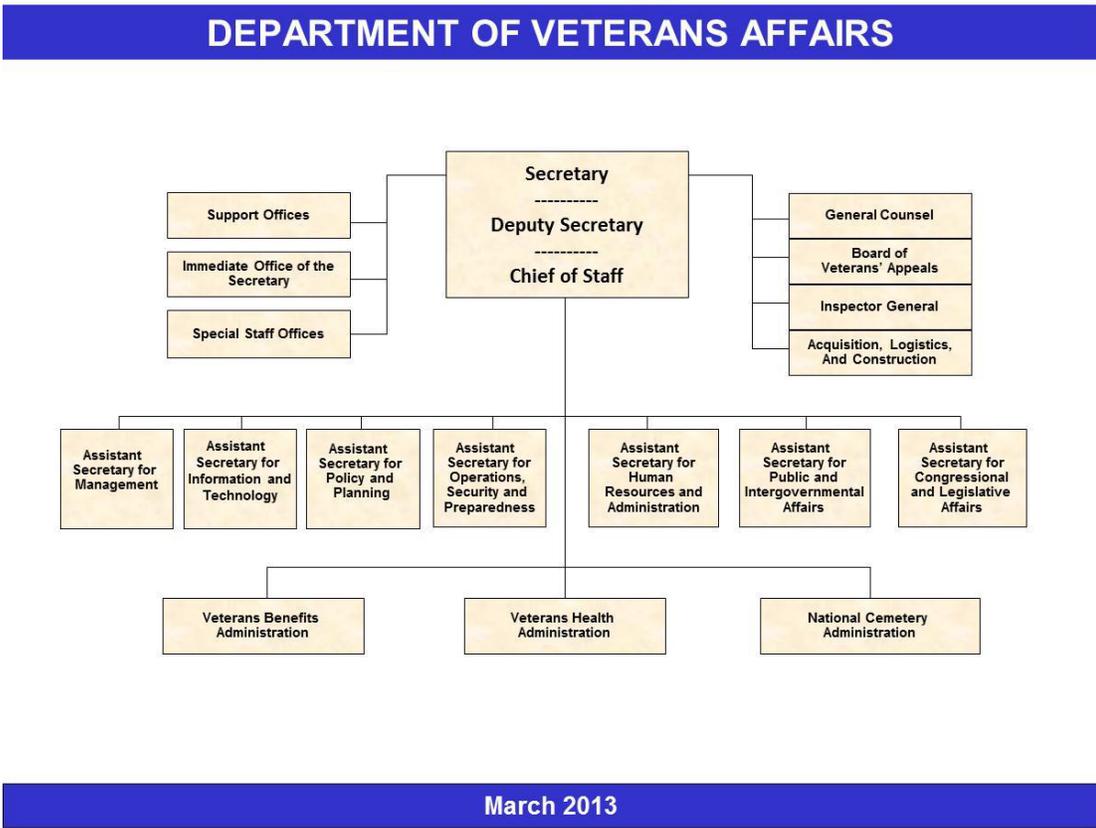
List your top five interests (what you love doing). Examples: designing, writing, calculating, teaching, working with my hands, creating, etc.

Take time at the beginning of the Pathways experience to talk about some of the items listed above. Brainstorm ways to leverage strengths and build confidence. The IDP is an ideal place to put this brainstorming into action. Once you have your list, keep it with you. When you feel off center or lacking confidence, refer to the list and remember that these are often what define your strengths and build your confidence.

6.3 Know Where You Fit In

Our personality, values and interests are three major factors that can determine a good fit in relation to the organization, team and work we choose. We might enjoy the work but struggle to get along with team members or we don't feel connected to the culture. One of the benefits of Pathways is to learn more about how we fit inside the organization and the broader world of work. Learn about the overall structure of VA, the culture, major accomplishments and challenges. This research can help you feel more connected and informed. A current organizational chart of VA is included for reference.

We recommend that you use the career development tools on MyCareer@VA to make connections between personal interests and VA positions that require those skills. Set up information interviews with others outside your current area of focus to learn more about what they enjoy about their job and why.



The chart above is an organization chart for VA as of March, 2013.

6.4 Stay Proactive

The Pathways experience is first and foremost a developmental or learning opportunity. Both participants and supervisors can learn from one another by asking questions, inviting feedback and being willing to listen and work through challenges. Plan ahead and know what is expected in terms of completing program requirements so everyone knows what you need to do whether it is to finalize and sign the IDP, pull together a conversion package or write a letter of recommendation.