

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

1. **REASON FOR ISSUE:** To revise Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy regarding employee recognition and awards, including an update resulting from the implementation of the “VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017” (Public Law 115-46, dated August 12, 2017), as it relates to cash awards for physician assistants.
2. **SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This policy update rewrites Part V in its entirety. The following is a general overview of the changes:
 - a. Special Advancement for Achievement (SAA) is updated to provide more specific information about the types of recognition available for this award and the justification needed to support this achievement.
 - b. Abolishes Professional Standards Board review for hybrid-title 38 employees recommended for an SAA.
 - c. Special Advancement for Performance is updated to ensure that this type of award is used in recognition of job-related performance.
 - d. Additional guidance regarding cash awards for specialty certifications received by registered nurses and certified registered nurse anesthetists. As a result of the enactment of Section 212 of Public Law 115-46, physician assistants have been included in this provision of the handbook.
 - e. More information about the technical review to be conducted by Human Resources when processing the types of awards covered by this part.
 - f. Clarification regarding the timely processing of awards covered by this part.
3. **RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** Employee Relations and Performance Management Service (051), Office of Human Resources Management.
4. **RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5017, “Employee Recognition and Awards.”
5. **RESCISSION:** None.

CERTIFIED BY:

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

/s/
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**[EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS
PART V. TITLE 38 SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS AND CASH AWARDS**

CONTENTS

| PARAGRAPH | PAGE |
|---|------|
| 1. SCOPE..... | V-1 |
| 2. REFERENCES..... | V-1 |
| 3. OFFICIALS AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE ADVANCEMENTS..... | V-1 |
| 4. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR CERTAIN TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES..... | V-1 |
| 5. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR CERTAIN TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES..... | V-6 |
| 6. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR HYBRID- TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES..... | V-8 |
| 7. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR HYBRID-TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES..... | V-13 |
| 8. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE..... | V-15 |
| 9. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE..... | V-16 |
| 10. CRITERIA FOR CASH AWARDS FOR FULL-TIME, PART-TIME, AND INTERMITTENT REGISTERED NURSES AND NURSE ANESTHETISTS APPOINTED UNDER 38 U.S.C. §§ 7306, 7401(1) AND 7405..... | V-18 |

APPENDICES

| | |
|--|-------|
| V-A. OFFICIALS AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE ADVANCEMENTS..... | V-A-1 |
|--|-------|

PART V. TITLE 38 SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS AND CASH AWARDS

- 1. SCOPE.** This part contains policies, procedures, and guidelines governing the advancement of 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 hybrid-title 38 employees appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3) or § 7405(a)(1)(B). Excluded are physicians and dentists appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(1) and § 7405(a)(1); facility directors, chiefs of staff, medical and dental residents appointed under 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. OFFICIALS 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 FOR CERTAIN TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES.**
 - a. Full-time, part-time, and intermittent podiatrists, optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, physician assistants and expanded-function dental auxiliaries appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(1) or § 7405(a) may be advanced within grade from one to five steps, on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment, provided that they have demonstrated a high level of performance and assumption of greater responsibility, as outlined in paragraph b below.
 - b. The following is a list of the types of professional accomplishment that may be achieved, and the criteria required. An employee is not eligible for a Special Advancement for Achievement if the professional accomplishment was achieved prior to appointment or as a result of VA funding, e.g., paying for training, paying for certification.
 - (1) **Certification.** Attainment of certification by an appropriate national certifying body, unless such certification: is a condition of employment with VA for the current position held; is a qualification requirement for promotion to a higher grade; or is used to justify a higher-level grade or assignment. An employee may only receive an SAA for attainment of specialty certification the first time that it is received; it cannot be granted for a renewal or after a lapse in the certification.
 - (a) A technically appropriate certification must meet all of the criteria below:
 - i. Be issued by a national certifying body; and
 - ii. Required attendance, virtually or in person, at a training class or self-taught

coursework/reading or other training required by the national certifying body; and

iii. Contain evidence that the employee passed a test at the end of the training program or successfully passed an examination as part of the certification process.

NOTE: Local, state, or regional certification programs and certification for work experience based upon receipt of another certification is not acceptable.

(b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraphs 4.b.(1)(a)i through iii must be included in the request for an SAA.

(c) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:

i. That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. The most recent rating of record is not sufficient to support this requirement unless it was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and

ii. How the knowledge gained by obtaining the certification will benefit VA and/or the duties that are being assumed for which the certification was obtained. Examples of these accomplishments must be provided; and

iii. How the employee will apply the knowledge in the performance of his/her current job duties.

(2) **Election to Office.** After serving a minimum of one term in an office in a professional organization, at the state or national level, in recognition of significant and distinguished contributions to the employee's occupation.

(a) A technically appropriate accomplishment must:

i. Include a letter from the professional organization appointing the employee to office for a designated period of time; and

ii. Include specific information about the employee's accomplishments made while serving in office with the confirmation of these accomplishments by the Chairperson/President, or other appropriate official if the employee is serving as the Chairperson/President of the professional organization; and

iii. Include information confirming the employee has completed at least one term in the office of the professional organization.

(b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraphs 4.b.(2)(a)i through iii must be included in the request for an SAA.

(c) This award will only be given after completion of at least one term. Only one SAA will be issued for this accomplishment, regardless of the number of terms served.

(d) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:

- i. That during the duration of the term with the professional organization and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. Previous ratings of record may be used to support this level of rating during the term in which he/she served; and
- ii. The employee's current level of performance unless the most recent rating of record was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and
- iii. How the employee's accomplishments while serving with the professional organization have benefited VA. Examples of these accomplishments must be provided.

(3) Appointment to State Licensing Board (SLB) or National Certifying/Accrediting Body. After serving a minimum of one term on a State Licensing Board or with a National Certifying/Accrediting Body related to the practice of the employee's occupation.

(a) A technically appropriate accomplishment must:

- i. Include a letter from the SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body appointing the employee to the position for a designated period of time; and
- ii. Include specific information about the employee's accomplishments made while serving in office with the confirmation of these accomplishments by the Chairperson/President, or other appropriate official if the employee is serving as the Chairperson/President of the SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body; and
- iii. Include information confirming the employee has completed at least one term in the SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body.

(b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraphs 4.b.(3)(a)i through iii must be included in the request for an SAA.

(c) The employee cannot receive consideration for an SAA until he/she has completed at least one term on an SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body. Only one SAA will be issued for this accomplishment, regardless of the number of terms served.

(d) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:

- i. That during the duration of the term with the SLB or the National Certifying/Accrediting Body and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. Previous ratings of record may be used to support this level of rating during the term in which the employee served; and

- i. From an educational institute of higher learning accredited by the U.S. Department of Education; and
 - ii. In a health care field related to the individual's current occupation with VA.
 - (b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraph 4.b.(5)(a)i and ii must be included in the request for an SAA.
 - (c) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of SAA:
 - i. That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. The most recent rating of record is not sufficient to support this requirement unless it was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and
 - ii. How the knowledge gained by obtaining the higher level of education will benefit VA; and
 - iii. How the employee will apply the knowledge in the performance of his/her job duties.
- (6) **Professional Award.** Receipt of a non-monetary professional award, at the state or national level, in recognition of significant contributions to the employee's field of expertise.
 - (a) A technically appropriate professional award must:
 - i. Include a copy of the nomination for the professional award, which must provide sufficient information to explain the employee's significant contribution to the employee's field of expertise; and
 - ii. Be a professional award given at the state or national level.
 - (b) Documentation of the criteria in 4.b.(6)(a)i and ii must be included in the request for an SAA.
 - (c) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:
 - i. That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. The most recent rating of record is not sufficient to support this requirement unless it was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and
 - ii. How the employee's professional contribution that warranted state or national recognition through the issuance of an award benefits VA. Examples of these contributions must be provided; and

iii. How the employee will apply the knowledge gained in the performance of his/her job duties.

- c. Number of Steps.** A step increase not only increases an employee's base pay but also increases the cost of retirement benefits and Government life insurance for covered employees, and often results in a higher basic pay adjustment upon promotion of the employee. Since a step increase represents an increase in base pay, this type of recognition may increase an organization's budget well into the future. Therefore, the Professional Standards Board (PSB) must be fiscally responsible when recommending the number of steps to be granted for each achievement and must carefully assess the value of the employee's contribution to the Agency and its mission. Additionally, the relationship between the number of steps to be granted and amount of pay for each step should also be considered when granting SAAs. A four- or five-step advancement should only be granted in extremely unusual situations when the achievement is deemed to be an exceptional contribution to the Agency and its mission.
- d. Top Step of the Grade.** Employees at the top step of their grade cannot receive a step increase. Therefore, for those employees who are at the top step of their grade and who also meet all of the criteria for an SAA, the PSB will make a recommendation to the approving official (see Appendix A of this part) as to the amount of a cash award that may be appropriate based on the value of the employee's contribution to the Agency and its mission. Only employees at the top step of their grade may receive a cash award in lieu of an SAA. Registered nurses and certified registered nurse anesthetists who obtain a specialty certification and are at the top step of the grade will only be granted a cash award under the provisions of paragraph 10(b) of this part; they are not eligible for a cash award in lieu of an SAA for obtaining a specialty certification. All cash awards will be documented on VA Form 4659.
- e. Criteria.** National PSBs and local facilities may develop criteria to assist with the consistency of application when PSBs recommend the awarding of SAAs. However, local Human Resources Offices are responsible for ensuring that all of the criteria are met for each award submission.
- f. Discretion.** Approving officials may approve or disapprove awards, at their discretion, for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made by the employee to the Agency or its mission.

5. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR CERTAIN TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES (INCLUDING USE OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS BOARDS).

- a.** Employees will typically submit evidence of professional accomplishment within 14 calendar days after the achievement is obtained, but documentation may be accepted up to 30 calendar days after the achievement when extenuating circumstances exist, e.g., lengthy illness, inability to get documentation from certifying body.

NOTE: Agency budget limitations are not an extenuating circumstance. Facilities should

appropriately allocate and manage the annual award budget so that deserving employees are recognized throughout the fiscal year. Lack of funding at the time of achievement will not result in the employee being recognized at a later date, or when funds become available.

- b.** The immediate supervisor, or higher-level official, will review the employee's submission and within 14 calendar days:
 - (1) Make a determination as to whether or not to support the employee's submission with a formal recommendation for an SAA. (Note: This determination by the immediate supervisor or higher-level official is discretionary.); and
 - (2) Consult with Fiscal or Human Resources to determine if the award budget allows for award recognition and compliance with local award policies; and
 - (3) If the criteria for the award are met and funding is available, make a recommendation including the appropriate justification as outlined in paragraph 4 of this part.
- c.** The award nomination and all required justification and documentation attached will be forwarded to the service chief or equivalent, or Chief of Staff or Associate Director or Associate Director for Patient Care Services, who will submit it to Human Resources so that it will be received no later than 30 calendar days after the achievement, or 60 calendar days after the achievement when extenuating circumstances exist, e.g., supervisor was on extended leave or additional information from the employee was needed.
- d.** Human Resources will conduct an initial technical review of the award prior to submission to the appropriate PSB (see NOTE below) to ensure that all information has been provided by the employee and supervisor, and the policy requirements have been met. Additional information obtained by Human Resources during the technical review process will be attached to the award nomination. If the award submission does not meet technical requirements due to lack of justification provided by the immediate supervisor, it will be returned to the supervisor within seven calendar days with an explanation of what information is needed or why technical requirements have not been met. Otherwise, if the award meets technical requirements, Human Resources will submit the nomination to the PSB within seven calendar days following receipt of the award. Human Resources will document, as part of the submission to the PSB, that an HR technical review was completed. For those SAAs that go to a National PSB for review, a copy of the local SAA policy will be submitted with the nomination. (See NOTE below for additional information about SAAs for optometrists.)
- e.** The PSB will conduct a review and will make a recommendation to approve or disapprove the submission. If recommending approval, the PSB will recommend an appropriate number of steps to be granted. The PSB will document on the board action justification to support its recommendation. The board action, with supporting justification from the PSB recommending approval or disapproval of the award, will be forwarded to the appropriate Human Resources Office on VA Form 10-2543.
- f.** Before the board action and award justification are forwarded to the appropriate approving official as outlined in Appendix A of this part, Human Resources will review and sign the board action to certify the board's recommendation meets technical and regulatory requirements.

- g. The approving official will make a final decision on the board's recommendation and will complete and sign the board action, as appropriate. After the approving official signs VA Form 10-2543, Human Resources will contact the supervisor to initiate a Standard Form 52 (SF-52) for the number of steps approved for the SAA.
- h. Upon approval of the SAA by the approving official, the SAA will be processed in a timely manner and effective the pay period following the date signed by the approving official.
- i. Approving officials may approve or disapprove SAAs at their discretion for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made by the employee to the Agency or its mission.

NOTE: SAA recommendations for optometrists will be made to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board through the facility's Human Resources Office by the service chief or Chief of Staff, as appropriate.

Submissions to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board for special advancements shall include a cover letter with grade or step(s) increase request information; Standard Form 50 (SF-50) showing the employee's anniversary date of grade; updated curriculum vitae; latest last three proficiency reports (or what is available); latest SF-50; last three board action reports (or what is available) approved by Facility Director; recommendation from the rating official; and Human Resources point of contact. A VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board checklist to assist with this process can be accessed at the following Office of Human Resources Management Web site link:
<http://vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/Staffing/Title38Appts.htm>.

The Human Resources Management Officer, VA Maryland Healthcare System, or designee, shall serve as the technical representative to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board. Additional program information covering optometrists can be obtained through the Director of Optometry Service or the VHA Optometry Service website via the following link:
<http://vaww1.va.gov/optometry/>.

6. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR HYBRID-TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES.

- a. Full-time, part-time, and intermittent hybrid-title 38 employees appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3) or § 7405(a)(1)(B) may be advanced within grade from one to five steps, on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment, provided that they have demonstrated a high level of performance and assumption of greater responsibility as outlined in paragraph b below. All SAA nominations for hybrid-title 38 employees will be submitted on VA Form 4659, with appropriate justification attached.
- b. The following is a list of the types of professional accomplishment that may be achieved, and the criteria required. An employee is not eligible for an SAA if the professional accomplishment was achieved prior to appointment or as a result of VA funding, e.g. paying for training, paying for certification.

(1) **Certification.** Attainment of certification by an appropriate national certifying body, unless such certification is a condition of employment with VA for the current position held, or is a qualification requirement for promotion to a higher grade, or is used to justify a higher-level grade or assignment. An employee may only receive an SAA for attainment of specialty certification the first time that it is received; it cannot be granted for a renewal or after a lapse in the certification.

(a) A technically appropriate certification must meet all the criteria below:

- i. Be issued by a national certifying body; and
- ii. Have included attendance virtually, or in person at a training class, or self-taught coursework/reading; and
- iii. Contain evidence that the employee passed a test at the end of the training program or successfully passed an examination as part of the certification process.

NOTE: Local, state, or regional certification programs and certification for work experience or based upon receipt of another certification is not acceptable.

(b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraphs 6.b.(1)(a)i through iii must be included in the request for an SAA.

(c) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:

- i. That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. The most recent rating of record is not sufficient to support this requirement unless it was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and
- ii. How the knowledge gained by obtaining the certification will be of benefit to VA and/or the duties that are being assumed for which the certification was obtained. Examples of these accomplishments must be provided; and
- iii. How the employee will apply the knowledge in the performance of his/her current job duties.

(2) **Election to Office.** After serving for a minimum of one term in an office in a professional organization at the state or national level, in recognition of significant and distinguished contributions to the employee's occupation.

(a) A technically appropriate accomplishment must:

- i. Include a letter from the professional organization appointing the employee to office for a designated period; and
- ii. Include specific information about the employee's accomplishments made while

serving in office with the confirmation of these accomplishments by the Chairperson/President, or other appropriate official if the employee is serving as the Chairperson/President of the professional organization; and

iii. Include information confirming the employee has completed at least one term in the office of the professional organization.

(b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraphs 6.b.(2)(a)i through iii must be included in the request for an SAA.

(c) This award will only be given after completion of at least one term. Only one SAA will be issued for this accomplishment, regardless of the number of terms served.

(d) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:

i. That during the duration of the term with the professional organization and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. Previous ratings of record may be used to support this level of rating during the term in which the employee served; and

ii. The employee's current level of performance unless the most recent rating of record was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and

iii. How the employee's accomplishments while serving with the professional organization have benefited VA. Examples of these accomplishments must be provided.

(3) Appointment to State Licensing Board (SLB) or National Certifying/Accrediting Body. After serving a minimum of one term on a State Licensing Board or with a National Certifying/Accrediting Body related to the practice of the employee's occupation.

(a) A technically appropriate accomplishment must:

i. Include a letter from the SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body appointing the employee to the position for a designated period; and

ii. Include specific information about the employee's accomplishments made while serving in office with the confirmation of these accomplishments by the Chairperson/President, or other appropriate official if the employee is serving as the Chairperson/President of the SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body.

iii. Include information confirming the employee has completed at least one term in the SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body.

(b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraphs 6.b.(3)(a)i through iii must be included in the request for an SAA.

- (c) The employee cannot receive consideration for an SAA until he/she has completed at least one term on an SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body. Only one SAA will be issued for this accomplishment, regardless of the number of terms served.
 - (d) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:
 - i. That during the duration of the term with the SLB or the National Certifying/Accrediting Body and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. Previous ratings of record may be used to support this level of rating during the term in which the employee served; and
 - ii. The employee's current level of performance unless the most recent rating of record was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and
 - iii. How the employee's accomplishments while serving on the SLB or with the National Certifying/Accrediting Body have benefited VA. Examples of these accomplishments must be provided.
- (4) **Published Research.** Independently producing or serving as a principal assistant or major contributing member of a research project that advances patient care or health care and authors or co-authors results in a national or international journal.
- (a) A technically appropriate achievement in research must:
 - i. Include a copy of the national or international publication containing the article resulting from the research project, ensuring that it demonstrates the employee was the author or co-author; and
 - ii. Include sufficient information to explain how the research advances patient care or health care; and
 - iii. Include the name and role of the employee in the journal article with sufficient information to demonstrate he/she independently produced or was serving as the principal assistant or a major contributing member of the research.
 - (b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraph 6.b.(4)(a)i through iii must be included in the request for an SAA.
 - (c) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:
 - i. That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. The most recent rating of record is not sufficient to support this requirement unless it was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and

support of the SAA:

- i. That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. The most recent rating of record is not sufficient to support this requirement unless it was issued within the past 30 calendar days; and
- ii. How the employee's professional contribution that warranted state or national recognition through the issuance of an award benefits VA. Examples of these contributions must be provided; and
- iii. How the employee will apply the knowledge gained in the performance of his/her job duties.

- c. **Number of Steps.** A step increase not only increases an employee's base pay but also increases the cost of retirement benefits and Government life insurance for covered employees, and often results in a higher basic pay adjustment upon promotion of the employee. Since a step increase represents an increase in base pay, this type of recognition may increase an organization's budget well into the future. Additionally, the relationship between the number of steps to be granted and the amount of pay for each step should also be considered when granting SAAs. A four- or five-step advancement should only be granted in extremely unusual situations when the achievement is deemed to be an exceptional contribution to the Agency and its mission.
- d. **Top Step of the Grade.** Employees at the top step of their grade cannot receive a step increase. Therefore, the approving official may grant a cash award, appropriate with the value of the employee's contribution to the Agency and its mission, to those employees who are at the top step of their grade and who also meet the criteria for an SAA. Only employees at the top step of their grade may receive a cash award in lieu of an SAA. All cash awards will be documented on VA Form 4659.
- e. **Criteria.** Local facilities may develop criteria to assist with the consistency of application when awarding Special Advancements for Achievement. However, local Human Resources Offices are responsible for ensuring that all of the criteria are met for each award submission.
- f. **Discretion.** Approving officials may approve or disapprove awards, at their discretion, for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made by the employee to the Agency or its mission.

7. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR HYBRID-TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES.

Employees will typically submit evidence of professional accomplishment within 14 calendar days after obtaining achievement, but documentation may be accepted up to 30 calendar days after the achievement when extenuating circumstances exist, e.g., lengthy illness, inability to get documentation from certifying body.

NOTE: Agency budget limitations are not an extenuating circumstance. Facilities should appropriately allocate and manage the annual award budget so that deserving employees are

recognized throughout the fiscal year. Lack of funding at the time of achievement will not result in the employee being recognized at a later date when funds become available.

- a.** The immediate supervisor, or higher-level official, will review the employee's submission and within 14 calendar days:
 - (1) Make a determination as to whether or not to support the employee's submission with a formal recommendation for an SAA. (Note: This determination by the immediate supervisor or higher-level official is discretionary.)
 - (2) Consult with Fiscal or Human Resources to determine if the award budget allows for award recognition and compliance with local award policies; and
 - (3) If the criteria for the award are met and funding is available, make a recommendation including the appropriate justification as outlined in paragraph 4 of this part.
- b.** The award nomination and all required justification and documentation attached will be forwarded to the service chief or equivalent, or Chief of Staff or Associate Director or Associate Director for Patient Care Services, who will submit it to Human Resources so that it will be received no later than 30 calendar days after the achievement, or 60 calendar days after the achievement when extenuating circumstances exist, e.g., supervisor was on extended leave or additional information from the employee was needed.
- c.** Human Resources will conduct an initial technical review of the award prior to submission to the approving official to ensure that all information has been provided by the employee and supervisor, and the policy requirements have been met. Any additional information obtained by Human Resources during the technical review process will be attached to the award nomination. If the award submission does not meet technical requirements due to lack of justification provided by the immediate supervisor, it will be returned to the supervisor within seven calendar days with an explanation of what information is needed or why technical requirements have not been met. Otherwise, if the award meets technical requirements, Human Resources will submit the nomination to the approving official within seven calendar days following receipt of the award submission and document on VA Form 4659 that an HR technical review occurred prior to submission.
- d.** The approving official (See Appendix A of this part) will make a final decision on granting the recommended award and the number of steps to be granted. The approving official will complete and sign VA Form 4659. After the approving official signs VA Form 4659, Human Resources will contact the supervisor to initiate an SF-52 for the number of steps approved for the SAA. In the event the employee is at the top step of the grade and a cash award is granted in lieu of a step increase, an SF-52 is not necessary.
- e.** Upon approval of the SAA by the approving official, the SAA will be processed in a timely manner and effective the pay period following the date signed by the approving official.
- f.** Approving officials may approve or disapprove SAAs, at their discretion, for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made by the employee to the Agency or its mission.

8. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (SAP).

- a. **Consideration.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent podiatrists, optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, 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 SAPs. Hybrid-title 38 positions may be considered in accordance with subparagraph d of this paragraph (8). 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.

NOTE: Supervisors and managers may only be considered for SAPs at the end of the Executive Career Field (ECF) rating cycle. (See VA Handbook 5013, Performance Management System, Part I, and Appendix F of Part I.)

- b. **Podiatrists, Optometrists, Chiropractors, Physician Assistants, and Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.** An advancement of one step may be granted on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. (See NOTE below.) The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance, and demonstrate exceptional skills and aptitudes in the care and treatment of patients.
- 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. (See NOTE below.) In addition, one or more of the criteria listed in VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, Part III, Chapter 4, paragraph 6 must be met.
- d. **Hybrid-Title 38 Employees in Occupations Identified in 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3).** The 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 occupations listed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3). The step increase will be coded as 894G. Special advancement for performance recommendations for hybrid-title 38 employees will not require review by a PSB. Instead, recommendations will be forwarded directly to the appropriate approving official listed in Appendix A of this part. (See NOTE below.)
- e. **Discretion.** Approving officials may approve or disapprove awards, at their discretion, for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made by the employee to the Agency or its mission.
- f. **Combination Award.** Employees may receive a Superior Performance Award and an SAP, but the amount of the award cannot exceed the value of the accomplishment. Refer to Part I, paragraph 4 for additional information.

NOTE: Individuals at the top step of their grade cannot receive an increase to base pay; however, they may be recognized with a Superior Performance Award in accordance with Part III of this handbook.

9. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE.

a. General.

- (1) Human Resources Management Officers shall assure that appropriate officials will be notified in anticipation of eligibility. Approximately 90 calendar days prior to the employee 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, identifying the employee and stating that the employee is eligible for consideration for an SAP.
- (2) The immediate supervisor or higher-level official will submit appropriate justification as outlined in paragraph 6 of this part with a completed VA Form 4659, the performance appraisal or proficiency rating, and generate an SF-52. The award nomination will be forwarded to the service chief or equivalent, or Chief of Staff or Associate Director or Associate Director of Patient Care Services, who will submit it to Human Resources so that it will be received no later than 30 calendar days following the completion of the employee's waiting period for a periodic step increase or rate adjustment.
- (3) Human Resources will conduct an initial technical review of the award prior to submission to the appropriate PSB to ensure that all information has been provided by the supervisor, and the policy requirements have been met. If the award submission does not meet technical requirements due to lack of justification provided by the immediate supervisor, it will be returned to the supervisor within seven calendar days with an explanation as to what information is needed. Otherwise, if the award meets technical requirements, Human Resources will submit the nomination to the PSB within seven calendar days following receipt of the award submission and document whether the award nomination meets or does not meet technical requirements, with an explanation as to why it does not, when applicable.
- (4) The PSB will make a specific recommendation with the appropriate number of steps to be granted, when applicable. The board action, with supporting justification from the PSB recommending approval or disapproval of the award, will be forwarded to Human Resources on VA Form 10-2543.
- (5) Human Resources will review and sign the board action to certify that the board's recommendation meets technical and regulatory requirements before the board action and award justification is forwarded to the appropriate approving official, as outlined in Appendix A of this part.
- (6) SAPs will be processed as soon as possible after the end of the employee's rating cycle but typically no later than 90 calendar days after the end of the rating cycle.

b. Podiatrists, Optometrists, and Chiropractors.

- (1) An advancement of one step, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. The advancement shall be

regarded as an equivalent increase.

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

NOTE: To process special advancements for performance for optometrists, follow steps 9.a.(1) and 9.a.(2) shown above. In step 9.a.(3), recommendations will be made to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board by the chief of service or Chief of Staff, as appropriate, through the facility HRM office.

Submissions to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board for special advancements for performance shall include a cover letter with grade or step(s) increase request information; Standard Form 50 (SF-50) showing the employee's anniversary date of grade; updated curriculum vitae; latest SF-50; last three proficiency reports (or what is available); last three board action reports (or what is available) approved by a Facility Director; recommendation from the rating official; and facility HRM office point of contact. A VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board checklist, to assist with this process, can be accessed at the following Office of Human Resources Management Web site link: <http://vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/Staffing/Title38Appts.htm>.

The VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board will make a specific recommendation with the appropriate number of steps to be granted. The board action, with supporting justification, will be returned to the facility HRM office. Thereafter, special advancements for performance of optometrists will be processed in accordance with steps 9.a.(5) and 9.a.(6), as appropriate.

The Human Resources Management Officer, VA Maryland Healthcare System, or designee, shall serve as the technical representative to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board. Additional program information covering optometrists can be obtained through the Director of Optometry Service or the VHA Optometry Service Web site via the following link: <http://vaww1.va.gov/optometry/>.

c. Registered Nurses, Nurse Anesthetists, Physician Assistants, and Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.

- (1) An advancement of one step, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be granted at any appropriate time within any 52-week period.
- (2) The advancement shall not be regarded as an equivalent increase or in lieu of a periodic step increase.
- (3) No more than one such advancement may be granted within any single 52-week period.

d. Hybrids. Employees in occupations identified in 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3) are eligible for one-step special advancements for performance, subject to meeting the criteria for Quality Step Increases, which is outlined in Part III of this handbook.

10. CRITERIA FOR CASH AWARDS FOR FULL-TIME, PART-TIME, AND INTERMITTENT REGISTERED NURSES, AND NURSE ANESTHETISTS APPOINTED UNDER 38 U.S.C. §§ 7306, 7401(1) AND 7405.

a. General.

- (1) Cash awards for specialty certification and cash awards for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement, as outlined under this paragraph, are in addition to special advancements mentioned previously in this chapter.
- (2) A registered nurse or nurse anesthetist may not receive a:
 - (a) Special Advancement for Performance and a Special Contribution Award based on the same performance; or
 - (b) Special Advancement for Performance and a cash award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement during the same rating cycle; or
 - (c) Special Advancement for Achievement and a Special Contribution Award based on the same achievement or contribution.
- (3) When it is determined appropriate and the established criteria for each type of award has been met, a registered nurse or nurse anesthetist may be granted a combination award such as:
 - (a) Special Advancement for Performance and a cash award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement as outlined below; or
 - (b) Special Advancement for Achievement and a cash award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement as outlined below; or
 - (c) Special Advancement for Performance and a Superior Performance Award; or
 - (d) Special Advancement for Achievement and cash award for specialty certification as outlined below.

b. Cash Award for Specialty Certification.

- (1) The Director or designee is required in accordance with 38 U.S.C. § 7452(b)(1)(A) to grant a cash award of up to \$2,000 to registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, and physician assistants who become certified while on VA rolls in a specialty related to the accomplishment of VA's health care mission.
- (2) A cash award for specialty certification is a mechanism for recognizing registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, and physician assistants who have been certified in a clinical specialty area by an appropriate national certifying body. Specialty certification does not include recertification or renewal of previously held certifications but does include second and subsequent certifications, as well as advanced certification, provided the requirements for

advanced certification are clearly in addition to basic certification.

(3) Establishment of Written Policy Concerning Cash Awards for Specialty Certification.

(a) Responsibilities:

- i. Facility Directors shall establish a written policy for granting a cash award to registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, and physician assistants who obtain specialty certification while on VA rolls.
- ii. The Human Resources Management Officer will be responsible for developing and coordinating this policy with appropriate facility officials prior to the Facility Director's approval.

(b) The amount of the award shall be based on criteria established by the Facility Director (see subparagraph (d) below); however, awards may also take into consideration management and/or PSB recommendations, including decisions concerning the relatedness of a certificate to the facility's health care mission and an employee's assignment.

(c) To the extent feasible, the policy will include information on specialty certification that does not establish eligibility for a cash award because it has been locally determined that the particular certification is not related to the facility's health care mission.

(d) The following criteria should be used and outlined in local policy when granting cash awards for certification:

- i. Whether the certification is based solely on experience, or successful completion of a comprehensive examination or training program, or a combination thereof;
- ii. The relationship of the certification to the registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant's job duties;
- iii. Proration of the award based on part-time or intermittent employment;
- iv. Registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant's performance or proficiency rating;
- v. Facility recruitment or retention needs; and
- vi. Any other criteria considered appropriate.

(4) The registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant will typically submit evidence of professional accomplishment within 14 calendar days after obtaining achievement. Cash awards for specialty certification will normally be made within 60 calendar days after the registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant presents a copy of the certificate to the appropriate facility official. A copy of the certificate will be filed with a completed VA Form 4659 in Human Resources. Registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, and physician assistants who became certified before April 7, 1991, or who

become certified before becoming a registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant with the Department are not eligible for a cash award for specialty certification.

- (5) Nurse anesthetists appointed or re-appointed on or after May 4, 1993, must be certified by the Council on Certification of Nurse Anesthetists as a condition of employment. They are not eligible for cash awards for specialty certification.
- (6) Registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, or physician assistants who receive a certification as a result of VA funding, or the certification is a condition of employment with VA for the current position held, or the certification is a qualification requirement for promotion to a higher grade, or is used to justify a higher level are not eligible for a cash award.

c. Cash Award for Exemplary Job Performance and Exemplary Job Achievement.

- (1) Facility Directors may grant a cash award of up to \$2,000 to registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, or physician assistants who demonstrate both exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement. (See 38 U.S.C. § 7452(b)(1)(B).) To receive an award, the employee's latest Proficiency Report must be Highly Satisfactory or above, and the employee must meet the criteria under one of the following subparagraphs:
 - (a) Significant and distinguished contribution(s) in some phase of health care as evidenced by original research, writings, and publications in professional media of stature (e.g., reference journals);
 - (b) Special recognition in the fields of teaching or professional practice;
 - (c) Special competence in the occupation, as evidenced by service with professionally recognized committees or groups, or responsible office in professional societies above the local level, or consultative services within the profession. The competence attained must be supported by achievement of renown, on a regional or wider basis;
 - (d) Expertise in specialized treatment modalities, outstanding competence as a clinical practitioner, or significant contributions concerning some aspect of the profession; or
 - (e) Other appropriate evidence of professional stature equivalent to the above.
- (2) Registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, or physician assistants may not receive a Superior Performance Award and an exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement award during the same rating cycle.

APPENDIX A. PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT OR PERFORMANCE/APPROVING OFFICIALS

- 1. Under Secretary for Health or designee.** 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.** Advancements of those covered by the scope of this handbook and VA Directive 5017 when the Network Director is the appointing official.
- 3. Facility Directors.**
 - a. Advancements of optometrists.
 - b. Advancements of podiatrists.
 - c. Advancements of expanded-function dental auxiliaries.
 - d. Advancements of chiropractors.
 - e. Advancements of registered nurses and nurse anesthetists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to the Associate Director for Patient Care Services the advancement of registered nurses and nurse anesthetists in noncentralized assignments below Nurse IV.
 - f. Advancements of physician assistants.
 - g. Advancements of pharmacists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to the Chief of Pharmacy Service the advancement of pharmacists in noncentralized assignments below GS-13 and assistant chiefs of Pharmacy Service at GS-13.
 - h. Advancements of occupational therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of occupational therapists in noncentralized assignments below GS-13.
 - i. Advancements of registered respiratory therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of registered respiratory therapists.
 - j. Advancements of certified respiratory therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of certified respiratory therapists.
 - k. Advancements of licensed practical or vocational nurses. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to nurse executives the advancements of licensed practical or vocational nurses.
 - l. Advancements of physical therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of physical therapists.

- m.** Advancements of other occupations covered by 38 U.S.C. 7401(3), other than those listed in subparagraph 3g. through 3l., e.g., 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* approval authority for the advancement of these occupations to chiefs of staff.

***NOTE:** Only the Facility Director may act as both the recommending and approving official for Special Advancements for Achievement or Special Advancement for Performance.]