

STAFFING

1. **REASON FOR ISSUE:** To revise the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) qualification standard for the appointment of Physician Assistant (PA), VN/AD-0603, appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(1) and 38 U.S.C. § 7405 in Veterans Health Administration (VHA).
2. **SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This handbook contains mandatory procedures on staffing. The pages in this handbook replace the existing PA qualification standard in VA Handbook 5005, Appendix II-G8 in its entirety. The standards are effective on the date of issuance of this handbook. These changes will be incorporated into the electronic version of VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, maintained on the [Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer Website](#) and the [VA Publications Website](#). Significant changes include:
 - a. Changes the education to require completion of an accredited PA training program in addition to a master's degree in any discipline or a bachelor's degree in any discipline with one year of experience as a PA.
 - b. Clarifies that the PA National Re-Certifying Exam (PANRE) by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) is no longer required for employment in VHA for PAs that obtain a state license. Initial passage of PA National Certifying Exam (PANCE), is required.
 - c. Adds a requirement for possession of a current, full, and unrestricted license from any State. The license must be maintained as a condition of employment.
 - d. Establishes qualifications for a new five grade structure.
3. **RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** Recruitment and Placement Policy Service (059), Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer.
4. **RELATED HANDBOOK/DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5005, Staffing.
5. **RESCISSIONS:** VA Handbook 5005, Part II, Appendix G8 dated September 5, 2014.

CERTIFIED BY:

/s/
Karen L. Brazell
Principal Executive Director, Office of
Acquisition, Logistics and Construction
and Chief Acquisition Officer, and Acting
Assistant Secretary for Enterprise Integration

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

/s/
Daniel R. Sitterly
Assistant Secretary for Human Resources
and Administration/Operations, Security and
Preparedness

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APPENDIX G8. PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT QUALIFICATION STANDARD
[VN/AD]-0603
Veterans Health Administration

1. **COVERAGE.** The following are the requirements for appointment as a Physician Assistant (PA) in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). [Within VHA, PAs practice with clinical oversight, consultation, and input by a designated collaborating physician.]
2. **BASIC REQUIREMENTS.**
 - a. **Citizenship.** Citizen of the United States [in accordance with section 7402(c) to title 38, United States Code (U.S.C.). Non-citizens may be appointed when it is not possible to recruit qualified candidates in accordance with 38 U.S.C. § 7407(a).]
 - b. **Education.** [Graduate of a training program which is accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education of PA (ARC-PA) or one of its predecessor organizations. Additionally, candidates must meet one of the following:
 - (1) Master's degree in any discipline;

OR

 - (2) Bachelor's degree in any discipline with one year of experience as a PA.]
 - c. **Certification.** [Must have successfully passed the PA National Certifying Exam (PANCE).

NOTE: Current and continuous certification by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) is no longer required for employment in VHA. (See paragraph 3a in this standard for additional information regarding the certification requirement for employees grandfathered into the occupation.)

- d. **Licensure.** PAs must possess an active, current, full, and unrestricted license to practice in a State, Territory, or Commonwealth of the United States, or in the District of Columbia. PAs must maintain current registration in the State of licensure if this is a requirement for continuing active and current licensure in that State.
 - (1) **Impaired Licensure.** A PA who has, or has ever had, any license(s) revoked, suspended, denied, restricted, limited, or issued/placed in a probationary status may be appointed only in accordance with the provisions of chapter 3, section B, paragraph 13 of this part.

(2) **Exceptions for Graduate PAs.**

- (a) PAs who otherwise meet the basic requirements, but do not possess the required licensure, may be appointed, pending licensure, as a graduate PA on a temporary full-time appointment not-to-exceed two years under the authority of 38 U.S.C. § 7405(c)(2)(B).
- (b) Graduate PAs may only be appointed at the entry grade level and may not be promoted/converted until certification is obtained.
- (c) Temporary graduate PA appointments may not be extended beyond two years or converted to a new temporary appointment.

NOTE: Individuals who have or have had multiple licenses and had any such license revoked for professional misconduct, professional incompetence or substandard care, or who surrendered such license after receiving written notice of potential termination of such license by the State for professional misconduct, professional incompetence, or substandard care, are not eligible for appointment to the position unless such revoked or surrendered license is fully restored (38 U.S.C. § 7402(f)). This requirement does not apply to licensed PAs currently employed by VA as of November 30, 1999, provided they maintain continuous appointment and are not disqualified for employment by any subsequent revocations or voluntary surrenders of State license, registration or certification.

- (3) **Loss of Credentials.** An employee in this occupation who fails to maintain the required licensure or NCCPA certification when required under paragraph 3a below must be removed from the occupation, which may result in termination of employment (VA Handbook 5005, part II, chapter 3, paragraph 17).
- (4) **Failure to Obtain Licensure.** In all cases, graduate PAs must actively pursue and obtain required licensure from the date of their appointments. The human resource office will provide the unlicensed PA in writing the date by which the license must be acquired and the consequences for not becoming licensed by the deadline. The written notice must be provided prior to the first date of employment. Failure to obtain required credentials by the prescribed date will result in termination of employment.

- e. **Physical Requirements.** See VA Directive and Handbook 5019, Employee Occupational Health Service.
- f. **English Language Proficiency.** Candidates must be proficient in spoken and written English to be appointed as authorized by 38 U.S.C. § 7403(f).

3. **GRANDFATHERING PROVISION.** All persons employed in VHA in this occupational series that are also performing the duties as described in the qualification standard on the effective date of this qualification standard are considered to have met all qualification requirements for

the grade held including positive education and licensure/certification. For employees who do not meet all the basic requirements required in this standard, but who met the qualifications applicable to the position at the time they were appointed to it, the following provisions apply:

- a. If a PA is certified by the NCCPA, but not licensed on the effective date of the qualification standard, they are not required to obtain or maintain a license to remain employed in VHA. However, if they lose or fail to maintain their NCCPA certification after this qualification standard is effective and do not possess a full, valid, and unrestricted license, they are no longer qualified for employment as a PA in VHA.
- b. PAs may be reassigned, promoted up to and including the full performance level, or demoted within the occupation, but may not be promoted beyond the full performance level or placed in supervisory or managerial positions.
- c. If a PA who was retained under this provision leaves the occupation, the employee will lose protected status and must meet the full VA qualification standard requirements in effect at the time of reentry to the occupation.
- d. PAs initially grandfathered into this occupation, who subsequently obtain additional education and/or licensure/certification and meet all the basic requirements of this qualification standard, must maintain the required credentials as a condition of employment in the occupation.
- e. PAs who are appointed on a temporary basis prior to the effective date of the qualification standard may not have their temporary appointment extended or be reappointed, on a temporary or permanent basis, until they fully meet the basic requirements of the standard.

4. DEFINITIONS.

- a. **Collaborating Physician.** The collaborating physician is a designated (allopathic or osteopathic) physician who provides clinical oversight, consultation, and patient care management assistance to the assigned PA.
- b. **Part-Time Experience.** Part-time experience as a PA is credited per the relationship to a full work week. For example, a PA is employed 20 hours per week on a half-time basis would receive one full-time work week credit for two weeks of such service.

5. GRADE REQUIREMENTS.

- a. **General.**

- (1) **Recency and Quality of Experience.** Recency or quality of training and experience as a PA should be carefully reviewed when determining the appropriate grade. To be creditable, experience must demonstrate possession of knowledge,

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skills and abilities related to the current practice of a PA. The importance of specific types of experience or training may vary per the intended assignment.

(2) **Grades.** The level of PA practice may be performed based on a combination of education and experience. Beyond the minimum education requirements, grade determination upon appointment, and advancement is dependent more on acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities than baseline education. As the PA acquires the knowledge and judgment that accrues with experience, the privilege of increased authority for patient care maybe expanded.

(3) **Research.** At any grade, PAs may assist in or conduct approved research projects relative to PA care that enhances their knowledge and skills in the profession.

b. **Grade Determination.** In addition to the basic requirements stated above, the following qualification criteria must be met in determining the appropriate grade assignment of candidates:

(1) **Physician Assistant-I (PA-I)**

(a) **Experience and Education.** None beyond the basic requirements. This is the entry level for PAs.

(b) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** The following list of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) present the minimum skill set expected of an Entry Level PA. This practice may include, but is not limited to:

- i. Ability to utilize the principles of PA practice in the care of assigned patients to provide appropriate care.
- ii. Ability to perform patient history and physical.
- iii. Ability to formulate a plan and provide treatment to the patient.
- iv. Ability to provide patient care that is abreast of changing concepts and advancements in the profession.

(2) **Physician Assistant-II (PA-II)**

(a) **Experience and Education.** The PA at this grade is at the intermediate grade level and has had progressively increasing responsibility and experiences as indicated in the KSAs listed below. Individuals will have demonstrated the ability to analyze and solve more complex medical problems than at the entry level grade and can utilize their training in the successful practice of patient care and participate in team problem solving. Individuals demonstrate the KSAs of PA-II intermediate level by:

i. Two years of successful practice as a PA.

OR

ii. Successful completion of a PA post-graduate residency program sponsored by VHA Office of Academic Affiliations or other postgraduate residency programs accredited by VA, ARC-PA, U.S. Armed Forces, or another accrediting agency.

OR

iii. A doctoral degree in a health-related field from an accredited college or university recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

(b) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs).** PAs at this level are not required to meet each individual KSA listed below to qualify, but should be able to demonstrate, develop, or acquire those not met upon appointment for PA-II:

i. Skills to analyze and solve complex medical problems.

ii. Ability to function autonomously and make independent medical decisions.

iii. Skill to incorporate training and experience into the successful practice of patient care including telehealth medical care.

iv. Ability to work effectively in an interdisciplinary environment for improvement of services for patient care.

v. Ability to practice with colleagues and peers collaboratively.

(3) **Physician Assistant-III (PA-III)**

(a) **Experience and Education.** PAs at the PA-III grade are at the full performance level and lead and organize patient care independently, practice within multi-disciplinary teams, and coordinate all aspects of patient care across the health care system. They utilize advanced clinical knowledge and judgment in decision-making and evaluating outcomes. They function as experts in clinical practice and/or in areas related to the assigned roles and responsibilities, may serve as mentors for transitioning PAs, and may provide training for health care students. Individuals can demonstrate the KSAs for the full performance level by:

i. Three years of successful practice as a PA.

OR

- ii. Successful completion of a PA post-graduate residency program sponsored by VHA Office of Academic Affiliations or other postgraduate residency programs accredited by VA, ARC-PA, U.S. Armed Forces, or another accrediting agency and one year of professional practice as a PA.

OR

- iii. A doctoral degree in a health-related field from an accredited college or university recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and one year of professional practice as a PA.

(b) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** PAs at this level are not required to meet each individual KSA listed below to qualify, but should be able to demonstrate, develop, or acquire those not met upon appointment for PA-III:

- i. Ability to clinically evaluate facility patient care delivery systems and validate or identify barriers to safe and effective patient care.
- ii. Skill to consistently demonstrate an elevated level of expertise and autonomy in diagnosing and treating seriously ill, multi-symptomatic patients through facility Focused Professional Practice Evaluation (FPPE) and Ongoing Professional Practice Evaluation (OPPE).
- iii. Ability to present clinical findings and recommendations to appropriate management officials.
- iv. Ability to clinically facilitate the delivery of patient care in collaboration with health professionals, health managers, and other health care personnel.
- v. Ability to implement and initiate clinical changes to established treatment protocols based upon new medical literature research findings to enhance patient delivery care for improved patient outcomes.
- vi. Ability to participate clinically in the development of the PA patient care audit processes involving in-depth review and analysis of medical records.

(4) **Physician Assistant-IV (PA-IV).** Positions may include but are not limited to: Facility or Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Lead PA, Facility PA Education Lead, PA Residency Program Director, or other Clinical and/or Administrative leadership assignments.

(a) **PA (Facility Lead).** Facility lead PAs have a thorough understanding of the various functions involved in the care of patients, and the ability to interact effectively with

different medical and surgical specialists, health care team members, and administrative staff. Facility lead PAs have the knowledge and expertise pertaining to PA employment, credentialing, clinical practice, and appropriate utilizations of PAs. A lead PA can monitor patient care operations, policies, and work performance of fellow PAs.

- i. **Experience.** PA facility leads require five years of experience, which includes progressively responsible leadership assignments, such as serving on any local committees, workgroups, or taskforces. The PA may exhibit knowledge of PA VHA employment and utilization of PAs through demonstrative actions as a facility point of contact (POC) for PA issues, policies, and directives.
- ii. **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** PAs at this level are not required to meet each individual KSA listed below to qualify, but should be able to demonstrate, develop, or acquire those not met upon appointment for PA-IV:
 - a. Ability to provide clinically and occupationally focused orientation to new PA appointees and mentoring other PA staff members.
 - b. Knowledge of the FPPE and OPPE processes to evaluate and assess patient care services provided by PA staff.
 - c. Knowledge of the educational needs of PAs.
 - d. Ability to provide leadership and clinical oversight of PAs at the facility.
 - e. Ability to exercise independent judgment, perform tasks involving special technical, supervisory, or administrative lines.
 - f. Ability to communicate effectively with a diverse group of professional clinical staff.

(b) **PA (Facility Education Lead or Residency Program Director).** PA Facility Education Leads and PA Residency Program Directors are responsible for the management, structure, and administration of the PA clinical trainee program. They ensure programs comply with VA Office of Academic Affiliations standards and accrediting bodies of sponsoring affiliated institutions while activities are being held at VA facilities. PA Education Leads and PA Residency Program Directors develop, implement, and enhance PA clinical education training programs.

- i. **Experience.** PA Facility Education Leads and PA Residency Program Directors require five years of experience, which include educational assignments, such as proctoring PAs or medical students, setting up continuing medical education for

local VHA PAs or participating in community health events; serving as a PA director or assistant in a VHA residency program or stipend program; or serving as a member or staff of an academic PA program.

ii. **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** PAs at this level are not required to meet each individual KSA listed below to qualify, but should be able to demonstrate, develop, or acquire those not met upon appointment for PA-IV:

- a. Ability to develop and update VA PA clinical rotation guidelines within each clinical specialty to ensure students and preceptors understand the responsibilities prior to and upon completion of each clinical rotation.
- b. Skills to maintain student evaluations and oversee changes that facilitate continuous enhancements and improvements of PA trainee clinical experiences.
- c. Ability to give quality systematic feedback to the practitioner within a broad range of medical and surgical experiences that meets ARC-PA and affiliated institutional standards.
- d. Ability to support trainees to allow open and ongoing feedback regarding collaborating practitioner, the training program, and VA site as a method of continuous improvement.
- e. Skill to properly record and maintain established affiliation agreements and subsequent supporting documents required for VA clinical training programs.
- f. Skill to maintain close relationships and open and ongoing communication with academic affiliates PA program directors and clinical coordinators participating in the PA trainee program.

(c) **PA (Clinical Leader/Administrative Leader).** PAs at the PA-IV grade level may serve as clinical leader or administrative leader. Clinical PA Leaders may be assigned to positions/studies where limited guidance exists as physician oversight is not required. Administrative PA Leaders are involved with strategic planning and administrative/managerial responsibilities for integrated programs that cross service and/or discipline lines and influence organizational mission and health care. A PA clinical leader/administrative leader may monitor or evaluate services or programs with interaction of senior administration.

i. **Experience.** PA clinical leaders/administrative leaders require five years of experience which included leadership assignments that involved formulating program objectives and priorities, implementing plans and practices, and

interpreting regulatory and organizational guidance to develop and implement policies and/or procedures.

- ii. **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** PAs at this level are not required to meet each individual KSA listed below to qualify, but should be able to demonstrate, develop, or acquire those not met upon appointment for PA-IV:
 - a. Ability to assess information and make recommendations that may significantly affect the content, interpretation, or development of programs concerning critical matters or key issues within the health care system.
 - b. Ability to schedule and supervise staff, students, or ancillary personnel, to include conducting performance evaluations.
 - c. Skill in planning, organizing, directing, and controlling an integrated program.
 - d. Skill in design, management of budget, and cost benefit analysis to ensure optimal stewardship of resources.
 - e. Ability to analyze complex medical care, organizational processes and/or systems, and develop and implement solutions that improve outcomes at the program or service level.
 - f. Ability to develop and recommend new or revised policies or procedures to justify program goals and motivate assigned personnel.

(5) **Physician Assistant-V (PA-V).** PA positions at this grade may include but are not limited to: VISN or VHA Central Office (VHACO) leadership or administrative positions that involve a high level of strategic planning of programs that cross integrated service lines and/or disciplines.

- (a) **PA (VISN).** VISN PAs manage one or more large, complex patient care or administrative programs across one or more VISNs. They have full responsibility for the program(s) and significantly influences overall functioning of the program(s) throughout the VISN(s). They provide leadership, direction, and guidance on all aspects of the program(s). They coordinate with network and facility executives in developing and establishing the long and short-range organizational goals for the program(s), ensuring organizational goals and policies are aligned with VISN and national goals. PAs provide direct oversight to program operations at multiple sites across the VISN(s). They evaluate, develop, coordinate, implement, and improve program operations within the VISN(s). They manage the overall budget for the program VISN-wide, to include determining resource needs, allocating resources, and ensuring proper utilization in productivity, efficiency and cost effectiveness of operations. PAs may manage and supervise a large number of employees in

different disciplines and areas at multiple locations/facilities. They have full responsibility for clinical practice, program management, education, and human resources management of the employees. They establish and maintain effective relationships with all levels of medical center/network personnel service leaders at the facility and network levels. They interpret and apply national policy, as well as, develop VISN-wide supplemental guidance regarding the program(s). PAs assist medical center/network staff to carry out the functions and activities expected of them. They assist in policy-making activities and the overall functioning of administrative and clinical programs. They collaborate with other staff to establish and maintain programs that cross service and/or discipline lines and influence organizational mission and health care, as well as, investigate and solve issues or situations impacting health care services. They conduct and analyze studies and projects fundamental to planning, programming, and budgeting. They utilize forecasts of technological changes, utilization patterns, future workloads, staffing projection and cost comparisons to provide feedback and recommendations to VISN Leadership that reflects current standards and expectations provided by VHACO.

- i. **Experience.** VISN PAs at this level require six years of experience that included assignments that involved directing and evaluating complex patient care or administrative programs, services or operations for a healthcare system or at multiple sites. The assignments would have required planning, organizing and assessing healthcare services or programs; implementing national initiative and organizational targets; developing long and short-term program goals, and analyzing, developing options and implementing solutions to health care operational or administrative problems.
- ii. **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** VISN PAs at this level are not required to meet each individual KSA listed below to qualify, but should be able to demonstrate, develop, or acquire those not met upon appointment for PA-V:

 - a. Ability to oversee specific regional level programs that cross service and/or discipline lines and influence organizational mission and health care operations.
 - b. Skill to provide management and budgeting of regional level programs.
 - c. Ability to analyze complex medical care systems and organizational needs of facilities within a region, other federal agencies and professional organizations and apply to healthcare programs within the region.
 - d. Knowledge of strategic planning processes to translate national and regional goals and objectives into efficient program operations.

(b) **PA (Central Office).** Central Office PAs manage a national VHA program or programs and provide overall administration of all aspects of the program(s) throughout VHA, to include planning, directing, and executing the program(s). They analyze and develop program specific plans, programs, and budgets for a national program office. They provide leadership and direction for the assigned program(s) that significantly impacts on the overall functioning of the program(s) VHA-wide, to include ensuring the program(s) meet VA mission requirements. They develop succession plans, monitoring trending data and academic preparation for the program(s). They develop national policies, directives, informal letters, white papers, and other guidance regarding the program(s). They coordinate and collaborate with Federal and State regulatory agencies when developing national policies, procedures, and operations for the program(s). They work with VA Central Office (VACO) and collaborate with other national program offices such as Regulatory Affairs, Legislative Affairs, and General Counsel. They provide agency-level interpretation and clarification of national policies and directives. They write or provide technical reviews of proposed legislation regarding the program for the agency. They respond to Congressional offices and other high-level inquiries from internal and external organizations related to the program(s) and/or program office. They interpret policies promulgated by senior VACO and VHACO leadership.

i. **Experience.** Central Office PAs at this level require six years of experience that included assignments which involved directing and evaluating complex patient care or administrative programs, services or operations for a healthcare system or at multiple sites. The assignments would have required planning, organizing and assessing healthcare services or programs; implementing national initiative and organizational targets; developing long and short-term program goals; and analyzing, developing options and implementing solutions to health care operational or administrative problems.

ii. **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** Central Office PAs at this level are not required to meet each individual KSA listed below to qualify, but should be able to demonstrate, develop, or acquire those not met upon appointment for PA-V:

- a. Ability to interpret, develop or revise VHA directives and handbooks pertinent to the national VHA program.
- b. Skill in the design and management of budget as well as cost benefit analysis, to ensure optimal stewardship of resources.
- c. Skill to collaborate with other VHA executives for strategic planning and problem-solving pertaining to national health care delivery systems and organizational priorities.

- d. Ability to represent VHA in interacting with state, regional, and national professional, accrediting, and certifying bodies.

6. DEVIATIONS.

- a. The approving official may, under unusual circumstances, approve reasonable deviations to the grade requirements at grade PA-III and below for PAs in VHA whose accomplishments, performance, and qualifications as well as current assignment warrant such action based on demonstrated competence to meet the requirements of the proposed grade.
- b. Under no circumstances may the educational, certification, or licensure requirements be waived.]
- c. The placement of individuals in grade levels or assignments not described in this qualification standard must be approved by the Under Secretary for Health or designee in VHA Central Office.

Authority: 38 U.S.C. [7301(b), 7402]