

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** To revise Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy regarding employee recognition and awards.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This policy updates Part V to abolish the use of Professional Standards Boards when processing special advancements for achievement and special advancements for performance and modifies language in previous versions for clarity and consistency. The pages in this handbook replace the corresponding page numbers in VA Handbook 5017. Revised text is contained in [brackets]. These changes will be incorporated into the electronic version of VA Handbook 5017 that is maintained on the [Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer website](#) and [VA Publications website](#).
- 3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** Office of Human Resources and Administration/ Operations, Security and Preparedness (006), Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (05), Employee Relations and Performance Management Service (051).
- 4. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5017, Employee Recognition and Awards.
- 5. RESCISSION:** None.

CERTIFIED BY:

/s/
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**BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY
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EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

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CERTIFICATION, ACHIEVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE]**

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

**PART V. TITLE 38 AND [HYBRID-TITLE 38] SPECIAL AWARDS FOR
CERTIFICATION, ACHIEVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE**

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**PART V. TITLE 38 [AND HYBRID-TITLE 38] SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS
[FOR ACHIEVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE] AND
[OTHER MONETARY] AWARDS**

1. **SCOPE.** This part contains policies, procedures and guidelines governing the advancement of 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, dentists, [] podiatrists [and chiefs of staff] appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(1) and § 7405(a)(1); [] medical and dental residents appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7406; and health care executives[, including facility directors,] appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7306 or § 7401(4).
2. **REFERENCES.**
 - a. VA Directive 5017, Employee Recognition and Awards.
 - 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 ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT (SAA) FOR CERTAIN TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES.**
 - a. Full-time, part-time, and intermittent, 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[s eligible for an SAA], 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.** Evidence of 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 of this part 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 [their] current job duties.

- (2) **Election to Office.** An employee may receive an SAA 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. An employee may only receive one SAA for serving in a professional organization regardless of the number of offices held within that organization, e.g., treasurer, secretary, vice-president, president. For example, an employee who serves as the treasurer for a state professional organization may be eligible for an SAA. If they receive an SAA for serving as the treasurer, they are not eligible for an SAA for subsequently serving as the secretary. However, if they serve

as secretary for a national organization, they may be eligible for an SAA since it is a different organization.

- (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 of this part 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 they 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.** An employee may receive an SAA after serving a minimum of one term on a[n] SLB or with a National Certifying/Accrediting Body related to the practice of the employee's occupation. The employee may only receive one SAA for serving on an

SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body regardless of the number of offices held within each organization, e.g., treasurer, secretary, vice[-]president, president. For example, an employee who serves as the treasurer for a[n] SLB may be eligible for an SAA. If [they] receive[] a[n] SAA for serving as the treasurer [they are] not eligible for an SAA for subsequently serving as the secretary. However, if [they] serve[] as secretary for a National Certifying/Accrediting Body, they may be eligible for an SAA since it is a different organization.

- (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 of this part must be included in the request for an SAA.
- (c) The employee cannot receive consideration for an SAA until they have 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

- (a) A technically appropriate academic achievement must be:
 - 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 of this part 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 [their] 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 of this part 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

[]

[5.] CRITERIA FOR [] SAA 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.** Evidence of 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 [5].b.(1)(a)i through iii of this part 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 [their] current job duties.

(2) **Election to Office.** An employee may receive an SAA 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. An employee may only receive one SAA for serving in a professional organization regardless of the number of offices held within that organization, e.g., treasurer, secretary, vice-president, president. For example, an employee who serves as the treasurer for a state professional organization may be eligible for an SAA. If [they] receive[] an SAA for serving as the treasurer, they are not eligible for an SAA for subsequently serving as the secretary. However, if [they] serve[s] as secretary for a national organization, [they] may be eligible for an SAA since it is a different organization.

(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 [5].b.(2)(a)i through iii of this part 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 [] SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body.** An employee may receive an SAA after serving a minimum of one term on a SLB or with a National Certifying/Accrediting Body related to the practice of the employee's occupation. The employee may only receive one SAA for serving on a[n] SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body regardless of the number of offices held within each organization, e.g., treasurer, secretary, vice-president, president. For example, an employee who serves as the treasurer for an SLB may be eligible for an SAA. If they receive a SAA for serving as the treasurer, [they are] not eligible for an SAA for subsequently serving as the secretary. However, if [they] serve [] as secretary for a National Certifying/Accrediting Body, [they] may be eligible for an SAA since it is a different organization.
 - (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 [5].b.(3)(a)i through iii of this part must be included in the request for an SAA.
 - (c) The employee cannot receive consideration for an SAA until [they have] 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 they independently produced or were serving as the principal assistant or a major contributing member of the research.
 - (b) Documentation of the criteria in paragraph [5].b.(4)(a)i through iii of this part 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 conducting or participating in the research project benefits VA; and
 - iii How the employee will apply the knowledge gained in the performance of [their] job duties.

- (5) **Education.** Attainment of a higher level of academic achievement than that required for the occupation unless such education 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 promotion to a higher-level grade or assignment, regardless of whether in the same occupation or another occupation within the VA.
 - (a) A technically appropriate academic achievement must be:
 - 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 of this part must be included in the request for an SAA.
 - (c) Supervisor's Endorsement: The supervisory 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 higher level of education will benefit VA; and
 - iii How the employee will apply the knowledge in the performance of [their] 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 paragraph [5].b.(6)(a)i and ii of this part 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 [their] job duties.
 - c. **Number of Steps.** A step increase not only increases an employee's basic 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 basic 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 [monetary] 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 [monetary] award in lieu of an SAA. All [monetary] awards will be documented on VA Form 4659.

- e. **Criteria.** Local facilities may develop criteria to assist with the consistency of application when awarding an SAA. However, [servicing HR] offices are responsible for ensuring [] all [] 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 [A]gency or its mission.

[6.] PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING [] SAA FOR [TITLE 38 AND] 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 [HR] 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 [HR] 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. [HR] 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 [HR] 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, [HR] 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, [HR] 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 [monetary] 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 [A]gency or its mission.

[7.] CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (SAP).

- a. **Consideration.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent 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 paragraph [7].d. of this part.

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

- b. **Optometrists and Chiropractors.** At the time an optometrist or chiropractor is eligible for an established periodic step increase, [they] may be eligible for a two-step SAP in lieu of the 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, Physician Assistants, Nurse Anesthetists and Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.** 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, for registered nurses and nurse anesthetists one or more of the criteria listed in VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, [] must be met.
- d. **Hybrid-Title 38 Employees in Occupations Identified in 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3).** The [] QSI provisions in Part III, paragraph 3 of this handbook will be used to grant one-step SAPs for employees in occupations listed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3). The step increase will be coded as 894G. SAP 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 [A]gency or its mission.
- f. **Combination Award.** Employees may receive a [s]uperior [p]erformance [a]ward and an SAP, but the amount of the award cannot exceed the value of the accomplishment. Refer to Part I, paragraph 4 of this handbook for additional information.

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

[8.] PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING [] SAP.

- a. **General.**
 - (1) At least 90 calendar days prior to optometrists and chiropractors completing the waiting period for a periodic step increase or rate adjustment, [HR] will notify the appropriate official that the employee is eligible for consideration of an SAP.
 - (2) The immediate supervisor or higher-level official will submit appropriate justification as outlined in paragraph 8 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 [HR]. The complete nomination

package for optometrists and chiropractors must be submitted to [HR] no later than 45 calendar days prior to the effective date of the employee's regularly scheduled periodic step increase or rate adjustments. For all other employees, the supervisor will submit the nomination package no later than 45 calendar days after the end of the performance/proficiency rating cycle.

- (3) [HR] will conduct a [] [] technical review of the award prior to submission to the [approving official] [] 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 of what information is needed [or why technical requirements have not been met. Any additional information obtained by HR during the technical review process will be attached to the award nomination.] Otherwise, if the award meets technical requirements, [HR] 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.]

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[(4)] [If the SAP is approved:]

- (a) For optometrists and chiropractors, SAPs will be processed on the effective date of the regularly scheduled periodic step increase or rate adjustment.
- (b) For all other employees, 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. Optometrists and Chiropractors.

- (1) An advancement of one step, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may 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.

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- 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 the conclusion of the rating cycle. 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.
 - (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 a one-step SAP, subject to meeting the criteria for [QSI], which is outlined in Part III of this handbook.

[9.] CRITERIA FOR [MONETARY] AWARDS FOR FULL-TIME, PART-TIME, AND INTERMITTENT REGISTERED NURSES, NURSE ANESTHETISTS, AND PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS APPOINTED UNDER 38 U.S.C. §§ 7401(1) AND 7405.

- a. **General.**
 - (1) [Monetary] awards for specialty certification and [monetary] awards for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement, as outlined under this paragraph, are in addition to special advancements mentioned previously in paragraphs 4 and 5 of this chapter.
 - (2) A registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant may not receive a:
 - (a) SAP and a Special Contribution Award based on the same performance; or
 - (b) Superior Performance Award and a [monetary] award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement during the same rating cycle; or
 - (c) SAA 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, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant may be granted a combination award such as:

- (a) SAP and a [monetary] award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement as outlined below; or
- (b) SAA and a [monetary] award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement as outlined below; or
- (c) SAP and a superior performance award; or
- (d) SAA and [monetary] award for specialty certification as outlined below.

b. [Monetary] Award for Specialty Certification.

- (1) The facility Director or designee is required in accordance with 38 U.S.C. § 7452(b)(1)(A) to grant a [monetary] 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 [monetary] 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 [Monetary] Awards for Specialty Certification.
 - (a) Responsibilities:
 - i Facility Directors shall establish a written policy for granting a [monetary] award to registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, and physician assistants who obtain specialty certification while on VA rolls.
 - ii The [HR] 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 [] 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 [monetary] 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 [monetary] 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. (The evidence does not need to be the actual certification; it can be any evidence from the national certifying body of achievement.) [Monetary] awards for specialty certification will normally be made within 60 calendar days after the registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, or physician assistant presents evidence to the appropriate facility official. A copy of the evidence will be filed with a completed VA Form 4659 in HR. 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 [monetary] award for specialty certification.
- (5) 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 [monetary] award. Refer to the qualification standards in VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, Part II for additional information about specific qualification standards. For example, nurse anesthetists appointed or reappointed 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 [monetary] awards for specialty certification.

c. **[Monetary] Award for Exemplary Job Performance and Exemplary Job Achievement.**

- (1) Facility Directors may grant a [monetary] 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 [SAA] OR [SAP]**

- 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 expanded-function dental auxiliaries.
 - c. Advancements of chiropractors.
 - d. 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.
 - e. Advancements of physician assistants.
 - f. 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.
 - g. 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.
 - h. Advancements of registered respiratory therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of registered respiratory therapists.
 - i. Advancements of certified respiratory therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of certified respiratory therapists.
 - j. 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.
 - k. Advancements of physical therapists. Facility Directors may also delegate* approval authority to chiefs of staff the advancements of physical therapists.

- I. Advancements of other occupations covered by 38 U.S.C. [§] 7401(3), other than those listed in subparagraph 3.g. through 3.l., 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 SAAs or SAPs.