

## VHA SPECIALTY CARE PROGRAM OFFICE AND NATIONAL PROGRAMS

**1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive establishes the responsibilities of the National Specialty Care Program Office (SCPO) in the development of policy, clinical guidance, operations, and monitoring of national quality and outcome data for the specialty care programs under its purview.

**2. SUMMARY OF CONTENT:** This new VHA directive establishes the responsibilities of the National Specialty Care Program Office (SCPO) in the development of policy, clinical guidance, operations, and monitoring of national quality and outcome data for the specialty care programs under its purview.

**3. RELATED ISSUES:** VHA Directive 1102.01(1), National Surgery Office, dated April 24, 2019; VHA Directive 1215, Standards for Veterans Health Administration Centers of Excellence, dated February 14, 2017; VHA Directive 1220(1), Facility Procedure Complexity Designation Requirements to Perform Invasive Procedures In Any Clinical Setting, dated May 13, 2019; VHA Directive 1217, VHA Central Office Operating Units, dated September 10, 2021.

**4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The National Specialty Care Program Office (11SPEC) in the Office of the Assistant Under Secretary for Health (AUSH) for Clinical Services is responsible for the content of this directive. Questions may be directed to: [VHA11SPECActions@va.gov](mailto:VHA11SPECActions@va.gov).

**5. RESCISSION:** None.

**6. RECERTIFICATION:** This VHA directive is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of March 2027. This VHA directive will continue to serve as national VHA policy until it is recertified or rescinded.

**BY THE DIRECTION OF THE OFFICE OF  
THE UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH:**

/s/ Erica Scavella, M.D., FACP, FACHE  
Assistant Under Secretary for Health  
for Clinical Services/CMO

**DISTRIBUTION:** Emailed to the VHA Publications Distribution List on March 9, 2022.

**DATE**

**VHA DIRECTIVE 1159**

***NOTE:*** All references herein to VA and VHA documents incorporate by reference subsequent VA and VHA documents on the same or similar subject matter.

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**NATIONAL SPECIALTY CARE PROGRAM OFFICE AND NATIONAL PROGRAMS****1. PURPOSE**

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive establishes the responsibilities of the National Specialty Care Program Office (SCPO) and national programs in the development of policy, clinical guidance, operations, and monitoring of national quality and outcome data for the specialty care programs under its purview. **AUTHORITY:** 38 U.S.C. § 7301(b).

**2. BACKGROUND**

Beginning in 2020, SCPO began a strategic reorganization from a program office primarily responsible for policy, consultation and education, to an office with responsibility for policy and operations of the following national programs, centers of excellence, and specialty areas: Allergy and Immunology; Anesthesia; Cardiology; Dermatology; Emergency Medicine; Endocrinology/Diabetes; Gastroenterology and Hepatology; Genomic Medicine; HIV, Viral Hepatitis, and Related Conditions; Health Physics; Hospital Medicine; Infectious Diseases Service; Nephrology; Neurology and aligned Centers of Excellence in Epilepsy, Multiple Sclerosis, and Parkinson's Disease; Oncology/Hematology; Ophthalmology; Optometry; Radiation Oncology; Rheumatology; Nutrition and Food Services; Pain Management, Opioid Safety, and Prescription Drug Monitoring Program; Podiatry; Pulmonary/Critical Care; Sleep Medicine, and Tele-Critical Care. More information about SCPO and each national program and medical specialty is available at: <https://vaww.specialtycare.va.gov/programs/programs.asp>.

**NOTE:** *This is an internal VA website that is not available to the public.*

**3. DEFINITIONS**

a. **Field Advisory Board.** For the purposes of this policy, a Field Advisory Board (FAB) is a group of field-based VA health care employees with subject matter expertise in their specialty area, appointed by Executive Directors of national programs. FABs are created by charter and support national programs and SCPO leadership. **NOTE:** *This is a renaming of Field Advisory Committees (FACs) to align with Clinical Services.*

b. **National Programs.** National programs are systems of policies, strategies and tools that are designed to produce specific, measurable, enterprise-wide outcomes. Although national programs may, as part of their strategy, seek to produce outcomes at the local level, such local outcomes are part of a national strategy. National programs are managed by program offices that report to a larger program office or principal office (Assistant Under Secretary for Health or Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Health). **NOTE:** *For more information, see VHA Directive 1217, VHA Central Office (VHACO) Operating Units, dated September 10, 2021.*

c. **Program Office.** Program Offices are the main operating units at VHACO, responsible for articulating policies, developing strategies, and providing tools to the field in support of national goals. **NOTE:** *The specific responsibilities of Program Offices include: managing standard operations and processes to support safe, efficient delivery*

*of care to Veterans; serving as subject-matter and technical experts for their National Programs; communicating with internal and external stakeholders; managing quality, compliance, and risk within their span of control. For more information, see VHA Directive 1217.*

d. **Specialty Care Integrated Clinical Communities.** Specialty Care Integrated Clinical Communities (ICC) are a common, Veteran-centered operational clinical structure intended to drive a consistent Veteran experience and enable information to flow more rapidly across VHA. This enhanced communication structure is intended to enable VHA's leadership to communicate consistently between the field, through the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) and VHA Central Office (VHACO). ICCs are not synonymous with program offices, which are charged with a broader range of responsibilities that include operations, resource management, policy, etc. The Specialty Care ICC does not include the following SCPO National Programs: Anesthesia, Ophthalmology, Optometry, and Podiatry. These four programs are aligned under the Surgical ICC and are aligned under SCPO for operations and resources. Additional information about the ICCs may be found here:

<https://dvagov.sharepoint.com/sites/VACOVACOMPM/CSL/SitePages/CSLHome.aspx>.

**NOTE:** *This is an internal VA website that is not available to the public.*

e. **Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) ICC Specialty Care Lead.** The VISN ICC Specialty Care Lead is appointed by the VISN to serve as the primary point of contact (POC) between SCPO and national programs and VA medical facilities within the VISN through the ICC modernization process. For responsibilities, see 5.j.

f. **Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Specialty Consultant Group.** A *VISN Specialty Consultation Group is a group of field based VA employees with subject matter expertise in the area(s) of their National Programs. Membership appointment is in collaboration with VISN Directors. VISN Specialty Consultant Groups, provide subject matter expertise, support, and communication to the NPEDs, National Programs, SCPO Leadership, and the VISN ICC Specialty Care Leads.* For responsibilities, see 5.k.

### 3. POLICY

It is VHA policy that SCPO provides oversight of its national programs and centers of excellence. It is VHA policy that SCPO national programs provide policy, clinical guidance, and clinical operations for the medical specialties they represent.

### 4. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. **Under Secretary for Health.** The Under Secretary for Health is responsible for ensuring overall VHA compliance with this directive.

b. **Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations.** The Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations is responsible for:

(1) Communicating the contents of this directive to each of the Veterans Integrated Services Networks (VISNs).

(2) Assisting VISN Directors to resolve implementation and compliance challenges in all VA medical facilities within that VISN.

(3) Providing oversight of VISNs to ensure compliance with this directive and its effectiveness.

c. **Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services**. The Assistant Under Secretary for Health (AUSH) for Clinical Services is responsible for:

(1) Ensuring the Chief Officer for the Specialty Care Program Office (SCPO) has sufficient resources to fulfill the requirements of this directive.

(2) Supporting the Chief Officer, SCPO with implementation and oversight of this directive.

(3) Issuing VHA operational memoranda, as requested by SCPO National Program Executive Directors or the SCPO Chief Officer, to ensure all documents gathered and reports written for SCPO approved site visits are protected under 38 U.S.C. § 5705 and approved for such use by the Under Secretary for Health, with the requesting entities assuring that the request falls under the purview of a 38 U.S.C. § 5705 (see paragraph 6.b.(5)).

d. **Chief Officer, Specialty Care Program Office**. The Chief Officer, SCPO is responsible for serving as the principal advisor to the AUSH for Clinical Services on management, policy, and operations pertaining to the delivery and assessment of the Specialty Care National Programs and medical specialties aligned under SCPO (see paragraph 2.). The responsibilities of the Chief Officer, SCPO include but are not limited to:

(1) Ensuring Executive Director leadership for each national program for a minimum four-year, renewable term, dependent on percentage of FTE assigned to SCPO, performance and availability.

(2) Providing oversight and management of SCPO and guidance to ensure compliance with this directive and all VHA SCPO and SCPO national program policies.

(3) Overseeing and approving the SCPO and national program operational budgets.

(4) Ensuring timely and accurate response to internal (e.g., VA, VHA, Stakeholder Program Offices, VISN, VA medical facility, Office of Inspector General) and external (e.g., Congressional, media, Government Accountability Office, Office of Special Counsel) inquiries on behalf of the National Program.

(5) Collaborating with SCPO NP Executive Directors to ensure that SCPO National Programs have budget, human resources, travel, communications, correspondence, and other critical administrative, analytics, and IT support, either directly or through shared services in SCPO or other Clinical Services offices.

(6) Conducting meetings regularly with Executive Directors to ensure clear communication between VHA Central Office (VHACO) leadership and the field.

(7) Conducting regular meetings with VISN ICC Leads to ensure clear communication between VHACO leadership and the field.

(8) Collaborating in the development of short- and long-term goals, objectives, priorities, and plans for reporting programs, consistent with VA's and VHA's missions, strategies, and goals, or assigning an SCPO leadership designee to do so.

(9) Approving appointment of National FAB and VISN Specialty Consultant Group Chairs and Vice-Chairs based on recommendations made by Executive Directors or assigning an SCPO leadership designee to do so.

e. **Specialty Care National Program Executive Directors.** Each SCPO Executive Director (NPED) is responsible for:

(1) **Governance.**

(a) Ensuring timely and appropriate National Program budget management and resource requests.

(b) Evaluating and approving contracts for services with their specialty area.

(c) Developing, implementing, and coordinating educational initiatives and training material for providers in their specialty and other providers related to clinical care in their specialty area, as appropriate. **NOTE:** *The expectation is that SCPO NPEDs serve as advocates for the FABs, VISN Specialty Consultant Groups and field-based clinicians, as appropriate.*

(d) As applicable, support of activities related to procurement and implementation of national software in their specialty area.

(e) Developing Focused Professional Practice Evaluation (FPPE) and Ongoing Professional Practice Evaluation (OPPE) standards in collaboration with respective FAB and/or VISN Specialty Consultant Groups.

(2) **Leadership.**

(a) Determining whether a national program requires a national Field Advisory Board (FAB) in specialty area(s), a VISN Specialty Consultant Group or both, which report through the NPED, or the Chief Officer for medical specialties with no NPED.

1. Each national program is required to have at least one FAB or VISN Specialty Consultant Group for their specialty area, unless otherwise specified by this directive.

2. The following SCPO National Programs are exempt from this requirement:

a. The National Health Physics Program (NHPP) is exempt from this requirement because the VHA National Radiation Safety Committee serves, in part, as NHPP's FAB. The composition and requirements of the VHA National Radiation Safety Committee are specified in the Master Material License commitments.

b. The National Tele-Critical Care Program is exempt from this requirement as they have representation on and can disseminate guidance through the Critical Care FAB.

3. Complex National Programs include those programs with multiple initiatives, multiple internal and external stakeholders, and engagement with scientific innovations in an ecosystem with active specialty guidelines and associations. These programs may require both a FAB (or more than one FAB) and a VISN Specialty Consultant Group.

(b) As applicable, maintaining either a National FAB in specialty area(s), or a VISN Specialty Consultant Group.

1. Maintaining an updated National Program FAB and/or VISN Specialty Consultant Group Charter which details the scope, reporting structure, and subcommittees (as applicable) to provide the National Program with the requisite subject matter expertise and support in the development of policy, strategic planning, and operational functions. Templates of FAB and VISN Specialty Consultant Group Charters are posted on the SCPO Intranet site here, <https://vaww.specialtycare.va.gov/programs/programs.asp>. **NOTE:** *This is an internal VA website that is not available to the public.*

2. Recommending a FAB or VISN Specialty Consultant Group Chairperson and Vice Chairperson for approval to the SCPO National Director of Medicine, or their designee, and in accordance with the FAB Charter.

**NOTE:** *The decision to remove a Chair or Vice Chair is to be recommended by NPEDs and approved for appointment by the SCPO Chief Officer or their designee.*

(c) If a FAB is selected, collaborating with the FAB Chairperson in the selection and appointment of FAB committee membership. FAB composition, reporting structure, and membership are detailed in National Program FAB charter(s).

(d) If a VISN Specialty Consultation Group is selected, collaborating with VISN Director on the selection of a VISN Specialty Consultant to serve in this group. VISN Consultation Group composition, reporting structure, and membership are detailed in National Program VISN Specialty Consultant Group charter.

(e) Sharing new policy, program, and operational initiatives with FAB and/or VISN Specialty Consultant Groups for their comment and distribution.

(f) Establishing ad hoc (permanent or time limited) FAB or VISN Specialty Consultant Groups subcommittees to provide additional expertise.



(g) Coordinating with SCPO Leadership to respond to internal [e.g., VA, VHA, Stakeholder Program Offices, VISN, VA medical facility, Office of the Medical Inspector (OMI), and Office of Inspector General (OIG)] and external (e.g., Congressional, media, Government Accountability Office (GAO), Office of Special Counsel (OSC), professional society, advocacy organization, Veteran, and Veteran Service Organization) inquiries on behalf of the National Program.

(h) Coordinating with the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services, via SCPO, on national data reporting, communications, legislative affairs, responding to Congressional inquiries and investigations by the OSC, GAO, OIG, and OMI.

(i) Serving as a representative for the specialty areas in VHA strategic planning initiatives (e.g. electronic health record modernization (EHRM), MISSION Act implementation).

### (3) Clinical Operations.

(a) Supporting the development and maintenance of national performance data within respective specialty area, either in collaboration with other program offices and collaborative partners, or within the National Program.

(b) Several national programs within SCPO produce regular reports which provide a foundation to support regular and ongoing quality improvement of VHA specialty care by VISN and VA medical facilities, which are posted on the SCPO intranet site here: <https://vaww.specialtycare.va.gov/programs/programs.asp>. **NOTE: This is an internal VA website that is not available to the public.**

(c) Promoting a culture of integrity within a high reliability organization to ensure patient safety and continuous process improvement

(d) Providing operations of respective programs, by regular review of national performance data relevant to the subject specialty care area(s).

(e) Participating in the coordination of site visits (virtual or in person), as required or requested, within that specialty area(s).

1. Determining whether a requested site visit meets criteria for designation as a 38 U.S.C. § 5705 activity. If criteria are met, EDs must submit a proposed memorandum to the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services to be issued prior to the site visit so that all documents gathered, and reports written for SCPO approved site visits will be protected as a quality assurance activity. The proposed scope of the request should be determined by the SCPO EDs according to the criteria outlined in VHA Directive 1320, Quality Management and Patient Safety Activities that can Generate Confidential Records and Documents, dated July 10, 2020. Examples of protected information that could be collected during a site visit are detailed in Appendix A and B of VHA Directive 1320 and could include, but may not be limited to:

2. Focused Reviews. Focused Reviews which address specific issues or specific incidents, and which are designated by the responsible office at the outset of the review are confidential and privileged.

3. Other National Comparative Performance Analyses. National comparative performance analyses are data analyses describing an individual VA medical facility's or VISN's performance on key indicators of care relative to other VA medical facilities or VISNs. The analyses are based on national administrative databases or data collected specifically for quality management purposes.

4. Trending and Analysis. VHA and VISN trending and analysis of VA medical facility quality management documents and data include adverse drug reaction reports, reports of adverse events and close calls. **NOTE:** *Purely statistical information that does not explicitly or implicitly identify an individual is not covered by 38 U.S.C. § 5705.*

5. Root Cause Analysis.

6. General Oversight Reviews. VHA or VISN general oversight reviews to assess VA medical facility compliance with VHA clinical program requirements are confidential and privileged if the reviews are designated by the reviewing office at the outset of the review as protected. An additional designation must be documented by the reviewing office at the outset of each individual or ongoing review for all of the activities in this category.

(f) For site visits led by a national program, a site visit report will be submitted with recommendations for action to the requestor (e.g. Director, VA Medical Facility/VISN leadership, VISN ICC Specialty or Surgical Lead(s), or VA/VHA leadership as appropriate) per the guidance in paragraph 6 of this directive.

**(4) Expertise.**

(a) Establishing and maintaining VHA policies within that specialty area through communication and program development feedback with ICCs, FABs, VISN leadership and other stakeholders.

(b) Executing mandated programs and regulatory oversight functions associated with their specialty. At the time of publication of this policy, this includes: National Health Physics Program (NHPP), the National Neurology Program, Nutrition and Food Services (NFS), the National Pain Management, Opioid Safety and Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PMOP) and the National Radiation Oncology Program (NROP).

(c) Participating in established meetings and conferences as requested by SCPO.

(d) As applicable, managing a national clinical program that provides direct clinical care, either virtual through a telehealth model (e.g., Tele-Stroke, Tele-Pain, Tele-Critical Care, Tele-Oncology), or through another mechanism (e.g., centers of excellence).

f. **Field Advisory Board.** Each FAB is responsible for fulfilling the functions and duties as described in their charter.

g. **Field Advisory Board Chairperson.** The FAB Chairperson is a field-based VA health care employee who serves as the primary liaison to the NPED and is responsible for assisting the sponsoring NPEDs in selecting and appointing the general board membership.

(1) For medical specialties without NPEDs, FAB Chairs are responsible for assisting SCPO in representing their medical specialty in appointing general board membership.

(2) Additional responsibilities for the Chair may be outlined in national program specific charters.

h. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Director.** The VISN Director is responsible for:

(1) Collaborating with national programs on site visits (see paragraph 6.b.).

(2) As requested by the NPED, collaborating in the designation of a VISN Specialty Consultants.

i. **VISN Specialty Consultant Group Chairperson.** The VISN Specialty Consultant Group Chairperson is a field-based VA health care employee who serves as the primary liaison to the NPED. Additional responsibilities for the Chair may be outlined in the national program specific charters.

j. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Specialty Consultant Group.** The VISN Specialty Consultant Group is responsible for fulfilling the functions and duties as described in their charter.

k. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Integrated Clinical Community Specialty Care Lead.** The VISN ICC Specialty Care Lead is appointed by the VISN to serve as the primary point of contact (POC) between the SC-ICC, National Programs and specialties aligned under the Specialty Care ICC (See paragraph 3.d. for more details), and VA medical facilities within the VISN.

## **5. NATIONAL SPECIALTY CARE PROGRAM OFFICE SITE VISITS.**

a. Some SCPO National Programs conduct site visits (virtual or in person) as an important component of operations and to facilitate process change to improve outcomes. Site visits are conducted under the direction of each National Program and are subject to the availability of subject matter experts and funding or authorization for travel.

### **b. Site Visit Minimum Standards.**

(1) Requests for a site visit can be initiated by a VA medical facility, VISN, or VA/VHA Central Office (VACO/ VHACO) office and should be directed through VISN leadership, the VISN Specialty and/or Surgical ICC Lead(s), to Specialty Care Program Office NPEDs. Site visit requests will be communicated to the Office of the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services and the NPED for that specialty area.

(2) If accepted, a national program will assume the lead for the site visit. As appropriate given the nature and location of a given site visit, the NPED may request team members from VISN Directors to conduct a review and initiate the site visit protocol. If there are insufficient resources and available SMEs made available by the VISN to initiate a site visit, the NPED will work with the facility to develop an alternate strategy to address the reason for the request.

(3) At a minimum, an SCPO site visit should include: 1) a pre-call between the site visit team members and the VISN and facility using a specific agenda, developed by the NPED in association with the facility or VISN; 2) an exit call with agenda developed by the site visit team; and 3) a written report to be submitted through VA Integrated Enterprise Workflow System (commonly referred to as "VIEWS").

(4) All actions should be closed within the time frames set in the action plan or recommendations based on the site visit. The entity responsible for closing the action should be determined within the action plan or recommendations.

(5) In order for documents gathered under this activity to be protected under 38 U.S.C. § 5705 and approved for such use by the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services, the requesting entities (e.g. the NPEDs) must assure that the request falls under the purview of a 38 U.S.C. § 5705 visit (per paragraph 5.c.3). Site visits must meet criteria for designation as a 38 U.S.C. § 5705 activity as outlined in VHA Directive 1320, Quality Management and Patient Safety Activities that can Generate Confidential Records and Documents, dated July 10, 2020. If criteria are met, all documents gathered and reports written for SCPO approved site visits will be protected as a quality assurance activity.

### **c. Types of Site Visits.**

(1) **Level of Concern Site Visit.** A VISN or VA medical facility (with VISN concurrence) or an NPED or other VHACO entity, may initiate a level of concern site visit for reasons related to quality outcomes based on review of national data, report of a concern, or due to a request by an external oversight body such as the OIG or other investigation, or to comply with an OMI action plan.

(2) **Consultative Site Visit.** A VISN or VA medical facility (with VISN concurrence) may request a consultative site visit to obtain expert opinion by an NPED or designee for a specific specialty area. The site visit team typically conducts an onsite review of the VA medical facility program(s). The findings of this review are compiled and formally presented to the VA medical facility and VISN leadership.

(3) **Clinical Restructuring Site Visit.** A VA medical facility (with VISN concurrence) may request a site visit in order to assess proposed specialty programs, evaluate changes in complexity designation, or support activation of new clinical facilities. Such site visits are performed in accordance with the VHA Directive 1043, Restructuring of VHA Clinical Programs, dated November 2, 2016.

(4) **Activation of a new program offering services in a specialty area.** A VA medical facility (with VISN concurrence) may request a site visit in order to assess a new program or new facility or health care center.

(5) **Periodic Review of SCPO Centers of Excellence.** SCPO Centers of Excellence should follow guidance in VHA Directive 1215, Standards for Veterans Health Administration Centers of Excellence, dated February 14, 2017. The Department of Defense (DoD)/VA Vision Center of Excellence, however, is exempt from the reporting requirement in VHA Directive 1215 as the DoD submits these reports.

(6) **National Health Physics Program Site Visits.** NHPP performs, pursuant to VHA Directive 1129, Radiation Protection for Machine Sources of Ionizing Radiation, dated February 2, 2015, site visits to assess facility radiation safety, regulatory compliance, and related quality assurance programs regarding machine sources of ionizing radiation.

## 6. TRAINING

There are no formal training requirements associated with this directive.

## 7. RECORDS MANAGEMENT

All records regardless of format (paper, electronic, electronic systems) created by this directive shall be managed as required by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) approved records schedules found in VHA Records Control Schedule (RCS) 10-1. If you have any questions regarding any aspect of records management, you should contact the facility Records Officer. See also VHA Directive 6300, Records Management, dated October 22, 2018.

## 8. REFERENCES

- a. P. L. 110-387.
- b. P. L. 109-461.
- c. P. L. 114-223.
- d. 38 U.S.C. §§ 5705, 7301.
- e. 38 U.S.C. § 1730B.
- f. VHA Directive 1043, Restructuring of VHA Clinical Programs, dated November 2, 2016.
- g. VHA Directive 1129, Radiation Protection for Machine Sources of Ionizing Radiation, dated February 2, 2015.
- h. VHA Directive 1217, VHA Central Office Operating Units, dated September 10, 2021.

i. VHA Directive 1220(1), Facility Procedure Complexity Designation Requirements to Perform Invasive Procedures in Any Clinical Setting, dated May 13, 2019.

j. VHA Directive 1320, Quality Management and Patient Safety Activities that Can Generate Confidential Records and Documents, dated July 10, 2020.

k. VHA Directive 6300, Records Management, dated October 22, 2018.