

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** To issue Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) procedures regarding employee recognition and awards.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This handbook contains VA policy on employee recognition and awards. The pages in this transmittal replace the corresponding page numbers in Part V of VA Handbook 5017, dated April 15, 2002. The changes remove physicians and dentists from eligibility for special advancements for achievement (SAA) and special advancements for performance (SAP) per the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Personnel Enhancement Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-445, dated December 3, 2004, which established a new pay system for physicians and dentists in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)). The changes will be incorporated into the electronic version of VA Handbook 5013 that is maintained on the [Office of Human Resources Management and Labor Relations Web site](#).
- 3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Employee Relations & Performance Management Service (051), Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Labor Relations.
- 4. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5013, Performance Management Systems.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** None

CERTIFIED BY:

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

/s/Robert T. Howard
Senior Advisor to the Deputy Secretary
Supervisor, Office Information and
Technology

/s/R. Allen Pittman
Assistant Secretary for
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PART V. TITLE 38 SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS AND CASH AWARDS

1. SCOPE. This part contains policies, procedures and guidelines governing the advancement of [] podiatrists, optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, physician assistants and expanded-function dental auxiliaries appointed under authority of 38 U.S.C. 7401(1) or 7405(a); and, Title 38 hybrid employees appointed under authority of 38 U.S.C. 7401(3) or 7405(a)(1)(B). Excluded are facility directors, chiefs of staff, medical and dental residents appointed under authority of 38 U.S.C. 7406, and health care executives appointed under 38 U.S.C. 7306.

2. REFERENCES

- a. VA Directive 5017
- b. 38 U.S.C., chapters 73 and 74

3. PERSONS AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE ADVANCEMENTS. The Under Secretary for Health, or a designee, shall approve all advancements of employees covered by this part. (See appendix A of this part.)

4. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT (SAA)

a. **[Podiatrists and Optometrists and Chiropractors.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent podiatrist, optometrists and chiropractors may be advanced within the grade from one to five steps on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment providing they have demonstrated a high level of performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Examples of professional achievement are:

- (1) Outstanding and exceptional achievement as evidenced by receipt of official recognition from a recognized professional or academic organization.
- (2) Significant professional attainment in research or contributions to podiatric or optometric science and patient care worthy of publication in a national or international journal of high regard within the respective professions.]

b. **[Registered Nurses and Nurse Anesthetists**

(1) **Criteria.** Full-time, part-time and intermittent registered nurses and nurse anesthetists may be advanced within the grade from one to five steps on the basis of professional achievement provided they have demonstrated excellence in performance above that expected for the grade level or assignment and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Such achievement may be demonstrated by:

- (a) Recognition of professional groups such as certification by the appropriate national certifying body (except where such certification is required as a condition of employment) or election to an office in a national professional society; or

(b) Professional attainments in research or contributions to the advancement of health sciences and patient care worthy of national or international recognition; or

(c) Receipt of professional awards at the State or national level in recognition of significant and distinguished contributions to nursing, nurse anesthesia, or health care delivery.

(2) **Number of Steps.** The relationship between the number of steps to be granted and the size of the pay range should be considered when granting special advancements under this paragraph. For example, if an employee is in a grade with a 133 percent pay range, a five-step advancement should only be granted in extremely unusual situations where there is a clearly documented history of truly exceptional achievement.

(3) **Nurse Anesthetists.** Nurse anesthetists appointed on and after May 4, 1993, may not be given an SAA based on certification by the Council on Certification of Nurse Anesthetists. Certification is a condition of employment and may not be used as a basis for an SAA].

c. **Physician Assistants.** Full-time, part-time and intermittent physician assistants may be advanced within the grade from one to five steps on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment provided they have demonstrated excellence in performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Examples of such achievements include, but are not limited to:

(1) A graduate level degree in a field related to the Department's health care mission;

(2) Appointment to a university faculty position;

(3) Significant contributions to the Department's health care mission. Such accomplishments may result from leadership or exceptional efforts on facility, regional or national task forces or committees, or by serving as a consultant on matters relating to education research, health care management, or quality of care issues;

(4) Recognition of outstanding and exceptional achievement by a professional or academic organization;

(5) Election to office in a professional organization at the State or national level;

(6) Independently producing or serving as a principal assistant or major contributing member on research producing publishable results that advance patient care or medical science; or

(7) Attainment of specialty certification within the occupation. This does not include certification as a physician assistant by the National Commission on Certification of Physician's Assistants, which is a condition of employment as a physician assistant in VHA].

d. **Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.** Full-time, part-time, and intermittent expanded-function dental auxiliaries may be advanced within their grade from one to five steps on the basis of

professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment provided they have demonstrated excellence in performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Such achievement may be evidenced by:

- (1) Completion of significant research in either the biomedical or health care delivery area and publication of these results in a recognized journal.
- (2) Recognition of outstanding and exceptional achievement by receipt of an official award and publication of these results in a recognized journal.
- (3) Academic achievement by completion of a postgraduate degree in a related health care field].

e. [**Pharmacists, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Certified Respiratory Therapists, Registered Respiratory Therapists, Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurses, Audiologists, Speech Pathologists, Audiologist-Speech Pathologists, Dietitians, Kinesiotherapists, Medical Record Administrators/Specialists, Medical Technologists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Biomedical Engineers, 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.** These occupations may be advanced within the grade from one to five steps on the basis of professional achievement above that expected for the grade level or assignment providing they have demonstrated a high level of performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility. Please note that the granting of four or five steps should be reserved for only the highest personal achievements, and should be rare. To the extent possible, all employees should be encouraged to seek developmental opportunities that could enhance their personal qualifications and be afforded fair and equitable opportunity to accomplish such achievements. Examples of professional achievement include:

- (1) Professional attainments in health care management, education, research, and patient care that are recognized at the national or international level, or are published in a recognized journal within the employee's occupation, or
- (2) Attainment of certification by an appropriate national certifying body, unless such certification is a condition of employment within VA or meets the criteria in the qualification standard for promotion to a higher grade, or
- (3) Academic achievement by the completion of a higher-level degree in a field related to the Department's health care mission, unless the degree is a condition for promotion under the applicable qualification standard, or
- (4) Election to office in a professional organization at the state or national level in recognition of significant and distinguished contributions to the employee's occupation, or
- (5) Recognition of outstanding and exceptional achievement by a professional or academic organization, or

(6) Independently producing or serving as a principle assistant or major contributing member on research producing publishable results that advance patient care or medical science, or

(7) Appointment to a university faculty position, or

(8) Appointment to a State licensing board or national certifying or accrediting body related to the practice of the employee's occupation.

NOTE: Individuals at the top step of their grade cannot receive an increase to base pay; however, they can be recognized with a Special Contribution Award per Part III of this handbook providing they have demonstrated a high level of performance and potential for assumption of greater responsibility, and by meeting one of the examples of professional achievement stated above.

NOTE: Local facilities are encouraged to develop criteria to ensure consistent application of Special Advancements for Achievement.]

5. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT (INCLUDING USE OF STANDARDS BOARDS). See appendices B and C of this part.

6. CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (SAP)

a. **Consideration.** Full-time, part-time and intermittent podiatrists, optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, nurse anesthetists, physician assistants, and expanded-function dental auxiliaries who have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance and professional competence over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession, or who have made noted contributions in some phase of their profession, may be considered for Special Advancements for Performance (SAP). Hybrid Title 38 positions may be considered in accordance with paragraph f. Union officials serving on 100 percent official time who do not perform sufficient management-assigned duties to receive an evaluation of their performance are not eligible for SAPs. [**NOTE:** Physicians and dentists may receive a performance pay lump sum payment per Part IX of VA Handbook 5007.]

b. [] **Podiatrists, Optometrists, and Chiropractors.** An advancement of three steps, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be granted in lieu of and on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. Two steps may be granted when employee is at the eighth step of the grade. The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance as evidenced by the following examples:

(1) Demonstration of exceptional skills and aptitudes in the care and treatment of patients.

(2) Actual assumption of greater professional and/or administrative responsibility. Faculty appointment (post residency) at the rank of instructor or above may be considered as a greater responsibility.

(3) Significant research.

(4) Significant clinical contribution (including publication).

c. **Registered Nurses and Nurse Anesthetists.** An advancement of one step within the grade may be granted to covered employees when there has been a demonstrated sustained high level of performance and ability over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession. In addition, one or more of the criteria listed in chapter 4, paragraph 6 of part III of VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, must be met.

d. **Physician Assistants.** The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance and ability over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession or there must have been noted contributions in some aspect of health care. Criteria for one-step advancement will be demonstrated by superior performance as evidenced by:

(1) Assumption of a major responsibility in administering a major patient care program.

(2) Significant accomplishments associated with an academic program conducted in affiliation with the facility where the physician assistant is employed.

e. **Expanded-Function Dental Auxiliaries.** The employee must have demonstrated a sustained high level of performance and ability over and above that normally expected of employees in the particular grade and profession or there must have been noted contributions in some phase of health care. Criteria for 1-step advancement will be demonstrated by superior performance as evidenced by:

(1) Demonstration of exception skills and aptitudes in the care and treatment of patients.

(2) Significant accomplishments associated with an academic program conducted in affiliation with the VA facility where the person is employed.

f. **Pharmacists, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Certified Respiratory Therapists, Registered Respiratory Therapists, Licensed Practical or Vocational Nurses, Audiologists, Speech Pathologists, Audiologist-Speech Pathologists, Dieticians, Kinesiotherapists, Medical Record Administrators/ Specialists, Medical Technologists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Biomedical Engineers, 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.** The Quality Step Increase provisions in part III, paragraph 3 of this handbook will be used to grant one-step special advancements for performance for employees in these occupations. Special advancement for performance recommendations for Title 38 hybrid employees will not require review by a Professional Standards Board. Instead, recommendations will be forwarded directly to the appropriate approving authority listed in appendix A of this part.

NOTE: Individuals at the top step of their grade cannot receive an increase to base pay; however, they can be recognized with a Special Contribution Award per Part III of this handbook.

7. PROCESSING AND DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE. See appendices C and D of this part.

a. [] **Podiatrists, Optometrists, and Chiropractors**

(1) Approximately 90 days prior to the employee's completing the waiting period for a periodic step increase or rate adjustment, the facility will receive from the Austin Automation Center (AAC), VA Form 97, Notice of Pending Personnel Action, in duplicate, identifying the employee and stating that the employee is eligible for consideration for Special Advancement for Performance. An advancement of three steps, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be granted in lieu of and on the same due date established for a periodic step increase. Two steps may be granted when employee is at eighth step of the grade. Human Resource Management Officers shall assure that appropriate officials will be notified in anticipation of eligibility. []

(2) The advancement shall be regarded as an equivalent increase.

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

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

(1) An advancement of one step, not to exceed the maximum of the grade, may be granted at any appropriate time within any period of 52 weeks.

(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.

c. **Hybrids.** Employees in occupations identified in 38 U.S.C. 7401(3) are eligible for one-step special advancements for performance, subject to meeting the criteria for QSIs.

[]

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

a. **General.** Cash awards under this paragraph are in addition to special advancements mentioned previously in this chapter. A registered nurse or nurse anesthetist may not receive a Special Advancement for Performance and a Special Contribution Award based on the same performance, nor may they receive a Special Advancement for Achievement and a Special Contribution Award based on the same achievement or contribution. However, when it is determined appropriate, a registered nurse or nurse anesthetist may be granted a Special Advancement for Performance or Achievement and a cash award for exemplary job performance and exemplary job achievement as outlined in paragraph c below.

APPENDIX A. PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED TO APPROVE ADVANCEMENTS

1. Under Secretary for Health or designee

a. 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

a. Advancements of those covered by the scope of this handbook and VA Directive 5017 when Network Director is the appointing official.

3. Facility Directors

a. Advancements of [optometrists].

b. Advancements of [podiatrists].

c. Advancements of [expanded-function dental auxiliaries].

d. Advancements of [chiropractors].

e. Advancements of [registered nurses and nurse anesthetists].

f. Advancements of [physician assistants].

g. Advancements of [pharmacists. Facility directors may also delegate to the Chief of Pharmacy Service the advancement of pharmacists in noncentralized assignments below GS-13 and assistant chiefs of Pharmacy Service at GS-13].

h. Advancements of [occupational therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chief of staffs the advancements of occupational therapists in noncentralized assignments below GS-13].

i. Advancements of [registered respiratory therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chiefs of staff the advancements of registered respiratory therapists].

j. Advancements of [certified respiratory therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chiefs of staff the advancements of certified respiratory therapists].

k. Advancements of [licensed practical or vocational nurses. Facility directors may also delegate to nurse executives the advancements of licensed practical or vocational nurses].

l. Advancements of [physical therapists. Facility directors may also delegate to chiefs of staff the advancements of physical therapists].

APPENDIX B. PROCESSING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT

HOW TO PROCESS A SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT		
A		B
S T E P S	If an employee meets criteria specified in part V, paragraph 4 and is	then take the following steps
1	a [] podiatrist, optometrist*, chiropractor, registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, physician assistant, expanded-function dental auxiliary[, physical therapist, registered respiratory therapist, certified respiratory therapist, licensed practical or vocational nurse, occupational therapist, or pharmacist]	At the time of achievement, the employee may be recommended for advancement. Recommendations will be made to the Standards Board by the chief of service or Chief of Staff as appropriate.
2		The Standards Board will make specific recommendation as to the appropriate number of steps to be granted. The board action with supporting justification will be forwarded to the HRM office.
3		The HRM office will forward the file through channels to the appropriate approving official.
4		Special advancements for achievement will be made effective on the first day of the pay period following administrative approval of the advancement.

***NOTE:** *If an optometrist meets criteria specified in part V, paragraph 4, the employee may be recommended for advancement at the time of achievement. Recommendations will be made to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board through the facility HRM office by the chief of service or Chief of Staff as appropriate. The Director of Optometry Service and the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board may be contacted at and communications should be directed to:*

*Director, VA Optometry Service (111E1)
Veterans Health Administration
103 South Gay Street
Room 714
Baltimore, MD 21202-4061
Telephone: 1-410-779-1576
Fax: 1-410-779-1581*

APPENDIX C. DOCUMENTATION OF ADVANCEMENTS ON SF 50-B, NOTIFICATION OF PERSONNEL ACTION

Category of Employee	Appointment Authority	Nature of Action	Legal Authority	VA Required Remarks
[] podiatrists, optometrists, chiropractors, registered nurses, physician assistants, expanded-function dental auxiliaries and nurse anesthetists	38 U.S.C. 7401(1)	“Administrative Pay Increase” “Administrative Pay Increase”	38 U.S.C. 7403	“Special Advancement for Performance” “Special Advancement for Achievement”
the same Title 38 occupations listed above	38 U.S.C. 7405(a)(1) (A)	“Administrative Pay Increase” “Administrative Pay Increase”	38 U. S. C. 7405(b)	“Special Advancement for Performance” “Special Advancement for Achievement”
pharmacists, occupational and physical therapists, registered respiratory therapists, certified respiratory therapists, and licensed practical or vocational nurses	38 U.S.C. 7401(3)	“Administrative Pay Increase” “Administrative Pay Increase”	38 U.S.C. 7403	“Special Advancement for Performance” “Special Advancement for Achievement”

APPENDIX D. PROCESSING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE

HOW TO PROCESS A SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE		
A		B
S T E P S	If employee meets the criteria specified in part V, paragraph 6 and is a	then take the following steps
1	a [], podiatrist, optometrist* or chiropractor	Upon receipt of VA Form 5-97, Notice of Pending Personnel Action, the HRM office will forward the original VA Form 5-97 to the employee's service chief [or to] the Chief of Staff [], as appropriate. The duplicate copy of the notice will be placed in the pending file in the HRM office.
2		Upon receipt of the advance SF-50B, for the periodic step increase or rate adjustment, the HRM Office will remove the duplicate VA Form 5-97 from the pending file. This will be sent with SF-50B to the service chief [] or to the Chief of Staff as appropriate.
3		If the employee is recommended for advancement, recommendation will be submitted to the [] Standards Board.
4		The [] Standards Board will submit its recommendation on VA Form 10-2543, Board Action, to the HRM Office [].
5		The HRM office will forward the board action through channels to the appropriate approving authority listed in appendix A of this part.

HOW TO PROCESS A SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (CONTINUED)		
A	B	
6	In the absence of recommendation for advancement, or if the recommendation for special advancement for performance is disapproved, the normal procedures for periodic step increases or rate adjustments will be followed. (See VA Handbook 5007 [].)	
7	If the recommendation is approved, Standard Form 52, Request for Personnel Action, will be initiated []. The effective date will be the same as the due date for the periodic step increase or rate adjustment.	
8	a registered nurse, nurse anesthetist, physician assistant, expanded-function dental auxiliary[, physical therapist, registered respiratory therapist, certified respiratory therapist, licensed practical or vocational nurse, occupational therapist, or pharmacist]	If the employee is recommended for advancement, the recommendation will be submitted to the appropriate Standards Board by the chief of service or Chief of Staff, as appropriate.
9		See steps 4 and 5 above.
10		If the recommendation is approved, Standard Form 52, Request for Personnel Action, will be initiated []. The effective date will be the first day of the pay period following administrative approval.

***NOTE:** To process special advancements for performance for optometrists, follow steps 1 & 2 shown above. In step 3, recommendations will be made to the VA Central Office Optometry Professional Standards Board by t