

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT LETTER NO. 05-03-02

March 13, 2003

Position Classification and Staffing Guidance for Social Worker Positions Which Have Program Management Responsibilities

1. **Purpose.** This Human Resources Management Letter (HRML) provides guidance on classifying and staffing Social Worker, GS-185, positions that have been given responsibility for the complexity, quality, and effectiveness of their advanced practice Social Work services.

2. Background.

a. In the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the Social Work field has undergone significant changes in the past decade as a result of downsizing the workforce and a greater consolidation and integration of facilities to meet organizational missions and goals. With increased consolidation of functions and greater delegations of authority, expanded organizational structures such as care or product lines have often replaced the traditional Social Work services and departments at many facilities.

b. Meeting the challenges of these organizational structures and workload changes has been accomplished while facing significant resource constraints. In some cases, the new organizational structures have resulted in Social Worker positions functioning without higher level Social Worker positions having direct responsibility for reviewing and evaluating Social Work program and service effectiveness.

c. The Office of Human Resources Management is providing classification and staffing guidance concerning these positions. Due to the changing organizational environment, this guidance could impact the classification of Social Worker positions in the Department.

3. Guidance.

a. To ensure consistency in the evaluation and classification process, we have prepared guidance for applying the Social Worker classification standard. This guidance is **not** to be used in lieu of the OPM Position Classification Standard for Social Worker, GS-185, but rather as a supplement to that standard.

b. We have prepared rating factors for use in the recruiting process.

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c. The attachments provide guidance on the application of the Social Worker position classification standard and rating factors. The position description in Attachment B is generic and should not be used verbatim. This prototype position description serves as an illustration of Attachment A and should be modified and tailored to suit specific situations.

4. Any questions concerning this policy may be referred to Jim Halliday, Classification and Compensation Division, at (202) 273-4973.

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Attachments

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Attachment A

Position Classification Guidance

General

Journey-level Social Worker positions that perform clinical Social Worker duties are typically classified at the grade GS-11 level. Positions supporting classification at the GS-12 level will usually be based upon supervisory responsibilities or by the delegation and performance of program responsibilities by the position. The supervisory responsibilities are evaluated using the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) General Schedule Supervisory Guide, and the program responsibilities of the Social Worker positions are evaluated using the OPM classification standard for Social Worker, GS-185.

Crediting of program responsibilities

A Social Worker position, which includes direct Social Work practice in cases with complex problems and responsibility for program development and evaluation, may support classification at the grade 12 level. There must be substantial accountability for program effectiveness assigned to the position before the grade 12 level can be credited. In view of new facility organizational structures such as care or product lines, which have resulted in some Social Workers performing their assignments without any technical review or assistance by higher level professional Social Workers, the possibilities for establishing Social Worker positions with program responsibilities and accountability for the program area have increased. On page 15 of the OPM Classification Standard for Social Work Series, GS-185, are two illustrations of positions that support the grade 12 level classification. We believe that the position description described in Attachment B for a Senior Social Worker position meets the requirements for the grade 12 level based on program responsibilities and other requirements that are described in the standard.

Position Description
Senior Social Worker, Veterans Health Administration

Social Worker, GS-185-12

Organizational Location: Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities, including community-based outpatient clinics.

Introduction: The Senior Social Worker independently provides clinical psychosocial and case management services at an advanced practice level to eligible veterans and their family members to meet biological, psychological, social, and environmental needs. Veterans treated come from a wide geographic area. Their health care and psychosocial problems and needs are complex and require a high degree of clinical oversight and creative problem solving. Services are provided in health care settings (inpatient and ambulatory), and in the community.

I. Principal Duties and Responsibilities:

A. Interviews Clients and Conducts Psychosocial Assessments

Interviews veterans and their family members/significant others to establish facts about the veteran's situation, presenting problems and their causes, and the impact of such problems on the veteran's functioning and health as part of a comprehensive psychosocial assessment. Interprets and explains VA's treatment and benefit programs.

Reviews all data, subjective and objective, and makes a clinical assessment identifying needs and strengths. Effectively uses professional skill, objectivity, and insight. Uses advanced clinical training, insight, and experience to interpret data and to identify viable treatment options. Assesses high risk factors, acuity, and need for services.

Has the ability to serve veterans who tend to have frequent and severe crises, lack family or an adequate community support network, be poor at self-monitoring, frequently fail to comply with instructions and treatment, or have significant deficits in coping skills and require continuing professional psychological support.

B. Makes Psychosocial Diagnoses

Independently evaluates the client's situation, including the veteran's reaction and ability to deal with it, and arrives at a reasoned conclusion. Based on the psychosocial assessment, uses professional judgment and advanced practice skills to make a psychosocial diagnosis. Assesses at-risk factors and develops a preliminary disposition plan involving the veteran and family or significant others. Performs insightful

assessment of serious and complicated cases involving psychiatric illness involving psychiatric illness, catastrophic medical conditions, dementia and other high-risk diagnoses. Makes independent professional decisions and recommendations for agency action. Consequences to the veteran may be serious, and the results are often unpredictable.

On an inpatient/outpatient basis, finds a suitable means of treatment to help veterans and/or significant others cope with stressful situations. Treatment is aimed at helping veterans find practical solutions to problems.

C. Plans Effective Treatment

Develops psychosocial treatment plans in coordination with interdisciplinary team members, including goals for psychosocial clinical treatment. Using known available resources and the initial assessment of the veteran's likelihood to accept differing types of assistance, makes initial and continuing decisions regarding use of VA and non-VA services and referrals. Arrives at a reasoned conclusion as to the preferred course of agency action. Provides independent consultation and makes recommendations to interdisciplinary team on course of treatment.

Independently concludes the appropriate action, even in instances where actions can have serious impact on the life of the veteran. This might include long-term institutional or nursing home care or separation from family members. These decisions are based on the Senior Social Worker's advanced practice skills, professional judgment and expertise regarding the veteran's self-care capability, the family support system, the veteran's health care needs and possible consequences.

Is responsible for clinical Social Work practice in the area or program to which assigned, including promotion of Social Work services as a key component of treatment. Evaluates his/her practice as a Senior Social Worker on an on-going basis through participation in professional peer review, case conferences, research studies, or other organized means. Is active in and accepts responsibility for the development and maintenance of professional standards of treatment.

Makes adjustments to the psychosocial treatment plan and interventions based on changing needs and response to interventions. Initiates and effects changes in methods and interventions to promote efficient practice and improve patient outcomes. Effectively uses professional skills, objectivity, and insight. In cases of antagonistic, indifferent, or evasive veterans and their significant others, the Senior Social Worker deals constructively with both positive and negative reactions, understands disparate values, and reaches veterans and families from different social and ethnic groups. Communicates confidence in the veteran's ability and worth, helping the veteran address problems utilizing larger support systems as appropriate.

Participates in the assignment of veterans to treatment teams and programs. Consults with other specialists in planning treatment for veterans with co-morbidities.

D. Implements Treatment

Provides clinical services to veterans and family members/significant others in support of the veteran's treatment. Gives advice, guidance, emotional support, and other assistance. Provides individual and group counseling services, including psychotherapy in some settings. Assists and encourages veterans and significant others in facing problems, thinking them through, evaluating the situation realistically, considering alternative courses of action, and arriving at plans for using resources to resolve problems.

Organizes community services on behalf of beneficiaries, developing and coordinating procedures for use of these services by related staff. Develops working relationships and agreements with other organizations having responsibilities for the same patient population. Maintains a current and productive network of referral resources. Makes provision for referral services from other agencies, community resources (i.e., transition or halfway houses, shelters, etc.), and other Governmental agencies to resolve problems.

Professional judgment, including knowledge of normal and abnormal behavior, is an inherent competency applied in daily interactions with veterans. Regularly treats veterans with serious medical and psychiatric problems through counseling or referral. Highly developed professional, clinical, and advanced practice skills are routinely used to treat veterans with complex problems, histories of non-compliance with treatment and inability, or unwillingness to participate in treatment.

The Senior Social Worker demonstrates acceptance, interest, encouragement, and selective use of questioning, explanation, and guidance in working with veterans to help them explore their problems. Employs Social Work methods and techniques to maintain a therapeutic relationship that will help the veteran work toward the best way of dealing with his/her problems.

Receives and completes requests for services (consults) from interdisciplinary team members and from other Social Workers on complex, difficult cases, using advanced practice skills and expertise. Also provides consultation to Social Workers and interdisciplinary team members. Is responsible for development and maintenance of professional standards of practice and educating others about them.

E. Evaluation, Education, Supervision, Coaching, and Mentoring

Establishes a continuing relationship with the veteran, evaluating progress towards goals and adjusting the treatment plan as appropriate. Meets with veteran to assess

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accomplishments and re-establish goals. Monitors veteran's progress, maintains comprehensive documentation, ensures expert diagnosis and treatment of clinical disorders, and shows competent discretion in decision to adjust treatment. Makes recommendations for care and changes to interdisciplinary treatment plan.

Documents independently in the medical records utilizing paper and/or electronic formats, including psychosocial assessments, diagnostics, treatment, progress notes, follow up, and referral.

Explains veteran's treatment and progress to third parties as appropriate. Manages the quality control and evaluation of the professional services provided. Devises methods of obtaining data, and evaluates data to determine the effectiveness of treatment. Identifies consistent qualities of successful treatment and of failed treatment.

Directs/coordinates clinical and psychosocial services and is accountable for the overall effectiveness of the services provided. Modifies services to best meet the treatment needs of veterans and to promote efficient practice. Coordinates Social Work services with other services offered in the treatment program, assuring such services are complementary and comprehensive. Directs activities to maximize effectiveness, efficiency, and continuity of care for veterans. Provides case management services to those veterans at high social or medical risk, serving as the liaison to other treatment programs. Represents the program in contacts with other agencies and the public.

Provides orientation and on-going training to Social Workers and interdisciplinary team members. Conducts staff development programs for Social Workers and takes responsibility for providing opportunities to help staff update their Social Work practice skills and acquire new knowledge in contemporary treatment modalities.

Serves as a mentor to other Social Workers, particularly those at the entry level. Provides clinical supervision for unlicensed Social Workers and for Social Work associates. Is viewed by Social Workers and interdisciplinary team members as a senior clinician with advanced practice skills and expertise.

As a field instructor or preceptor, supervises Social Work graduate students and provides a training experience for them in Social Work. Works with students to develop training plans and goals. Regularly assesses student's progress toward training goals and student's overall performance. Provides reports to the school of social work field liaison on the student's progress. Participates in the school of social work's field instructor training programs, and the affiliation process. May serve as an adjunct faculty member.

Provides training to students, residents, interns, and fellows from other disciplines. Instructs them on psychosocial treatment and on the services available from Social Workers. Helps them understand family dynamics and the impact of psychosocial issues and problems on the veteran's health and response to treatment. Conducts formal workshops and classes for staff.

Offers patient and family/significant other educational services. Takes responsibility for identifying the health education needs of veterans and working with interdisciplinary team members on a plan to address those needs. Teaches health education classes.

II. Supervision and Guidance Received

The Senior Social Worker practices independently, using professional judgment and expertise to make decisions about services and treatment provided to veterans and their significant others/family members. The Senior Social Worker is given authority to make his/her own work assignments within the program area to which assigned. The Senior Social Worker consults with the supervisor as needed and with colleagues to develop knowledge and apply agency policies and practices to new matters. His/her work is reviewed for technical adequacy and conformance with procedures and practices applicable to the subject.

The Senior Social Worker uses initiative and resourcefulness in deviating from traditional methods or trends and patterns to develop new methods, criteria, and proposed new policies. The Senior Social Worker practices at an advanced level and independently gathers relevant information to guide practice, including community Social Work standards.

III. Other Significant Factors

A. Work involves intensive Social Work services requiring the exercise of mature professional judgment and the flexible use of a wide range of advanced Social Work practice skills. Provides services in serious, complex and complicated cases, often referred by other Social Workers and interdisciplinary team members. Carries full professional responsibility for cases presenting a wide range of biopsychosocial and environmental problems.

B. The purpose of the work is to plan and carry out the work processes involved in the assignment and identify the extent of services, treatments, analysis, and evaluation necessary to provide high quality, comprehensive Social Work services. The work affects a wide range of medical center activities and operations.

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C. Contacts are with numerous veterans, family members, significant others, professionals, and administrative and managerial staff. Develops working relationships with community agencies and other governmental agencies, often serving as the VA liaison or contact person. Represents VA at town hall and community meetings, having membership on boards, councils, and task forces. Has regular contact with staff from other VHA facilities, the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) office, and VA Central Office (VACO). Is frequently involved in VISN and national VHA activities with Social Work peers and leaders and managers from other disciplines. The primary purpose of contacts is to provide clinical services and to coordinate care for veterans. These contacts involve making community referrals and developing community resources, representing the VA in the community, and conducting outreach to identify new veterans. Such contacts may be uncooperative, skeptical, or contentious, requiring skill in persuasion, negotiation, motivation, or establishment of rapport. Contacts with VISN and VACO leaders are for the purpose of identifying and sharing Social Work best practices, developing Social Work standards of practice, and providing guidance at the advanced practice level.

D. The work requires extreme patience and controlling of emotions. The work may require using appropriate techniques to physically restrain veterans who present a danger to self or others. The work may also require assisting physically disabled veterans. Day-to-day work involves sitting, walking, standing and carrying light objects such as medical records. Work is typically performed in a clinical setting that exposes the incumbent to the communicable diseases common to the client population. Some work is performed in a setting away from the office where the environment cannot be controlled.

E. Meets the needs of customers while supporting the VHA, VISN, facility, and service missions and business plans. Respects diversity, and consistently communicates and treats customers (patients, visitors, volunteers, students, facility staff, community representatives) in a courteous, tactful, respectful, and fair manner. Provides the customer with consistent information according to established policies and procedures. Handles conflict and problems in dealing with the customer constructively and appropriately.

F. Takes into consideration age-related differences of the various veteran populations served:

a) *Young adulthood (20-40)*. Persons in general have normal physical functions and lifestyles. Person establishes relationships with significant others and is competent to relate to others.

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b) *Middle age (40-65)*. Persons may have physical problems and may have changes in lifestyles because children have left home or change in occupation goals.

c) *Older adulthood (65-75)*. Persons may be adapting to retirement and changing physical abilities. Chronic illness may also develop.

d) *Middle old (75-85)*. Persons may be adapting to declines in speed of movement, reaction time, and sensory abilities. Also, persons may have increasing dependence on others.

e) *Old (85 and over)*. Increasing physical problems may develop.

G. Protects printed and electronic files containing sensitive data in accordance with the provisions of the Privacy Act of 1974 and other applicable laws, Federal regulations, VA statutes and policy, and VHA policy. Protects the data from unauthorized release or from loss, alteration, or unauthorized deletion. Follows applicable regulations and instructions regarding access to computerized files, release of access codes, etc.

H. Uses word processing software to execute several office automation functions such as storing and retrieving electronic documents and files; activating printers; inserting and deleting text; formatting letters, reports, and memoranda; and transmitting and receiving e-mail. Uses the Veterans Health Information & Technology Architecture (VistA) to access information in the Medical Center Computer System.

I. Knowledge of the principles and theoretical concepts of the practice of clinical Social Work at the advanced practice level is required. Keeps up to date on new issues, trends, and treatment techniques pertinent to their area of Social Work practice. Familiarity with Social Work community practice standards and current trends in Social Work assessment and treatment is required. Knowledge of the administrative mechanisms appropriate to the assignment is necessary. Requires the ability to select appropriate treatment interventions based on the veteran's needs and ability to respond to such treatment. Also requires the ability to utilize a variety of techniques for data collection, workload capture and practice review and evaluation. Must be able to identify aspects of successful program operations that can be used for improving similar programs. Requires the ability to utilize a variety of fact-finding and data analysis techniques.

J. Requires an advanced level of knowledge and understanding of the services and benefits available from community, State, and Federal agencies. Requires knowledge of clinical and administrative aspects of the treatment program for which responsible. This includes knowledge of the contributions of other professional health care disciplines to care.

Senior Social Worker Rating Factors

Rating Factor I: Ability to practice Social Work at an advanced level. (A Social Worker at the advanced practice level demonstrates skills and abilities not expected of a journey-level Social Worker. In determining advanced levels of practice, consider such factors as scope and complexity of practice, specialty training and expertise, and number of years of independent practice. Social Workers functioning at the advanced practice level provide services to veterans with extremely complex care needs, who are referred by journey-level Social Workers because of the level of specialty care needs or the complexity of those care needs. An example would be veterans with traumatic brain injury or a new spinal cord injury.)

Rating Factor II: Ability to evaluate Social Work practice, programs and services. (Consider such factors as degree of sophistication of evaluation and evaluation techniques, complexity and volume of data analyzed, comprehensiveness of evaluation and data analysis, degree of independence and responsibility, frequency of need to perform analyses, and scope of responsibility for practice and program evaluation.)

Rating Factor III – Ability to lead and to coordinate programs and services. (Consider such factors as degree of independence and delegated responsibility, scope of responsibility for program or service operation, scope of functions of leadership roles, and degree of participation in leadership activities.)

Rating Factor IV – Ability to provide training, orientation, consultation and guidance. (Consider such factors as the degree of complexity of the information or materials communicated, the type of audience to which the information or material was communicated, the conditions under which the communication was made, and the use to which information communicated was put.)