

## 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 recognizing and rewarding employees. The pages in this issuance replace the corresponding page numbers in Part I, Part III and Appendix A to Part V of VA Handbook 5017. Revised text is contained in [brackets]. These changes will be incorporated into the electronic version of the VA Handbook 5017 that is maintained on the [Office of Human Resources Management Web site](#). Significant changes include:

a. Expands eligibility for Superior Performance Awards to non-supervisory/non-managerial title 38 employees.

b. Clarifies that Quality Step Increases may only be granted within the grade level that they are earned.

c. Increases non-tangible award values.

d. Updates and replaces the delegation to approve incentive awards memos from each of the Administrations.

**3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Employee Relations and Performance Management Service (051), Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources Management.

**4. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5017, Employee Recognition and Awards.

**5. RESCISSIONS:** None.

**CERTIFIED BY:**

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

**PART I. GENERAL PROVISIONS**

**CONTENTS**

<b>PARAGRAPH</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
1. <u>PURPOSE</u> .....	I-1
2. <u>DEFINITIONS</u> .....	I-1
3. <u>PAYMENT OF AWARDS AND NECESSARY EXPENSES RELATED TO EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION</u> .....	I-2
4. <u>COMBINATION AWARDS</u> .....	I-3
5. <u>AUTHORITY TO APPROVE AWARDS</u> .....	I-4
6. <u>AWARD RESTRICTIONS</u> .....	I-5
7. <u>AWARD AND SUGGESTION RECORDS</u> .....	I-5
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
I-A. <u>TYPES OF EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION</u> .....	I-A-1
I-B. <u>VHA DELEGATION OF APPROVAL AUTHORITY FOR [SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION, PERFORMANCE,] SUGGESTION, AND TIME OFF AWARDS; AND, QUALITY STEP INCREASES</u> .....	I-B-1
I-C. <u>NCA DELEGATION OF APPROVAL AUTHORITY FOR [SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION, PERFORMANCE,] SUGGESTION, AND TIME OFF AWARDS; AND, QUALITY STEP INCREASES</u> .....	I-C-1
I-D. <u>VBA DELEGATION OF APPROVAL AUTHORITY FOR [SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION, PERFORMANCE,] SUGGESTION, AND TIME OFF AWARDS; AND, QUALITY STEP INCREASES</u> .....	I-D-1

(2) Engaged in the performance of a Federal function under authority of law or an Executive act; and

(3) Subject to the supervision of an individual named by subparagraph (1) above while engaged in the performance of the duties of a position.

(4) Currently performing at a successful level. (Performance requirements for Special Advancements and awards for Exemplary Job Performance and Exemplary Job Achievement for title 38 employees are contained in part V of this handbook.)

c. **Key Officials.** For the purpose of this policy directive only, "key officials" refers to the following specified officials: Administration Heads, Assistant Secretaries, Other Key Officials within VA Central Office, and key field officials (network and field facility directors and equivalent officials).

d. **Necessary Expenses.** Costs associated with recognition under VA's awards program that enhance the honor and distinction given the award recipient(s).

e. **Superior Performance Awards.** A one-time cash award that may be granted to an employee [at the conclusion of the performance rating cycle] based on his/her rating of record. These awards [ ] apply to [all] title 5, [title 38 and title 38 hybrid employees who are] covered under VA's [ ] performance appraisal program [or proficiency report system.]

### **3. PAYMENT OF AWARDS AND NECESSARY EXPENSES RELATED TO EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION**

a. Normally cash awards are paid by the organization(s) benefiting from the contribution. In cases where the organization primarily benefiting from the contribution is not the recipient's employing organization, funds may be transferred to the employing organization to cover the award amount.

b. When a cash award is approved by a VA organization for a suggestion or contribution made by an employee of another Federal agency, arrangements shall be made to transfer funds to the recipient's employing agency unless the administrative costs associated with transferring funds would exceed the amount of the award.

c. Superior Performance Awards will be paid as lump-sum awards and should not be considered part of the basic pay of the employee.

d. Appropriated funds may be expended to purchase award items to be used in connection with recognition granted under VA's employee recognition and awards program.

e. If deemed appropriate by the organization head or designee, travel and per diem expenses may be paid for an award recipient(s) and his or her guest or attendant to attend an awards ceremony to receive an award from the funds or appropriations available to the organization to which the employee is assigned, the organization primarily benefiting from the contribution, or from several funds or appropriations of the various organizations benefiting.

f. Appropriated funds may be expended to pay for ceremonial expenses (see Part IV, Appendix B of this handbook for information on planning a ceremony) and to furnish light refreshments at awards ceremonies when:

(1) The ceremony is truly "ceremonial" and is not a part of the organization's typical day-to-day activities; and

(2) A determination is made by the organization head that light refreshments would enhance the effectiveness of the awards ceremony; and

(3) [Guidance published by the Office of Finance titled Incentive Awards Ceremony Expenses/Gifts and Mementos, Volume II, Chapter 4] offers guidance on necessary expenses associated with an awards ceremony.

g. Decisions regarding other expenses in connection with awards that involve expenditure of appropriated funds will be determined based on application of relevant Comptroller General decisions and VA financial policy. A summary of Comptroller General decisions relevant to the employee recognition program is located in part III, appendix E of this handbook.

h. Expenses for appropriate promotion, publicity and administration of awards may be incurred at the discretion of key officials as a necessary expense of administering their awards programs in accordance with VA financial policy. Necessary expenses may include appropriate items which enhance the ceremony and presentation of awards.

**4. COMBINATION AWARDS.** Authorized combinations of awards include cash and honorary; time off and honorary; cash and time off; and in extraordinary cases, cash and a Quality Step Increase (QSI) or time off and a QSI. To ensure compliance with the intent of applicable laws and regulations, adhere to the following guidelines when granting combination awards.

a. **Combining Cash or Time Off With a QSI.** QSIs by themselves are substantial awards that affect everything from current and future compensation budgets, to the recipient's retirement benefits. Therefore, the granting of QSIs along with a cash or time off award should be rare, and done only in circumstances where there is extraordinary performance or contributions to organizational goals during a rating period.

b. **Do Not Exceed the Value of the Accomplishment.** The value of an employee's accomplishment(s) should always be determined by using either the Scale of Awards Based on Tangible Benefits or the Scale of Awards Based on Intangible Benefits (see Appendix A to Part III of this handbook). Time off is not a cash award, but it does have an intrinsic value. This value can be determined by multiplying the amount the employee makes per hour by the number of hours of time off. For the purpose of this procedure, the value of a QSI is the increase to the employee's pay the first year. Therefore, if the value of the employee's accomplishment(s) is/are, e.g., \$2000, a supervisor may give an employee making \$25 per hour 20 hours of time off (20 X \$25/hr. = \$500), and a \$1500 cash award. Under extraordinary circumstances, if the same employee's accomplishments during the rating year are valued at \$3500, and a QSI would be a \$3000 increase to pay, the employee could receive a QSI and \$500 cash—or a QSI and up to 20 hours of time off.

**APPENDIX A. TYPES OF EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION**

	<b>AWARD</b>	<b>RECOGNIZES</b>	<b>FORM OF RECOGNITION</b>	<b>JUSTIFICATION NEEDED</b>	<b>ELIGIBILITY</b>
<b>[AWARDS BASED ON A SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION]</b>	<p>Special Contribution Award [SCA] includes “On-the-Spot” and Time Off Awards.</p>	<p>A contribution, act, service, or achievement that benefits VA/ Government. See part III and its appendix B for examples of contributions.</p>	<p>SCA - Cash Award of up to \$7,500 for an individual and \$25,000 for a group based on tangible and/or intangible benefits to VA/Federal Government.</p> <p>On-the-Spot - Minimal Cash Award, usually \$150 or less, that is granted as soon as possible after contribution of limited impact is made. May also include a non-monetary award item.</p> <p>Time Off - from 4 to 40 hours for a specific contribution. Employee may receive up to 80 hours during a 12-month period.</p>	<p>Narrative description of act and how it benefited government. See part III, appendix D. Can document SCAs using VA Form 4659a.</p>	<p>Individual employees, groups or teams (Senior Executive Service employees ineligible for Time Off Awards.)</p>
	<p>[ ] Gainsharing Award</p>	<p>Improvements in performance or productivity that are measurable as increases in productivity and that result in more effective and efficient use of resources.</p>	<p>Typically cash award based on pre-determined formula for measuring and sharing gains distributed to employees who produce gains.</p>	<p>Sufficient data to demonstrate improvements in quality, quantity and/or timeliness realized and basis for each employee’s share based on increases in productivity.</p>	<p>Individual employees, groups or teams.</p>

**APPENDIX A. EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AT A GLANCE (CONTINUED)**

	<b>AWARD</b>	<b>RECOGNIZES</b>	<b>FORM OF RECOGNITION</b>	<b>JUSTIFICATION NEEDED</b>	<b>ELIGIBILITY</b>
<b>[AWARDS BASED ON PERFORMANCE]</b>	[ ] Superior Performance Award	Sustained performance beyond normal job requirements as reflected in the employee's most recent rating of record.	A one-time cash award with the amount determined by the employee's performance rating.	A complete copy of the employee's performance appraisal [or proficiency report] and a narrative description of any factors that were considered but not [described] in the appraisal, e.g., the employee's self-assessment.	Employees covered under VA's performance management system [or proficiency report system.]
	Quality Step Increase	Exceptional performance during the most recent performance appraisal cycle.	Adjustment in base pay to next step of grade.	Narrative description demonstrating exceptional performance on all job elements and how performance contributed to accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives.	Individual [title 5] GS employees only.

**APPENDIX A. EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AT A GLANCE (CONTINUED)**

<b>[OTHER AWARDS]</b>	Honor Award	Contributions or achievements that are unique and deserving of recognition beyond or other than that provided by cash.	Typically a plaque, certificate, medal, desk item or other item used to bestow honor.	Narrative description of contribution or achievement being recognized by the particular award and benefits to VA.	Individual employees, groups of employees.
	Non-monetary Award	Contributions or achievements that may not warrant a cash award or may supplement a cash or time off award.	Award items of nominal value such as pen-and-pencil sets, mugs, water bottles, desk organizers, etc. whose primary value is as a form of recognition and not as an object with monetary value.	Brief narrative description of contribution or achievement being recognized by the particular type of award.	Individual employees, groups of employees.

[APPENDIX B. VHA DELEGATION OF APPROVAL AUTHORITY FOR SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION, PERFORMANCE, SUGGESTION, AND TIME OFF AWARDS; AND, QUALITY STEP INCREASES

1. DEFINITIONS

- a. **Special Contribution Award.** For the purpose of this handbook, a special contribution award refers to a cash award given for a special contribution made by an individual or group of individuals, for on-the-spot recognition, or for achievement of productivity/gainsharing/goalsharing program.
- b. **Superior Performance Award.** A one-time cash award that may be granted to a title 5, title 38 or title 38 hybrid employee based on his/her performance appraisal rating of record provided that the rating of record is at the fully successful level (or equivalent) or above.
- c. **Suggestion.** Employee suggestions are ideas that define a problem or objective, present a solution or plan for improvement and tell how the solution will improve the efficiency, economy or effectiveness of government operations or otherwise benefit the government.
- d. **Time Off Award.** Time Off Awards are time off from 4 to 40 hours (or 1-5 days for VHA full-time physicians, dentists, optometrists, and podiatrists) in recognition of a specific contribution.
- e. **Title 5 Quality Step Increase (QSI).** A QSI is an increase to an employee's rate of basic pay from one step of the grade to the next step that is granted in recognition of excellence in performance during the last appraisal cycle. The purpose of a QSI is to recognize, on an individual basis, consistently high achievers by granting faster than normal step increases.

2. SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION AWARDS

a. Delegations

(1) VHA Central Office

- (a) Deputy Under Secretaries for Health, or their designees; VA Central Office (VACO) chief officers; and the Dean, VA Learning University, are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$25,000** for group special contribution awards for eligible Senior Executive Service (SES) and title 38 equivalents, title 5 employees, title 38 employees, and title 38 hybrid employees so long as no one employee receives more than \$7,500.
- (b) VACO chief consultants and staff office directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$16,500** for group special contribution awards for title 5 employees, title 38 employees and title 38 hybrid employees so long as no one employee receives more than \$5,000.

**PART I  
APPENDIX B**

**(2) VHA Field Facilities**

(a) Field Network directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$25,000** for group special contribution awards for eligible SES and title 38 equivalents, title 5 employees, title 38 employees and title 38 hybrid employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$7,500**. **Approval authority may be re-delegated as appropriate.**

(b) Field facility directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$16,000** for group special contribution awards for title 5 employees, title 38 employees, and title 38 hybrid employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$5,000**. **Approval authority may be re-delegated as appropriate.**

**b. Restrictions**

(1) When approving group special contribution awards, the award amount for any employee within a group cannot exceed the approving official's dollar limit for an individual special contribution award (e.g., a field facility director can approve group special contribution awards up to and including \$16,000 as long as the award amount for any employee within the group does not exceed \$5,000).

(2) Award amounts must be consistent with the Scales of Awards Based on Tangible and Intangible Benefits located in VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix A.

(3) Only Field Network and facility directors may act as both the recommending and approving official. Otherwise, the approving official must be at a higher management level than the official who recommended the award.

(4) See VA Handbook 5017, Part I, paragraph 6, for additional award restrictions.

**3. SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE AWARDS**

**a. Delegations**

**(1) VHA Central Office**

(a) Deputy Under Secretaries for Health, or their designees; VA Central Office (VACO) chief officers; and the Dean, VA Learning University are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for an individual performance award for eligible SES and title 38 equivalent employees, title 5 employees, title 38 employees and title 38 hybrid employees.

(b) VACO chief consultants and staff office directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for an individual performance award for title 5 employees, title 38 employees and title 38 hybrid employees.

**(2) VHA Field Facilities**

(a) Field Network directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for an individual performance award for eligible SES and title 38 equivalent employees, title 5 employees, title 38 employees and title 38 hybrid employees.

(b) Field facility directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for an individual performance award for title 5 employees, title 38 employees, and title 38 hybrid employees.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) Performance awards may only be awarded if the rating of record for title 5, title 38 and title 38 hybrid employees is at the fully successful level (or equivalent) or above.

(2) The process used for calculating performance awards must ensure a meaningful distinction is made so that employees with higher ratings of record receive larger cash awards than those with lower ratings of record. For example, a GS-5 with an outstanding rating must receive a higher dollar amount than a GS-5 who received a highly successful rating.

(3) Meaningful distinctions must be made at the level award decisions are made. For example, if performance award decisions are made at the medical center level then all awards within that regional level must reflect a meaningful distinction.

(4) Only Field Network and facility directors may act as both the recommending and approving official. Otherwise, the approving official must be at a higher management level than the official who recommended the performance award.

**4. SUGGESTION AWARDS**

**a. Delegations**

**(1) VHA Central Office**

(a) The Deputy Under Secretaries for Health, or their designees, are authorized to approve up to and including **\$10,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees.

(b) VACO chief officers and the Dean, VA Learning University, are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees.

(c) VACO chief consultants and staff office directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees.

**PART I  
APPENDIX B**

**(2) VHA Field Facilities**

(a) Field Network directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees. **Approval authority may be re-delegated, as appropriate.**

(b) Field facility directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees. **Approval authority may be re-delegated, as appropriate.**

**b. Restrictions**

(1) In order to qualify for a cash award, adopted suggestions must have measurable dollar benefits of at least \$250, or intangible benefits of comparable value, or a combination of both.

(2) In determining the amount of the award for adopted suggestions, the appropriate scale of awards in Appendix A to Part III of VA Handbook 5017 will be used.

(3) Only Field Network and facility directors may act as both the recommending and approving official. Otherwise, the approving official must be at a higher management level than the official who recommended the award.

**5. TIME OFF AWARDS**

**a. Delegations**

**(1) VHA Central Office**

(a) Deputy Under Secretaries for Health, or their designees; VACO chief officers; and the Dean, VA Learning University, are authorized to approve time off awards up to and including **40 hours** for eligible employees.

(b) VACO chief consultants and staff office directors are authorized to approve time off awards up to and including **32 hours** for eligible employees.

(2) **VHA Field Facilities.** Field Network and facility directors are authorized to approve time off awards of up to and including **40 hours** for eligible employees. **Approval authority may be re-delegated, as appropriate.**

**b. Restrictions**

(1) Employees in the SES and equivalents appointed under title 5 are excluded from receiving time off awards.

(2) The minimum time off award is 4 hours, except for VHA full-time title 38 employees paid on a daily basis, who may only be granted time off in increments of 1 day (8 hours equivalent).

(3) Not more than 40 hours may be granted to an employee for a specific contribution.

(4) The maximum amount of time off that may be granted to any employee during a 12-month period is 80 hours. Normally, each time off award must be used within 180 days after the date on which it was approved. At the request of the employee, a supervisor may extend the period of time to use a time off award for an additional 180 days. In no case may the total period for use of the award exceed 1 year from the date the time off award was granted.

(5) The number of hours granted for a time off award must be consistent with the Scale of Time Off Awards located in VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix F.

(6) Only Field Network and facility directors may act as both the recommending and approving official. Otherwise, all time off awards in excess of 1 day must be approved by an official at a higher management level than that which recommended the award.

## **6. TITLE 5 QSIs**

### **a. Delegations**

#### **(1) VHA Central Office**

(a) Deputy Under Secretaries for Health, or their designees; VACO chief officers; and the Dean, VA Learning University, are authorized to approve QSIs for title 5 employees in pay categories through the **GS-15 level** under their jurisdiction.

(b) VACO chief consultants and staff office directors are authorized to approve QSIs for title 5 employees in pay categories through the **GS-14 level**.

(2) **VHA Field Facilities.** Field Network and facility directors are authorized to approve QSIs for title 5 employees in pay categories through the **GS-15 level**. **Approval authority may be re-delegated, as appropriate.**

### **b. Restrictions**

(1) Only General Schedule employees appointed under title 5 are eligible to receive QSIs.

(2) A QSI may not be granted to an eligible employee who has received a QSI within the preceding 52 consecutive calendar weeks.

(3) A QSI may not be granted to an eligible employee who is in step 10 of the pay grade.

(4) Only Field Network and facility directors may act as both the recommending and approving official. Otherwise, the approving official must be at a higher management level than the official who recommended the QSI.]



[APPENDIX C. NCA DELEGATION OF APPROVAL AUTHORITY FOR SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION, PERFORMANCE, SUGGESTION, AND TIME OFF AWARDS; AND, QUALITY STEP INCREASES

1. DEFINITIONS

a. **Special Contribution Award.** For the purpose of this handbook, a special contribution award refers to a cash award given for a special contribution made by an individual or group of individuals, for on-the-spot recognition, or for achievement of productivity/gainsharing/goalsharing program.

b. **Superior Performance Award.** A one-time cash award that may be granted to an employee based on his/her rating of record provided that the rating of record is at the fully successful level (or equivalent) or above.

c. **Suggestion.** Employee suggestions are ideas that define a problem or objective, present a solution or plan for improvement and tell how the solution will improve the efficiency, economy or effectiveness of government operations or otherwise benefit the government.

d. **Time Off Award.** Time off awards are time off from 4 to 40 hours in recognition of a specific contribution.

e. **Title 5 Quality Step Increase (QSI).** A QSI is an increase to an employee's rate of basic pay from one step of the grade to the next step that is granted in recognition of excellence in performance during the last appraisal cycle. The purpose of a QSI is to recognize, on an individual basis, consistently high achievers by granting faster than normal step increases.

2. SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION AWARD

a. Delegations

(1) VA Central Office

(a) The Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs is authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual special contribution and up to and including **\$25,000** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$7,500**.

(b) The Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs is authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$15,000** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$5000**.

(c) The Director of Office of Field Programs, Office of Finance and Planning, Communication Management Service, Management Support Service, State Cemetery Grants Service, Office of Construction Management, Information Technology and Business Requirement Services are authorized

**PART I  
APPENDIX C**

to recommend and approve up to and including **\$4,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$10,000** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no employee receives more than **\$4,000**.

(d) Service directors in VACO are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$3,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$8,000** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no employee receives more than **\$3,000**.

**(2) Field Facilities**

(a) Memorial Service Network (MSN) directors are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$3,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$8,000** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$3,000**.

(b) Cemetery directors at the:

(1) GS-13 and GS-14 grade levels are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$2,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$5,000** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$2,000**.

(2) GS-11 and GS-12 grade levels are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$1,500** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$3,500** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$1,500**.

(3) GS-9 grade level are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$1,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$2,000** for group special contribution awards for all eligible employees so long as no one employee receives more than **\$1,000**.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) When approving group special contribution awards, the award amount for any employee within a group cannot exceed the approving official's dollar limit for an individual special contribution award (e.g., a MSN director can approve group special contribution awards up to and including \$8,000 as long as the award amount for any employee within the group does not exceed \$3,000).

(2) Award amounts must be consistent with the Scales of Awards Based on Tangible and Intangible Benefits located in VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix A.

(3) See VA Handbook 5017, Part I, paragraph 6, for additional award restrictions.

### 3. SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE AWARD

#### a. Delegations

##### (1) VA Central Office

(a) The Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs is authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual performance awards.

(b) The Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs is authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual performance awards.

(c) The Director of Office of Field Programs, Office of Finance and Planning, Communication Management Service, Management Support Service, State Cemetery Grants Service, Office of Construction Management, Information Technology and Business Requirement Services are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$4,000** for individual performance awards.

(d) Service directors in VACO are authorized to recommend and approve up to an including **\$3,000** for individual performance awards.

##### (2) Field Facilities

(a) MSN directors are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$3,000** for individual performance awards.

(b) Cemetery directors at the:

(1) GS-13 and GS-14 grade levels are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$2,000** for individual performance awards.

(2) GS-11 and GS-12 grade levels are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$1,500** for individual performance awards.

(3) GS-9 grade level is authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$1,000** for individual performance awards.

#### b. Restrictions

(1) Performance awards may only be awarded if the rating of record is at the fully successful level (or equivalent) or above.

(2) Performance awards must make meaningful distinctions based on levels of performance. Employees with higher ratings of record must receive a higher dollar amount than those with lower ratings of record. For example, a GS-5 with an outstanding rating must receive a higher dollar amount than a GS-5 who received a highly successful rating.

**PART I  
APPENDIX C**

(3) Meaningful distinctions in award amounts must be made at the level the award decisions are made. For example, if performance award decisions are made at the cemetery director level then all awards authorized by that director must reflect a meaningful distinction.

#### **4. SUGGESTION AWARD**

##### **a. Delegations**

##### **(1) VA Central Office**

(a) The Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs is authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$10,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

(b) The Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs is authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

(c) The Director of Office of Field Programs, Office of Finance and Planning, Communication Management Service, Management Support Service, State Cemetery Grants Service, Office of Construction Management, Information Technology and Business Requirement Services are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

(d) Service directors in VACO are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$3,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

##### **(2) Field Facilities**

(a) MSN directors are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$3,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

##### **(b) Cemetery directors at the:**

(1) GS-13 and GS-14 grade levels are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$2,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

(2) GS-11 and GS-12 grade levels are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$1,500** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

(3) GS-9 grade level are authorized to recommend and approve up to and including **\$1,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for all eligible employees.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) In order to qualify for a cash award, adopted suggestions must have measurable dollar benefits of at least \$250, or intangible benefits of comparable value, or a combination of both.

(2) In determining the amount of the award for adopted suggestions, the appropriate scale of awards in Appendix A to Part III of VA Handbook 5017 will be used.

**5. TIME OFF AWARD**

**a. Delegations**

**(1) VA Central Office**

(a) The Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs and Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs are authorized to recommend and approve time off awards up to and including **40 hours** for all eligible employees.

(b) The Director of Office of Field Programs, Office of Finance and Planning, Communication Management Service, Management Support Service, State Cemetery Grants Service, Office of Construction Management, Information Technology and Business Requirement Services are authorized to recommend and approve time off awards up to and including **27 hours (or the equivalent of 3 workdays)** for all eligible employees.

(c) Service directors in VACO are authorized to recommend and approve time off awards up to and including **18 hours (or the equivalent of 2 workdays)** for all eligible employees.

**(2) Field Facilities**

(a) MSN directors are authorized to recommend and approve time off awards up to and including **18 hours (or the equivalent of 2 workdays)** for all eligible employees.

(b) Cemetery directors are authorized to recommend and approve time off awards up to and including **8 hours (or the equivalent of 1 workday)** for all eligible employees.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) Employees in the Senior Executive Service (SES) and equivalents appointed under title 5 are excluded from receiving time off awards.

(2) The minimum time off award is 4 hours and not more than 40 hours may be granted to an employee for a specific contribution.

## PART I

## APPENDIX C

(3) The maximum amount of time off that may be granted to any employee during a 12-month period is 80 hours and recipients must use the time off award within 180 days. At the request of the employee, a supervisor may extend the period of time to use a time off award for an additional 180 days. In no case may the total period for use of the award exceed 1 year from the date the time off award was granted.

(4) The number of hours granted for a time off award must be consistent with the Scale of Time Off Awards located in VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix F.

**6. TITLE 5 QSIs****a. Delegations**

(1) **VA Central Office.** The Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs; Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs; and the Director of Office of Field Programs, Office of Finance and Planning, Communication Management Service, Management Support Service, State Cemetery Grants Service, Office of Construction Management, Information Technology and Business Requirement Services are authorized to recommend and approve QSIs.

**(2) Field Facilities**

(a) MSN directors are authorized to recommend and approve QSIs for all eligible employees.

(b) Cemetery directors may recommend QSIs and route to MSN directors for approval.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) Only General Schedule employees appointed under title 5 are eligible to receive QSIs.

(2) A QSI may not be granted to an eligible employee who has received a QSI within the preceding 52 consecutive calendar weeks.

(3) A QSI may not be granted to an eligible employee who is in step 10 of the pay grade.

**7. ADDITIONAL DELEGATIONS.** Service directors and cemetery directors may delegate their authority to recommend or approve (but not both) to the next lower level supervisor. The award amount associated with this delegation will not exceed 75% of the original delegated authority.]

[APPENDIX D. VBA DELEGATION OF APPROVAL AUTHORITY FOR  
SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION, PERFORMANCE, SUGGESTION, AND  
TIME OFF AWARDS; AND, QUALITY STEP INCREASES

**1. DEFINITIONS**

a. **Special Contribution Award.** For the purpose of this handbook, a special contribution award refers to a cash award given for a special contribution made by an individual or group of individuals, for on-the-spot recognition, or for achievement of productivity/gainsharing/goalsharing program.

b. **Superior Performance Award.** A one-time cash award that may be granted to an employee based on his/her rating of record provided that the rating of record is at the fully successful level (or equivalent) or above.

c. **Suggestion.** Employee suggestions are ideas that define a problem or objective, present a solution or plan for improvement and tell how the solution will improve the efficiency, economy or effectiveness of government operations or otherwise benefit the government.

d. **Time Off Award.** Time Off Awards are time off from 4 to 40 hours in recognition of a specific contribution.

e. **Title 5 Quality Step Increase (QSI).** A QSI is an increase to an employee's rate of basic pay from one step of the grade to the next step that is granted in recognition of excellence in performance during the last appraisal cycle. The purpose of a QSI is to recognize, on an individual basis, consistently high achievers by granting faster than normal step increases.

**2. SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION AWARDS**

a. **Delegations**

(1) **VBA Central Office**

(a) The Under Secretary for Benefits and Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$25,000** for group special contribution awards so long as no one employee receives more than \$7,500.

(b) Associate Deputy Under Secretaries (Policy and Programs, Field Operations, and Management), the Chief of Staff, the Chief Financial Officer and Area Directors (Central, East, South and West) are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$10,000** for group special contribution awards so long as no one employee receives more than \$5,000.

**PART I  
APPENDIX D**

(2) **VBA Regional Offices.** Regional, Service, and Staff Office directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$3,500** for individual special contribution awards and up to and including **\$7,000** for group special contribution awards so long as no one employee receives more than \$3,500.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) When approving group special contribution awards, the award amount for any employee within a group cannot exceed the approving official's dollar limit for an individual special contribution award (e.g., a regional director can approve group special contribution awards up to and including \$7,000 as long as the award amount for any employee within the group does not exceed \$3,500.)

(2) Award amounts must be consistent with the Scales of Awards Based on Tangible and Intangible Benefits located in VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix A.

(3) See VA Handbook 5017, Part I, paragraph 6, for additional award restrictions.

**3. SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE AWARDS**

**a. Delegations**

**(1) VBA Central Office**

(a) The Under Secretary for Benefits and Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits are authorized to approve up to and including **\$7,500** for an individual performance award.

(b) Associate Deputy Under Secretaries (Policy and Programs, Field Operations, and Management), the Chief of Staff, the Chief Financial Officer and Area Directors (Central, East, South and West) are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for an individual performance award.

(2) **VBA Regional Offices.** Regional, Service and Staff Office directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$3,500** for an individual performance award.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) Performance awards may only be awarded if the rating of record is at the fully successful level (or equivalent) or above.

(2) Performance awards must make meaningful distinctions based on levels of performance. Employees with higher ratings of record must receive a higher dollar amount than those with lower ratings of record. For example, a GS-5 with an outstanding rating must receive a higher dollar amount than a GS-5 who received a highly successful rating.

(3) Meaningful distinctions must be made at the level award decisions are made. For example, if performance award decisions are made at the regional level then all awards within that regional level must reflect a meaningful distinction.

#### **4. SUGGESTION AWARDS**

##### **a. Delegations**

###### **(1) VBA Central Office**

a. The Under Secretary for Benefits and Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits, or their designees, are authorized to approve up to and including **\$10,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees.

b. Associate Deputy Under Secretaries (Policy and Programs, Field Operations, and Management), the Chief of Staff, the Chief Financial Officer and Area Directors (Central, East, South and West) are authorized to approve up to and including **\$5,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees.

(2) **VBA Regional Offices.** Regional, Service, and Staff Office directors are authorized to approve up to and including **\$1,000** for individual and group suggestion awards for employees.

##### **b. Restrictions**

(1) In order to qualify for a cash award, adopted suggestions must have measurable dollar benefits of at least \$250, or intangible benefits of comparable value, or a combination of both.

(2) In determining the amount of the award for adopted suggestions, the appropriate scale of awards in Appendix A to Part III of VA Handbook 5017 will be used.

#### **5. TIME OFF AWARDS**

##### **a. Delegations**

###### **(1) VBA Central Office**

(a) The Under Secretary for Benefits or Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits, or their designees, are authorized to approve time off awards up to and including **40 hours** for employees.

(b) Associate Deputy Under Secretaries (Policy and Programs, Field Operations, and Management), the Chief of Staff, the Chief Financial Officer and Area Directors (Central, East, South and West) are authorized to approve time off awards up to and including **32 hours** for employees.

**PART I  
APPENDIX D**

(2) **VBA Regional Offices.** Regional, Service, and Staff Office directors are authorized to approve time off awards of up to and including **24 hours** for employees.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) Employees in the Senior Executive Service (SES) and equivalents appointed under title 5 are excluded from receiving time off awards.

(2) The minimum time off award is 4 hours and not more than 40 hours may be granted to an employee for a specific contribution.

(3) The maximum amount of time off that may be granted to any employee during a 12-month period is 80 hours and recipients must use the time off award within 180 days. At the request of the employee, a supervisor may extend the period of time to use a time off award for an additional 180 days. In no case may the total period for use of the award exceed 1 year from the date the time off award was granted.

(4) The number of hours granted for a time off award must be consistent with the Scale of Time Off Awards located in VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix F.

**6. TITLE 5 QSIs**

**a. Delegations**

**(1) VBA Central Office**

a. The Under Secretary for Benefits or Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits, or their designees, are authorized to approve QSIs for title 5 employees in pay categories through the GS-15 level under their jurisdiction.

b. Associate Deputy Under Secretaries (Policy and Programs, Field Operations, and Management), the Chief of Staff, the Chief Financial Officer, Area Directors (Central, East, South and West) and Regional Offices are authorized to approve QSIs for title 5 employees in pay categories through the GS-15 level under their jurisdiction.

**b. Restrictions**

(1) Only General Schedule employees appointed under title 5 are eligible to receive QSIs.

(2) A QSI may not be granted to an eligible employee who has received a QSI within the preceding 52 consecutive calendar weeks.

(3) A QSI may not be granted to an eligible employee who is in step 10 of the pay grade.]

**PART III. RECOGNIZING INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP CONTRIBUTIONS****1. SPECIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

a. **General Provisions.** Recognition through a cash award, time off award or other honorary or non-monetary means may be granted to an individual employee, group or team of employees in recognition of a contribution, act, service or achievement that benefits VA/Federal Government [ ]. The type and amount of award will be based on the value of the contribution to the organization. In determining the amount of an award, the appropriate table(s) in appendix A of this part will be used. If a ceremony will be used to recognize award recipients, see [VA Handbook 5017, Part IV, Appendix B].

**NOTE:** *Because recognition has its greatest impact as a motivational tool when it follows closely the contribution being recognized, every effort should be made by supervisors and managers to submit a recommendation as soon as possible after the contribution is made.*

(1) There is no limit on the number of special contribution awards that may be granted to an employee in any given period, either as an individual or as a member of a group or team.

(2) When a special contribution award is based on a group contribution, each contributing employee, including supervisors, should share in the award. The award may be granted in equal shares or in shares which reflect actual demonstrated differences in contributions to the group effort.

[ ]

(3) Some examples of contributions for which a special contribution award may be appropriate are:

(a) High-level performance on a [special project while continuing to perform regular duties];

(b) Creative efforts that resulted in an important contribution to the efficiency or economy of VA operations or improved customer service such as streamlining processes or procedures or a significant reduction in paperwork;

(c) A major medical advancement;

(d) Overcoming unusual, unique, or difficult circumstances in the performance of duties with exceptional results that warrant recognition;

(e) Enhanced service delivery to customers through reengineering of work processes or procedures;

(f) Significant improvements in the quality of services and products for VA customers; and

(g) An act of heroism or unusual courage or competence in an emergency situation which was connected with or related to official employment;

**NOTE:** *See checklist in VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix D for additional examples of contributions that may warrant a special contribution award.*

[(4)] Examples of situations where a monetary award is not appropriate, but an employee may be eligible for a time off award or other nonmonetary recognition, are included in [VA Handbook 5017, Part III, Appendix B].

[(5)] Generally, award recommendations will be submitted as soon as possible following the contribution. Cash and time off awards recommendations should be submitted using VA Form 4659, Incentive Awards Recommendation and Approval, and will contain a justification that summarizes the contribution and includes a description of the benefits to VA or beyond from the contribution which serve as the basis for the award. The justification may be completed on VA Form 4659a, Checklist for Special Contribution Award Recommendations, as an attachment to VA Form 4659, or on bond paper. Recommendations for special awards programs, such as "On-the-Spot" awards, may be submitted on alternative forms as indicated in the procedures for the special awards programs.

#### **b. Types Of Awards for Special Contributions**

(1) Special Contribution Awards of up to \$10,000 per employee to recognize individual, group or team efforts.

(2) On-the-Spot Awards provide immediate recognition of one-time, short-term efforts that do not meet the minimum requirements for a special contribution award. On-the-Spot Awards may be cash or nonmonetary or both.

(3) A Time Off Award is an excused absence granted to an employee without charge to leave or loss of pay. Time off may be used alone or in combination with other forms of special contribution awards. See appendix F of this part for additional information on time off awards.

(4) Non-monetary awards are discussed in [VA Handbook 5017, Part IV, paragraph 2].

**2. SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE AWARDS.** A superior performance award is a one-payment cash award that may be granted to an employee for sustained superior performance on job responsibilities over the period of a rating year. Managers should encourage and reward excellence in performance by granting these awards when appropriate to deserving employees. The factor used in identifying award recipients will be performance ratings.

#### **a. Eligibility**

(1) [All title 5, title 38, and title 38 hybrid employees, who are covered under VA's performance appraisal program or proficiency rating system are eligible to receive superior performance awards.]

(2) Superior performance awards are not required, but may be granted to [title 5, title 38 and title 38 hybrid] employees [who are covered by VA's performance appraisal system if a rating of fully successful/satisfactory or higher is achieved. A fully successful rating must include the attainment of an exceptional achievement level on at least one critical element to be eligible for an award.

(3) Title 38 employees who are covered by VA's proficiency report system may be considered for a superior performance award if a rating of satisfactory or higher is achieved.

(4) Recognition for superior performance may include a combination of both a QSI and cash award in accordance with Part I, paragraph 4 of this handbook.]

b. **Period of Performance.** This will coincide with the rating year.

c. **Amount of Superior Performance Award.** The dollar amount of the superior performance award will be determined by the performance rating attained [and must reflect meaningful distinctions based on levels of performance to ensure employees with higher ratings of record receive larger cash awards.

d. **Processing.** All cash awards issued as a result of an employee's annual performance rating under the performance appraisal program, including VHA's Executive Career Field Program, or proficiency report system, will be processed as a superior performance award under the provisions of this chapter. Generally, award recommendations will be submitted as soon as possible following the end of the rating cycle. Performance awards will be submitted using VA Form 4659, Incentive Awards Recommendation and Approval, with a complete copy of the employee's performance appraisal or proficiency report, and a narrative description of any factors that were considered but not described in the appraisal, e.g., the employee's self-assessment.

e.] **Appeal.** The failure to grant an employee a superior performance award or the amount of a superior performance award may not be appealed.

**3. QUALITY STEP INCREASE (QSI).** A quality step increase is an increase to an employee's rate of basic pay from one step of the grade to the next step that is granted in recognition of excellence in performance during the last appraisal cycle. The purpose of such increases is to recognize, on an individual basis, consistently high achievers by granting faster than normal step increases.

a. **Eligibility**

(1) Only General Schedule employees [appointed under title 5] are eligible to receive [QSIs].

(2) [Title 38 employees identified in 38 U.S.C. 7401 (with the exception of physicians and dentists) and title 38 hybrid employees in occupations identified in 38 U.S.C. 7401(3) are eligible for one-step Special Advancement for Performance in accordance with Part V, paragraph 6 of this handbook.

(3) [QSIs] are not required but may be granted to employees who receive an Outstanding rating of record.

[NOTE: *QSIs may only be granted at the grade level in which they are earned.*]

(4) QSIs are appropriate when an employee's sustained high level of achievement merits faster than normal advancement of basic pay and that employee is not in step 10 of the grade. A QSI not only

increases an employee’s base pay, but also increases the amount of retirement benefits, the amount of Government life insurance for covered employees, and often results in a higher basic pay adjustment upon promotion of the employee. Because a QSI represents an increase in base pay, this type of recognition may increase an organization’s budget well into the future.

[(5) Recognition for superior performance may include a combination of both a QSI and cash award in accordance with Part I, paragraph 4 of this handbook.]

**NOTE:** *Because a QSI represents an increase in base pay, this type of recognition may increase an organization’s budget well into the future.*

**b. Submission.** Recommendations for [QSIs] will be submitted as soon as possible after the end of the [performance rating] cycle on VA Form 4659. [A complete copy of the employee’s most recent performance appraisal, including specific examples of job performance justifying the performance rating level assigned, must be attached to VA Form 4659.] Standard Form 52, Request for Personnel Action, should also be provided to ensure timely processing.

**c. Restrictions.** A [QSI] may not be granted to an eligible employee who has received a [QSI] within the preceding 52 consecutive calendar weeks or who is in step 10 of the pay grade.

**d. Effect on Regular Within-Grade Increases.** An employee who receives a [QSI] does not start a new waiting period to meet the time requirements for a regular within-grade increase. If the increase places the employee in the *fourth or seventh step* of his or her pay grade, however, the waiting period for the within-grade increase is extended by 52 weeks. Because a QSI is intended to recognize and motivate an employee, the avenue most advantageous to the employee should be taken. Also, if the employee is about to be promoted, the QSI may or may not benefit the employee once promoted.

**NOTE:** *The following chart compares the impact of the effective date of a QSI on an employee’s progression from step 3 through step 5 of the grade. In the illustration, a decision was made to award a QSI to an employee who is due for a within-grade increase to step 4 in January 2004. The last two columns illustrate how making the QSI effective before or after the due date of the step 4 within-grade increase affects the due date for the within grade increase to step 5.*

<b>Impact of QSI on Regular Within-Grade Increase</b>		
<b><i>Regular Within-Grade (WGI) Progression</i></b>	<b><i>Impact of QSI</i></b>	<b><i>Impact When WGI Places Employee in Step 4 of Grade because QSI is delayed</i></b>
WGI to step 3 - effective 1/03	WGI to step 3 - effective 1/03	WGI to step 3 - effective 1/03
WGI to step 4 - effective 1/04	QSI to step 4 - effective 1/03	WGI to step 4 - effective 1/04
WGI to step 5 - effective 1/06	WGI to step 5 - effective 1/05	QSI to step 5 - effective 1/04*

*\*WGI and QSI may be processed on the same date as the WGI will always be effected first.*

e. **Effective Date.** [QSIs] should be made effective as soon as possible after they are approved unless a short delay would benefit the employee. Because the approval of the increase is a discretionary action, it may not be approved retroactively. However, if an administrative error occurred *after* the increase was approved that caused a delay in the increase being processed, it may be made effective retroactive to the first day of the first pay period following the date of approval.

**4. PRODUCTIVITY SHARING OR GAINSHARING AWARDS.** Productivity sharing or gainsharing programs are subject to the same award criteria that apply to other awards. These are awards that are paid out on a regular recurring basis in recognition of exceeding predetermined levels of productivity during the measurement period. Key officials may establish productivity sharing or



**APPENDIX A. AMOUNTS OF CASH AWARDS**

1. The extent to which an employee or group of employees makes a contribution in support of VA's mission and the value of that contribution are the bases for granting a monetary award. Such awards are calculated using the appropriate table(s) on the next three pages.

a. Tangible benefits are specific monetary savings that can be calculated. When used as the basis for determining a cash award, tangible benefits are calculated based on an estimate of savings for the first full year. When there are significant nonrecurring costs involved in implementation, the amount of the award may be based on an *average* of the estimated net benefits over a period of up to 5 years.

b. Intangible benefits measure the value of a suggestion or contribution when its worth cannot be calculated in dollars, and considers such factors as value or significance of the contribution, and extent of application and impact. [The values outlined on the following Scale of Awards Based on Intangible Benefits reflects the maximum amount that an individual employee may be given for a special contribution award based on the value of the benefit and the extent of the application. If a group special contribution award is given, no one employee may receive more than the amount reflected on the scale. Additionally, the amount of the award cannot exceed the amount delegated to the approving official or the award recommendation must be sent to a higher-level official for approval.]

2. The minimum cash award that may be granted under this program is \$50.

3. A cash award granted under this program is a lump-sum award which is in addition to the regular pay of the recipient and is subject to the withholding of income and Medicare taxes.

4. When a cash award is authorized for a group of employees based on a contribution or suggestion, each contributing employee may share in the award equally or in shares proportionate to each employee's participation in the contribution.

5. Exceptions to application of the scales of awards may be made as follows: (1) a properly calculated cash award for a group of employees may be increased by a reasonable amount if it would not provide a meaningful award (at least \$50 per employee) when divided among the recipients; or (2) a properly calculated cash award for an employee whose contribution falls directly within job requirements, but that is so outstanding that it warrants a cash award, may be reduced.



[SCALE OF AWARDS BASED ON INTANGIBLE BENEFITS

VALUE OF BENEFIT	EXTENT OF APPLICATION		
	LOCAL	REGIONAL	GENERAL
	<p>Affects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• one or more field facilities or Central Office organizational elements or staff office, or</li> <li>• a minor change or correction of a VA form , policy, or procedure, or</li> <li>• optional use of an idea or procedure, or</li> <li>• minor change in the area of technology or automation.</li> </ul>	<p>Affects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an entire network, region, or</li> <li>• all Central Office organizations, or</li> <li>• ideas approved for optional use in the Department or an administration, or</li> <li>• important area of technology or automation.</li> </ul>	<p>Affects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more than one network, or region,</li> <li>• has impact VA-wide or beyond.</li> </ul>
<p><b>MODERATE.</b> Change or contribution to an operating principle, practice, procedure or program of limited impact or use.</p>	<p><b>Up to \$1,000</b></p>	<p><b>Up to \$3,000</b></p>	<p><b>Up to \$5,000</b></p>

<b>EXTENT OF APPLICATION</b>			
	<b>LOCAL</b>	<b>REGIONAL</b>	<b>GENERAL</b>
<b>SUBSTANTIAL.</b> Significant or important change, contribution to, or modification of an operating principle, practice, procedure or program or service to the public.	<b>Up to \$3,000</b>	<b>Up to \$5,000</b>	<b>Up to \$7,500</b>
<b>EXCEPTIONAL.</b> Complete revision or initiation of a major policy, practice or procedure that has significant impact on VA's mission. Major improvement in the quality of a critical product, activity, program or service to the public.	<b>Up to \$5,000</b>	<b>Up to \$7,500</b>	<b>Up to \$10,000</b>

**NOTE:** *\$50 is the minimum award that may be granted.]*



**PART V**

**APPENDIX A**

m. Advancements of 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 to chiefs of staff the advancements of 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.

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[ ]