

EXTENDED EDUCATIONAL LEAVE

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook delineates policies relating to the establishment and administration of extended educational leave in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENT:** This is a new VHA Handbook, written with specific emphasis on:
 - a. The purpose and types of activities appropriate for extended educational leave.
 - b. The administration of extended educational leave.
 - c. Paid and unpaid leave authorized under this program.
 - d. Reporting on use of this program.
 - e. Employee eligibility for participation in the program,
 - f. The amount of paid leave available to the employee
 - g. The procedures for leave to be requested and approved.
- 3. RELATED ISSUES:** VHA Handbook 1400.06.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Chief Academic Affiliations Officer (10A2D) is responsible for the content of this Handbook. Questions may be referred to 202-461-9490.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** VHA Manual M-8 Part V, Chapter 4, dated February 28, 1990, is rescinded.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION:** This VHA Handbook is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of April 2021.

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CONTENTS

EXTENDED EDUCATIONAL LEAVE

1. PURPOSE 1

2. BACKGROUND 1

3. SCOPE 1

4. DEFINITIONS 1

5. RESPONSIBILITIES 2

6. EXCLUSIONS 3

7. ACTIVITY OBJECTIVES 3

8. EMPLOYEE ELIGIBILITY 4

9. APPLICATION AND APPROVAL PROCEDURES: 6

10. POST ACTIVITY REPORT: 8

EXTENDED EDUCATIONAL LEAVE

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook describes the manner by which eligible VHA employees can be granted paid and non-paid leave for up to one year to pursue education and other professional development opportunities, which assist in achieving the agency's mission and performance goals by improving employee and organizational performance. **AUTHORITY:** 5 U.S.C. Chapter 41 and 38 U.S.C. 7421.

2. BACKGROUND

The Under Secretary for Health recognizes that VHA will function most effectively when employees have the opportunity to pursue effective personal and professional development that is relevant to the agency's mission. The agency will benefit if there is a program by which selected employees can pursue highly creative activities that meet both the employee's personal and professional goals as well as the critical needs of VHA. A great deal of such development opportunities should be pursued as part of one's daily professional life. However, there are certain activities that are best accomplished with extended leave from one's workplace, either because of the location of the activity requiring extended travel in order to participate, or because the time or mental commitment to the activity is incompatible with integration into one's routine schedule. Some activities to achieve this purpose will be best structured with large blocks of time, up to 12 months, away from usual duties, while others will be better accomplished by interweaving educational leave (e.g., 1 day per week for 2 years) with regular assignments.

3. SCOPE

This VHA Handbook discusses the purpose of extended educational leave. Policies relating to the administration of extended educational leave, paid and unpaid leave authorized under this program, and relating to reporting on use of this program are offered.

4. DEFINITIONS

a. **Extended Educational Leave.** Extended educational leave is a leave status for VHA employees, awarding a combination of leave without pay (LWOP) and paid authorized absence (AA) of not less than 30 days or more than 365 days combined for the purposes of education and professional development. The amount of extended educational leave that can be awarded is dependent upon several factors, including time in service, applicability of the proposed activity to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA's) missions, and the service needs of the agency. The awarded leave can be requested to be used either contiguously or intermittently over a time period of up to 2 years.

b. **Full Pay.**

(1) Full pay is the total amount of pay that the individual is receiving at the time of the approved absence. VHA physician and dentist time is usually calculated in eighths, such that a full time appointment is referred to as 8/8's. For the purpose of this policy, if an individual is serving on a part time 5/8 appointment, the amount of pay will continue at 5/8. If an employee other than a physician or dentist is serving on a part time 4/8 appointment, the pay will be at 4/8, etc. If an employee other than a physician or dentist is serving on a 60 hours per pay period appointment, the amount of pay will continue at 60 hours. If an employee other than a physician or dentist is serving on a 50 hours per pay period appointment, the pay will be at 50 hours, etc.

(2) An individual historically serving on a part-time basis may not be appointed to a full-time status merely for the purpose of pursuing extended educational leave.

(3) Full pay for extended educational leave may include retention incentives as described in VA Directive 5007, Pay Administration, at the discretion of the official responsible for the retention incentive determination.

(4) 'Full pay' for extended educational leave for physicians and dentists paid in accordance with 38 U.S.C. 7431, always includes base pay, market pay, and performance pay. Full pay for this purpose can include performance pay to the extent that the specified performance elements were achieved during the applicable compensation period, including the effort performed during the extended educational leave.

5. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. **Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health.** The Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health is responsible for considering appeals from VA Central Office (VACO)-based employees, and for approving and disapproving requests arising from VACO Chief Officers.

b. **VA Central Office Chief Officer.** The VACO Chief Officer is responsible for approving and disapproving requests arising from the VACO office and VA medical facility staff members who report to them.

c. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Director.** The Veterans Integrated Service Network Director (VISN) Director is responsible for considering appeals from VA medical facility-based employees within the VISN and for approving and disapproving requests arising from medical facility Directors.

d. **Chief Academic Affiliations Officer.** The Chief Academic Affiliations Officer of the Office of Academic Affiliations is responsible for maintenance of this Handbook, for collecting data on usage of this program, and for providing periodic reports as requested by the Office of Academic Affiliations.

e. **VA Medical Facility Director.** The VA medical facility Director is responsible for approving and disapproving requests arising from the VA medical facility.

f. **Designated Learning Officer.** The facility Designated Learning Officer (DLO) is responsible for reviewing eligibility of applications under this Handbook and making recommendations to the medical facility Director. The Designated Learning Officer is also responsible for assuring that post-activity reporting is accomplished.

g. **Employees.** Employees are responsible for initiating requests, and assuring that submitted requests contain all required elements, for fulfilling all requirements of approved activities, and for accurate and timely reporting of conclusion of participation.

6. EXCLUSIONS

a. This VHA Handbook addresses only the employee's time and leave, and does not address payment by the agency for other expenses associated with activities approved under this authority, including tuition, fees, book, travel expenses, or any other expenses. This Handbook does not address other special or formal training programs such as long-term training in upward mobility or scholarship programs through the Healthcare Recruitment and Retention Office (HRRO), or sabbatical leave authorized under Title 5 United States Code (U.S.C.) 3396. This Handbook is not applicable for an activity that is determined to be of sole benefit to the participating employee but not the agency.

b. This policy on extended educational leave does not address foreign travel while on official duty status or AA for educational leave of less than 30 days. This policy also does not concomitantly address approval of issues related to extended educational leave such as gifts from outside the government to facilitate the proposed activities or the availability and costs of benefits for employees in LWOP status.

c. Extended educational leave is not an employment benefit and employees should not presume that their eligibility for the program implies that management is obligated to approve such requests. Management may disapprove such requests for any legitimate reason, including lack of eligibility, their perception of lack of value in the proposed activity, or service needs for the facility.

7. ACTIVITY OBJECTIVES

Although most educational leave experiences have traditionally involved a continuous block of time away from the duty station, this policy is intended to be flexible. VHA recognizes that many valuable educational experiences currently involve combinations of intermittent travel and distance learning strategies. This Handbook may be used for employee's wishing to be provided educational leave over the course of 1 year in smaller, scheduled increments. An employee awarded extended educational leave may request to use the leave in a continuous period or may request to use the approved leave in some other pattern, e.g. one day per week or one week per month, up to the awarded amount within 2 years of the initial use. Activities eligible for consideration under this Handbook shall include one of the following three categories:

a. Pursuit of new knowledge, skills, or abilities that promote VA’s mission of clinical care, education, research or emergency preparedness by improving employee and organizational performance.

b. Experiential and participatory learning at VA or non-VA medical centers, laboratories, research, educational or other institutions (including for the delivery of lectures) of relevance to VA and the professional responsibilities of the individual.

c. Pursuit of a formal course of instruction that promotes VA’s missions by improving employee and organizational performance, under the auspices of an accredited college, university, or comparable learning institution and which is not intended to alter the career role of the employee.

8. EMPLOYEE ELIGIBILITY

a. Title 38 Employees.

(1) Employees are eligible for extended educational leave after 6 calendar years of employment in VA, regardless of whether such employment was full-time or part-time. Time served as a trainee or in without compensation (WOC) status is not creditable toward this eligibility. Persons who have previously received extended educational leave are eligible for additional leave, however, this additional leave is limited by the requirement that time spent by an employee in extended educational leave may not exceed 1 year in the first 10-year period and in each subsequent 10-year period of continuous or non-continuous service in VA

(2) The calculation of the maximum amount of educational leave that may be approved is based on the length of time in service to VA. The maximum amount allowable, for those who have completed at least 6 years (72 months) of VA employment, is 6 months paid leave and 6 months either drawn from the employee’s accrued annual leave or as LWOP. Time served as a trainee or in WOC status is not creditable toward eligibility. For individuals having worked 6 full years at less than full-time, approved leave will be based upon the following scale:

Table 1: Maximum Educational Leave Determination for Employees Less Than Full Time

Months Total Combined Full and/or Part-Time Service	Months of Authorized Absence at Full Pay	Months of Annual Leave and/or LWOP
72 and Over	6	6
60-71	5	7
48-59	4	8
33-47	3	9
24-32	2	10
12-23	1	11
1-11	0	

(3) The following examples are provided for clarification on how the scale will apply:

(a) An individual with a 5-year full-time appointment is not eligible since the individual does not have 72 months, or 6 calendar years, of VA service.

(b) An individual with a 3-year full-time VA employment and 3-year part-time 4/8 VA employment is eligible to apply (has 6 years with VA), and falls into the 48-59 months category (3 years full-time times 12 months equals 36 months; 3 years at 4/8 is the equivalent of 6 months per year times 3 years equals 18 months; total of 54 months) and would be eligible for a maximum of 4 months authorized absence and 8 months annual leave and/or LWOP.

(c) An individual with 6 years part-time 3/8 VA employment is eligible to apply, and falls into the 24-35 months category (6 years at three-eighths is the equivalent of 4-1/2 months per year times 6 years equals 27 months) and would be eligible for a maximum of 2 months authorized absence and 10 months annual leave and/or LWOP.

b. Title 5 Employees.

(1) Employees are eligible for extended educational leave after 6 calendar years of employment in VA, regardless of whether such employment was full-time or part-time. Time served as a trainee or in WOC status is not creditable toward this eligibility. Persons who have previously received extended educational leave are eligible for additional leave, however this additional leave is limited by the requirement that time spent by an employee in extended educational leave may not exceed 1 year in the first 10-year period of VA employment and in each subsequent 10-year period of continuous or non-continuous service in VA.

(2) The calculation of the maximum amount of educational leave that may be approved is based on the length of time in VA service. The maximum amount allowable, for those who have completed at least 6 years (72 months) of VA employment, is 6 months paid leave and 6 months either drawn from the employee's accrued annual leave or as LWOP. Time served as a trainee or in a WOC status is not creditable toward eligibility. For individuals having worked in VA for 6 full years at less than full-time, approved leave will be based upon the following scale:

Table 2: Maximum Educational Leave Determination for Employees Less Than Full Time

Months Total Combined Full and/or Part-Time Service	Hours Authorized Absence Full Pay	Hours of Annual Leave and/or LWOP
72 and Over	1040	1040
60-71	867	1213
48-59	693	1387
33-47	520	1560
24-32	347	1733
12-23	172	1907
1-11	0	0

(3) The following examples are provided for clarification on how the scale will apply:

(a) An individual with 5-year full-time VA employment is not eligible since the individual does not have 72 months, or 6 calendar years of VA service.

(b) An individual with 3-year full-time VA employment and 3-year part-time employment at 40 hours/pay period (1040 hours/year or 50 percent) is eligible to apply (has 6 years with VHA), and falls into the 48-59 months category (3 years full-time time 12 months equals 36 months; 3 years at 50 percent is the equivalent of 6 months per year time 3 years equals 18 months; total of 54 months) and would be eligible for a maximum of 693 hours authorized absence and 1387 hours annual leave and/or LWOP.

(c) An individual with 6 years part-time VA employment at 32 hours/pay period (832 hours per year or 40 percent) is eligible to apply, and falls into the 24-35 months category (6 years at 40 percent is the equivalent of 4-1/2 months per year time 6 years equals 29 months) and would be eligible for a maximum of 347 hours authorized absence and 1733 hours annual leave and/or LWOP.

9. APPLICATION AND APPROVAL PROCEDURES

a. Employees who are interested in requesting extended educational leave shall prepare a decision document for management's consideration. This decision document shall address the following issues:

(1) Proposed start and end date of the activity.

(2) Description of the proposed activity, including its relationship to the applicant's and VA's mission.

(3) Location of the proposed activity (if foreign destination, requires separate approval for foreign travel, per VHA Handbook 1400.06, Foreign Travel).

(4) Curriculum or course of study.

(5) Method of obtaining the instruction.

(6) Documentation of support of proposed activity from the site hosting the proposed activity.

(7) Amount of paid leave, annual leave, and leave without pay requested.

(8) Projection of the full pay amount that the employee shall receive during requested paid leave.

(9) Plan for using the leave (e.g., whether will used as contiguous block of leave or will be used intermittently along with other duty status over a time period not to exceed 2 years).

(10) Whether or not any gifts from outside the government are anticipated for funding any aspect of the proposed activity. **NOTE:** *Acceptance of such gifts from outside the government requires prior approval from Regional or General Counsel).*

(11) If the proposed activity is intended primarily to further research, whether a VA Career Development Enhancement Award (CDA) (<http://www.research.va.gov/funding/CDP.cfm>) shall be sought in relation to this application.

(12) Impact on current responsibilities and plan for covering such responsibilities during the proposed leave.

(13) Description of the expected results of the activity. The expected results shall address: the projected contribution to the employee's and organization's performance and the projected contribution to VA's missions of patient care, education, research, or emergency preparedness, or other benefits to VA at the local, regional or national levels.

(14) Plan for assessment of whether the proposed results were achieved.

b. For VA medical facility-based employees, the complete decision document shall be routed at least through the employee's supervisor and the VA medical facility's Designated Learning Officer. Local procedures can require routing through additional individuals as determined by the Director (for example, a facility may require that research-oriented proposals could be routed through ACOS/R&D). For VA medical facility-based employees, the medical facility Director is the approving official for such requests.

c. For VACO employees, the complete decision document shall be routed at least through the employee's supervisor to the Chief Officer. The Chief Officer is the approving official for such requests. Office procedures can require routing through additional individuals as determined by the Chief Officer.

d. The approving official may choose to obtain peer-review or other assessments of the application to assist in their decision. Such assessments could draw upon input from persons or committees (e.g., Research and Development (R&D) Committee) at that facility, within the VISN, or from others on an ad hoc basis. The Office of Research and Development maintains a roster of scientific merit review board reviewers, which could be useful for a facility to locate an ad hoc reviewer for an application for extended educational leave for a research purpose.

e. There are no specific criteria by which all applications can be assessed. Different types of proposals will necessarily require different approaches to evaluation. The assessment should generally include assessment of employee's preparation for the proposed activity, the likelihood of the activity being completed in the proposed timeframe, and the likely benefit to the employee and the agency. For example, an application proposing a research purpose for the extended educational leave could reasonably include assessment of the employee's record of VA and extramural funding

in the field, publication history, and relevance of the proposed activity to both prior accomplishments and anticipated benefit to Veterans and the nation. However, an application proposing participation in a clinical 'mini-residency' offered by another VA medical facility might include consideration of the applicant's preparation to participate in the proposed activity, their perceived commitment to applying the new knowledge and skills at their originating station, and the need for such clinical services at the facility. Approval can be made contingent upon related VA procedures (e.g. an associated foreign travel request, or an application for CDA research award).

f. If the approving official does not approve the employee's application, the applicant is to be notified in writing within 10 business days of the disapproval, including reasons for the disapproval.

g. VA medical facility-based employees may appeal the Director's decision within 10 business days of receipt of the decision, by writing through the medical facility Director to the VISN Director. The appeal shall include the original decision document and any other materials submitted for the initial consideration, the written notification from the Director, and a basis for the appeal. The VISN Director shall respond to the appeal in writing within 30 business days of receipt of such appeal.

h. VACO employees may appeal the Chief Officer's decision within 10 business days of receipt of the decision, by writing through the Chief Officer to the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health. The appeal shall include the original decision document and any other materials submitted for the initial consideration, the written notification from the Chief Officer, and a basis for the appeal. The Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health shall respond to the appeal in writing within 30 business days of receipt of such appeal.

10. POST ACTIVITY REPORT

a. The following information shall be submitted to the approving official (through the DLO, if VA medical facility-based employee) within 30 days of completion of the extended educational leave:

(1) Exact dates of authorized absence.

(2) Place(s) where the authorized absence was spent and key person(s) and/or institutions involved.

(3) The stated objective(s) (described above) of the absence and the extent to which they were accomplished. Narrative discussion shall include unanticipated benefits that might have developed (either towards the employee's professional/personal development or VA mission), and unanticipated barriers that might have emerged which impaired the ability to achieve the proposed purpose.

(4) Whether a publication will result.

(5) How the results of the stated objective(s) are to be applied to better patient care or otherwise benefit VA and the employee.

(6) Additional comments as desired by either the employee or management.

b. In addition to the local report, the Office of Academic Affiliations shall also require a report of the above information be submitted to VA Central Office. A Web-based or similarly convenient system is available for this purpose.