Social Work Professional Standards Board

Frequently Asked Questions

November 2013
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**Introduction:**

We are pleased to present this update to the Social Work Professional Standards Board Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). This product is designed to be a resource for any VA Social Worker who may have questions about the Professional Standards Board process.

It is a product of the National Social Work Professional Standards Committee, the current members of which are credited by name at the end of the document. It was created in response to continued questions from the field about the Professional Standards Board process. This document was developed as part of the annual National Social Work Strategic Plan. There are eight national Social Work committees whose function is to report to the Social Work Leadership Council (SWLC). The SWLC serves as an advisory council to the National Social Work Program, Care Management and Social Work Services in VA Central Office. All products created and updated by the national Social Work committees are maintained on the Social Work SharePoint site (http://vaww.infoshare.va.gov/sites/cmsws/SocialWork/default.aspx).

*The following is a list of topics/issues/questions asked and responses provided by Human Resources Award Employee Relations, Office of Human Resource Management Recruitment & Placement Policy Service, VHA Workforce Management and Consulting Office HR Consultants to Care Management and Social Work Services – VACO. Information can also be found on the VA Professional Standards Board website at http://vaww.socialwork.va.gov/standardsboard.asp.*
Special Advancement for Achievement (SAA):

- An SAA for a certification, or other professional achievement, is not just about getting the certification or accomplishing a professional achievement.
- An SAA is not an entitlement, but rather a discretionary award given by management.
- An SAA must be recommended by the Supervisor or higher level management official in the employee’s supervisory chain of command. Supervisory approval is not automatic and is based on the employee meeting all of the required criteria for SAA. Hybrid employees who were appointed under 38 U.S.C. 7401(3) or 7405(a) (1) (B) may be advanced 1 to 5 steps within their grade for professional achievement above that expected for their grade level or assignment if they have 1) shown high level performance, 2) demonstrated the potential to assume greater responsibility, and 3) attained a professional achievement above that expected for the employee’s grade level or assignment. Additionally, the Supervisor must state that the certification, or other professional achievement, enhances the employee’s practice.
- A fully satisfactory rating is sufficient, since this is not about performance ratings. The issue of high level performer does not require the employee to have a rating of record that is higher than Fully Successful. Although it is common that employees recommended for an SAA have a rating of record that is Outstanding or Excellent, there is no requirement that the employee have such a rating to be eligible for an SAA. Keep in mind that a rating of record is the rating for the employee for the last fiscal year and may not be indicative of how he/she is currently performing.

  - For example, an employee may have received a rating last year of Fully Successful, but the supervisor may be planning on rating the employee as Outstanding or Excellent this year. A supervisor can certify in the affirmative that an employee has demonstrated high level performance and shown potential for the assumption of greater responsibility. This would be enough to meet this policy requirement. If this is missing from the boarding packet, the board can make a recommendation for an SAA contingent upon these requirements being certified by the supervisor when it is forwarded to the Professional Standards Board (PSB) for action.

- The Supervisor must certify that the employee has demonstrated a high level of performance and has demonstrated the potential for assumption of higher level responsibility. If a supervisor cannot certify all of the above items, then they should not recommend the employee for an SAA.
- The PSB should review and make sure that the applicant meets all of the requirements before recommending an SAA.

It has been suggested that facilities use a Supervisory Memorandum template that includes the following to improve the supervisor’s ability to justify the recommendation:

- Has demonstrated a high level of performance: ____________________________
- Has demonstrated the potential to assume greater responsibility: ____________
  ________________________________________________________________
- Certification/Achievement is directly related to the assignment based on:
  ________________________________________________________________
- Certification/Achievement improves practice by: ________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
- Attainment of this certification/achievement represents achievement above that expected by an individual in this grade level:
  ________________________________________________________________

Questions & Responses:

Question: Two employees have the same certifications and have requested an SAA. One employee receives a one-step increase while the other receives a two-step increase. How is this possible?

Response: Many things are considered when reviewing a request for an SAA. This may include job performance considered excellent or above standard, relevance to current job, potential for improvement or enhancement of the employee’s current position, grade and step, as well as the number of steps requested by the employee’s supervisor. Requests for SAA are reviewed on an individual basis and recommendations are based on a review of the whole person, not just the achievement obtained.

Example: Employee A is a GS-12, step 9 and Employee B is a GS-9, step 7. Both obtain the same certification or accomplish the same professional achievement. Each SAA request is reviewed by the board based on the consideration of each employee as a whole, including the relevance to the position, duties, grade level, etc. Further Employee A is only eligible for one-step (they are at step 9) where Employee B could be granted more than one step due to the step they held at the time the achievement occurred, was approved, and granted.

Question: Can a certification that must be renewed be added to the performance plan in order to assure it is maintained?
Response: No. Unless the certification is a requirement of the functional statement under which the social worker was hired, in which case the employee would not be eligible for an SAA as it is a condition of employment.

Question: Can an SAA be awarded on a prospective basis. (i.e., the certification is currently in process)?

Response: No. A certification must have been completed prior to applying for an SAA and must have relevance to current job functions.

Question: If an SAA was requested for a certification, but the supervisor did not recommend this action, based on performance at less than standard, can the same SAA be requested at a later time when the employee demonstrates that they are at a high level of performance and that they can assume higher level duties?

Response: No. The employee should receive the step(s) at the time that h/she receives the certification, not at a later date when h/she has demonstrated the ability to perform at a higher level and can assume a higher level of duties.

Question: An MSW had a certification when hired. The employee is now asking if this certification expires can the employee apply for the certification again and submit it for an SAA?

Response: No. The employee would be precluded from an SAA as this would be a recertification, not a new certification, and an SAA cannot be awarded for a recertification.

Question: Can a Director lower the recommendations made by a PSB?

Response: Yes. The Director is the final authority and can make such decisions. The PSBs make recommendations only.

Question: The Human Resource Management Services (HRMS) at our VA feels that SAAs are an award, and must be processed in the same way as Incentive Awards, with a form 4659 in addition to the Board Action Form. Is this necessary?

Response: It is not required in national policy because an SF50 is generated for a step increase. A 4659 would be required if the employee is at the top step, and cash is being awarded instead. However, local management can require a 4659 if local policy dictates but there is no place on the form that relates to a step increase.
Multiple Requests for SAAs:

Questions & Responses:

**Question:** Is there a limit to the number of steps that may be granted?

**Response:** A maximum of five steps can be granted for each SAA submission. The granting of four or five steps should be reserved for only the highest personal achievements, and should be rare. It is recommended the PSB should be judicious in deciding what deserves special recognition and what does not. The local, VISN and National PSB’s should decide what limits they feel are appropriate for their area of responsibility.

**Example:** A social worker submits three certifications for review, which according to the guidance provided would be eligible for up to five steps for each achievement. The PSB should decide if each certification improves the employee’s practice, represents an achievement above what is expected for the position, and if the certification is relevant to the functions of the position. Additionally, the employee must be demonstrating a high level of achievement and demonstrate the ability to assume greater responsibility.

**Question:** Are there limits on the number of SAA’s that may be given in a year?

**Response:** No. It is up to the PSB and local facility to determine what is appropriate.

**Question:** What is the frequency in which an employee may request an SAA? On the Anniversary date?

**Response:** An employee may ask for consideration for an SAA at the time of the achievement and consideration for the SAA should occur as soon as practical after the achievement occurred.

**SAAs and Within Grade Increases:**

**Question:** If an employee receives an SAA will the employee also receive h/her scheduled within-grade step increase?

**Response:** It depends on the employee’s current step. The granting of an SAA will not start a new waiting period for a Wage Grade Increase (WGI) but it may change the waiting period to longer period, i.e., from 1 to 2 years or 2 to 3 years.

**Example 1:** Employee received a within-grade increase from Step-7 to Step-8 in June 2009. The next scheduled within-grade increase would be in June 2012 since h/she is in a three-year waiting period. However, the employee is awarded a one-step SAA in September 2011. H/her annual date is not affected and h/she
would be eligible for h/her next within-grade step increase as scheduled June 2012 since his waiting period is still three years.

**Example 2:** Employee received a within-grade increase from a Step 2 to Step 3 in June 2009. The employee is still in a one-year waiting period and is scheduled to receive the within-grade increase in June 2010. However, the employee receives an SAA in December 2009, changing h/her step from Step 3 to Step 4. Since the employee is now at the 4th step of the grade, h/she is now in a two-year waiting period for a within-grade increase and will be eligible for h/her next increase in June 2011.

**Question:** If a Social Worker has received an SAA in December 2012 and then accepted a promotion to a GS-12 in January 2013, can the employee request consideration of another SAA based on the same achievement after h/her promotion to a GS-12?

**Response:** No. An SAA considered and awarded at one pay grade cannot be considered again, nor awarded at the next higher pay grade.

**Professional Standards Board:**

**Question:** Are their term limits on PSB membership?

**Response:** Yes. Following the initial One-Time Boarding, which established membership terms at 3, 2 and 1 year, all subsequent terms are for 2 years.

**Question:** Who is responsible for overseeing this process?

**Response:** VHA management officials are responsible for ensuring the effective functioning of boards under their jurisdiction.
Nationally – National Social Work Program, Care Management and Social Work Services, VA Central Office
VISN Boards – The VISN Director or designee
Local Boards – Facility Director or designee (Social Work Chief/ Executive or HR)

**Question:** Is it permissible for American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) representatives to be in attendance as observers at Social Work Professional Standards Board (SWPSB) meetings?

**Response:** No. The SWPSB is composed solely of social workers with the principal function of providing professional peer review in such matters as eligibility, suitability, and appropriate grade levels for appointments and advancements of these professionals. The union is only allowed to represent an employee before a physical standards board, etc. if requested by the employee.
**Question:** Are Social Workers in positions outside the 0185 series eligible for boarding?

**Example:** Social Worker functioning in a 0671 series Health System Specialist role.

**Response:** No. The Social Worker Qualifications Standard under Hybrid Title 38 applies to all VA social workers in the General Schedule (GS)-0185 series, including those assigned to VA medical centers, Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), Vet Centers, Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) offices, and VA Central Office.

**Reconsideration Requests:**
(Part III, Chapter 4, Section B, subparagraph 6(b))

**Issue:** Since the one-time special boarding promotions are subject to reconsideration on the employee’s anniversary date of grade.

Reconsideration requests are sent to the next highest Board:

- Local SW PSB reconsideration requests are reviewed by the VISN SW PSB.
- VISN SW PSB reconsideration requests are reviewed by the National SW PSB.
- National SW PSB reconsideration requests are reviewed by the Alternate VA Central Office PSB.

The board recommendation of reconsideration request is referred to the approving official, i.e., Medical Center Director. The ultimate decision to approve or disapprove the recommendation rests with the approving official.

**Boarding Above the Full Performance Level (GS11):**

**Question:** How much information should a PSB receive in order to make a recommendation? Sometimes it is given only a functional statement, performance appraisal and a supervisory memo.

**Response:** PSBs should make a recommendation based on as much information as possible. By using the HT38 boarding checklist, organizational chart or position approval, current and new Functional Statement would be provided that is needed by the PSB to make a recommendation. The PSB should also receive a memo stating what has changed in the assignment to warrant the upgrade along with the org chart and position approval.

It is essential that Knowledge Skills Abilities (KSA) relevant information be provided to the PSB by the applicant or referred individual in order to make a determination and recommendation. If necessary, the employee can be given a list of the KSA’s for the functional statement being reviewed to allow h/her to
provide sufficient information to assist the PSB in determining if s/he meets the Qualification Standard and functions of the position.

New Hires:

Question: Should new employees be boarded prior to their established start date?

Response: Yes, newly hired employees are to be boarded prior to their start date in order to be given an actual salary based on their recommended grade & step. If this is not possible, they should be given a Temporary Appointment "pending boarding" and set the grade and step at the bottom of the pay scale (ex. GS11, step 1) pending boarding.

Question: Do PSBs have the authority to recommend grade and step for new hires?

Response: Yes. Employees appointed into hybrid occupations are appointed at step 1 unless they are authorized additional steps based on pay, superior qualifications or unique needs at the VA (covered under VA Handbook 5007, part II, chapter 3) or highest previous rate provisions based on prior Federal service (covered in VA Handbook 5007, part II, chapter 4).

If the Social Work Chief/Executive feels that the qualifications of the new hire warrant consideration of additional steps at the time of the initial boarding, recommendations should be sent forward with the boarding package for consideration by the PSB. It is not appropriate to grant additional steps based on years of experience or certifications they hold.

Question: Does time-in-grade apply to Hybrid Title 38 positions?

Response: No. Time in grade does not apply to Hybrid Title 38. However this is often confused with the requirement of the 1 year of specialized experience at the next lower level that is required.

Question: Can prior private or Federal sector experience count towards meeting the specialized experience requirement, if the PSB or supervisor believes the experience was comparable or equivalent to the next lower grade?

Response: In some situations it may apply and in others it may not. (Please see the examples below for each type of situation).

Example 1: Where it counts towards experience:

A Social Worker was hired at the GS-11 level a year ago. On their resume they list 2 years of experience as a Staff Social Worker and 2 years as a Supervisor
Social Worker. The board action form shows that credit was given for the GS-11 level based on their 2 years of experience as a Staff Social Worker. The 2 years as a supervisor was not considered or used to qualify them for the GS-11. Now a year later the Social Worker has applied for an assignment as a supervisor GS-13. The board sees the non-VA supervisory experience was not used previously. The board has determined the non-VA experience meets the GS-12 grade level therefore the employee meets the requirements of 1 year of specialized experience at the next lower grade level.

**Example 2:** Where it doesn’t count towards experience:

A Social Worker was hired at the GS-11 level a year ago. On their resume they list 2 years of experience as a Staff Social Worker and 2 years as a Supervisor Social Worker. The board action form shows that credit was given for the GS-11 level based on their 2 years of experience as a Staff Social Worker and the 2 years as a supervisor due to the board determining the “supervisor” experience did not meet the definition of supervisor under the VA qualification standard. Now a year later the Social Worker has applied for an assignment as a supervisor GS-13. The board sees the non-VA supervisory experience was used previously to qualify for the GS-11. The board has determined the non-VA experience cannot be considered for the specialized experience at the next lower grade therefore the employee does not meet the requirements of 1 year of specialized experience at the next lower grade level.

**Question:** If an employee has specialized experience and it is only at the VA, must they complete the full year at the lower level before being promoted?

**Response:** Yes. An applicant must meet the full year of specialized experience at the next lower level before they can be promoted.
Promotions:

**Question:** If functions are permanently added to an individual’s functional statement and these additions will likely meet the Qualification Standard for a higher grade, can the individual be boarded into the new functional statement or must the position be considered a new promotion eligible position and be competed for?

**Response:** With the change in assignment, the facility would need to approve the assignment and it would need to be reflected on the org chart. Employee’s current assignments should be reflected accurately in the employee’s functional statement. However, due to local partnership agreements your local HR office should be consulted. If it is determined by a PSB that the additional duties justify a higher grade and the PSB’s recommendation is not approved, the duties should be removed from the employee’s functional statement and reassigned to the appropriate graded social worker.

**Question:** When a social worker obtains their advanced licensure, are they automatically promoted to a GS12 level?

**Response:** No. The social worker would not automatically be promoted based on obtaining a higher credential. They would need to apply for an announced position for promotion.

**Question:** I am trying to understand if the Deviation provision below allows a Medical Center Director to permanently convert a Social Work position to GS12 without a Boarding?

  a. The appointing officer may, under unusual circumstances, approve reasonable deviations to the grade determination requirements for social workers in VHA whose composite record of accomplishments, performance, and qualifications, as well as current assignments, warrant such action based on demonstrated competence to meet the requirements of the proposed grade.

  b. Under no circumstances will the educational requirements be waived. Under no circumstances will licensure requirements be waived for grade levels GS-l2 or above.

  c. The placement of individuals in grade levels not described in this standard must be approved by the Under Secretary for Health, or designee, in VHA Central Office.

Authority 38 U.S.C. 7402, 7403]
Response: No, The Deviations provision of the Qualification Standard does not substitute for the requirement for a board action. The deviation provision cited applies to situations where the facility disputes the board’s recommendation of grade and step. Based upon the facility’s memo disputing the recommendation with their position and supporting documentation can approve the recommendation made by the facility.

The Deviation provision in the Qualification Standard only applies to application of the requirements of the Qualification Standard, but does not address the procedural requirements for effecting promotions to Hybrid positions above the full performance level. The procedures and requirements for such advancements, which include the recommendation of a Professional Standards Board (PSB), are published in VA Handbook 5005, Part III, Section B, and Chapter 4.

Boarding Lateral Moves and Changes in Position:

Question: Does a social worker that is moving from one position to another with no change in grade need to be boarded?

Response: There is no policy that requires that a social worker be boarded when they move from one position to another if their grade or assignment does not change, making a lateral transfer. A “lateral transfer” would be a transfer in which the functions are the same.

However, if the functions of the new position are different, boarding would be recommended.

Example: Senior Social Worker GS-12 transfer to a Program Coordinator GS-12 position or a Senior Social Worker GS 12 transfer to a Social Work Supervisory position.

Question: If a social worker currently boarded in a position as GS12 voluntarily applies for a position at a lower grade do they retain their status at the higher grade.

Response: No, if it is a voluntary action, the employee will be changed to the lower grade.

Question: The position of a licensed social worker currently functioning in another job series (ex: Health System Specialist (0671) is being converted to the Social Work job series (0185). Does this require board action by PSB?

Response: Yes. However, the position would need to be announced and the employee selected. The facility should provide the entire board package including the vacancy announcement, Functional Statement, the employee’s supplemental qualifications sheet and CV, and the Supervisor’s recommendation.
Once the PSB receives the complete package, they should then be able to conduct the board and make the recommendation. If the employee has not been selected for an actual vacancy, there is not a provision for the employee to be boarded and your local HR should be consulted.
Published By:

This document was developed by our National Social Work Professional Standards Committee. We sincerely thank the committee members for their diligence and expertise in producing these excellent samples to share throughout VA. The current committee members are:

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