



AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

## **Frequently Asked Questions regarding participation of licensed professional counselors in the Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system**

*(Updated May 12, 2010)*

### **Are licensed professional counselor going to be recognized as mental health providers within the VA health care system?**

Yes. Public Law 109-461, which was enacted December 22, 2006, explicitly recognized both “licensed professional mental health counselors” and “marriage and family therapists” as mental health providers within the agency.

### **My local VA clinic says they haven’t heard anything about the law, and that they can’t hire counselors for clinical or supervisory positions.**

Before VA clinics can start hiring counselors, VA headquarters needs to tell them exactly how to implement the law—what types of licensure and training are required for counseling positions, what sorts of work counselors can do, what their promotional track is, who they report to, etc. The central VA office in Washington, D.C. is hammering out all of this, and when this work is completed, they’ll publish regulations and send out guidance to make everything official.

### **When is the VA expected to finally implement the law?**

VA staff have repeatedly stated that their goal is to have the law implemented in September of 2010. Earlier this year the VA convened a “Subject Matter Expert” (SME) work group to develop an occupational series and job descriptions for mental health counselors, and it is our understanding that the SME work group completed drafts of these which have been forwarded up the chain for approval.

Once the standards are developed, VA will formally submit a request to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to establish new, separate occupational series for both licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists, based on their proposal. Once the job classifications and occupational series have been approved by OPM, the VA—and all other government agencies—will be able to hire “licensed professional mental health counselors.”

ACA is working to make this process as smooth and efficient as possible.

## **Which counselors will be recognized as eligible for the VA?**

Public Law 109-461 states that in order to be recognized as a licensed professional mental health counselor, an individual must:

- “(A) hold a master’s degree in mental health counseling, or a related field, from a college or university approved by the Secretary; and
- (B) be licensed or certified to independently practice mental health counseling.”

Either the VA or OPM may set more detailed requirements for recognition as a licensed professional mental health counselor. We expect the new occupational series for counselors to include different General Schedule (GS) level positions for counselors at varying levels of development (i.e., completion of master’s degree but not post-master’s supervision hours, etc.).

## **Will counselors be eligible for the same types of positions clinical social workers currently have?**

We believe this will be the case, and we are working toward this goal. Should the VA release a proposed occupational series for counselors which does *not* place counselors on a level playing field with clinical social workers, we will push both the VA and Congress to recognize licensed professional mental health counselors at parity with clinical social workers.

## **What can I do to help speed up recognition of counselors within the VA, and make sure that the law is implemented appropriately?**

You can help push for recognition of the profession by contacting your Representative and Senators to let them know you want to be able to help provide mental health treatment to our nation’s veterans, but are unable to do so because the VA has not yet implemented a 2006 law (P.L. 109-461) recognizing your profession. Ask your members of Congress to ask the VA about their progress in implementing the law, and to express support for recognizing counselors as eligible for the same kinds of VA positions currently reserved for clinical social workers.

You can find out who your members of Congress are at <http://capwiz.com/counseling>, at <http://www.senate.gov>, and <http://www.house.gov>.

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