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

(Updated October 26, 2010)

Are licensed professional counselors officially 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. On September 28, 2010, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released a set of qualification standards for licensed professional mental health counselor (LPMHC) positions, as well as for marriage and family therapist positions.

Prior to the adoption of the new standards, counselors were typically eligible only for “rehabilitation counseling therapist” positions, at a maximum General Service (GS) level of 11. At this level, counselors were not allowed to work in supervisory positions.

Where can I find a copy of the new standards?


What are the eligibility requirements for LPMHC positions within the VA?

1. Be a U.S. Citizen.

2. Have a master’s degree in counseling. The standards state that applicants must:
   "Hold a master’s degree in mental health counseling, or a related field, from a program accredited by the Council on Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Examples of related mental health counseling fields include, but are not limited to, Addiction Counseling; Community Counseling; Gerontology Counseling; Marital, Couple, and Family Counseling; and Marriage and Family Therapy. A doctoral degree in mental health counseling may not be substituted for the master’s degree in mental health counseling."

3. Be licensed, or working toward licensure. The standards state that:
   "Persons hired or reassigned to LPMHC positions…must hold a full, current, and unrestricted license to independently practice mental health counseling, which includes diagnosis and treatment…."
“Non-licensed LPMHCs who otherwise meet the eligibility requirements may be given a temporary appointment as a graduate LPMHC…. The appointing official may waive the requirement of licensure for a period not to exceed 2 years for a LPMHC that provides care under the supervision of a licensed LPMHC at or above the full performance level. This exception only applies at the entry level (GS-9). For grade levels at or above the full performance level, the candidate must be licensed.”

It is important to note that under the VA’s process for developing the standards, neither ACA nor any other counseling organization had any opportunity to make recommendations on their content.

**Can local VA offices make exceptions to the requirements in hiring counselors?**

No, they cannot. However, the VA may decide to adopt modifications to the standards to provide some discretion to VA facility directors.

**Can the standards be changed?**

Now that the standards have been adopted, ACA will be submitting recommendations to the VA for changes. The VA will make updates and improvements to the standards on an as-needed basis, as it does for standards for other occupations.

We believe the most important goal, for both our organization and the Department of Veterans Affairs, is to provide the best service possible for veterans, in terms of both quality of care and access to care. In trying to accomplish this, we believe that as many highly qualified professional mental health counselors as possible should be eligible for mental health provider positions within the VA, perhaps through the use of grandparenting provisions for established, experienced counselors.

**What job titles and GS (general schedule) levels will be used for counselor positions?**

The positions established by the VA include:
- **GS-9** Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor (Entry Level – for individuals with a graduate degree in counseling but who have not yet become licensed)
- **GS-11** Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor
- **GS-12** Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor Program Coordinator
- **GS-12** Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor Supervisor
- **GS-13** Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor Program Manager
- **GS-14** LPMHC Program Manager Leadership Assignments

The GS levels established for these positions parallel those currently used for social workers. The counselor positions are established within the GS-101 “social science” series.

**How do the new standards compare to the VA’s existing “Rehabilitation Counseling Therapist” qualification standard?**
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Readjustment counseling is a wide range of services provided to combat veterans in the effort to make a satisfying transition from military to civilian life. Services include:

- Individual counseling
- Group counseling
- Marital and family counseling (as it relates to the veteran's military service)
- Medical referrals
- Assistance in applying for VA benefits
- Employment counseling
- Guidance and referral
- Alcohol/drug assessments
- Information and referral to community resources.

Family members of combat veterans can also receive readjustment counseling services if the veteran is receiving them.

Readjustment counseling is provided at community-based Vet Centers nationwide. In some cases, the Vet Centers can furnish services through other providers closer to a veteran's home.

**Bereavement Services**

Bereavement counseling is assistance and support to people with emotional and psychological stress after the death of a loved one. It includes a broad range of transition services, including outreach, counseling, and referral services to family members.

Counseling can sometimes be made available in the family's home or anywhere the family feels most comfortable.

**What job responsibilities are included in the new standards?**

The GS-11 level LPMHC job qualification standard requires candidates to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and abilities in basic mental health practice areas, including:

- "Ability to make professional evaluations, decisions, and recommendation for treatment planning and implementation."
- "Ability to provide complex crisis intervention and stabilization to patients who are in psychological distress."
- "Ability to fully utilize the current DSM in making diagnoses and formulation of treatment goals and application of appropriate clinical intervention using professional counseling practice."

For positions at the GS-12 level, as an LPMHC Supervisor, the occupational standard states that: "LPMHCs administratively supervise their licensed staff and/or graduates and may provide treatment to patients. They direct the development and implementation of services and treatment to patients through the administrative supervision, mentoring, and oversight of assigned clinical staff. Their experience must demonstrate practice skills in a specialty area or in administration demonstrating progressively more professional competency and judgment."
My local VA clinic says they haven’t heard anything about the law, and that they can’t hire counselors.

Although the new occupational standards for counselors have been disseminated electronically to VA facilities and clinics and can be used immediately, VA facilities need further guidance on how the new positions will be incorporated into the existing health care provider structure. VA staff have indicated that they expect to provide clinics and facilities with instructions on how to hire counselors on an interim basis, while ancillary decisions are pending.

Will the new standards be available for use in the military or in other federal agencies?

Yes. VA staff have been in contact with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) regarding the standards. Ultimately, OPM will establish new occupational titles for licensed professional mental health counselors based on, if not identical to, the occupational standards adopted by the VA. Once the job classifications and occupational series have been approved by OPM, other government agencies and branches of the military will be able to hire “licensed professional mental health counselors.”

How do the

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