

## STAFFING

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** To establish a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) qualification standard for Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor, GS-101, appointed under 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3).
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This handbook contains mandatory procedures on staffing. This revision establishes the Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor occupation under VA's Title 38 Hybrid excepted service employment system in accordance with the "Veterans Benefits, Health Care, and Information Technology Act of 2006" (Public Law 109-461). Authority is given to the Secretary of the VA under 38 U.S.C. § 7402 to prescribe qualifications for occupations identified in 38 U.S.C. § 7401(3). The pages in this revision are to be inserted in part II of VA Handbook 5005. This new qualification standard will be incorporated into the electronic version of VA Handbook 5005 that is maintained on the [Office of Human Resources Management Web site](#).
- 3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Recruitment and Placement Policy Service (059), Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources Management.
- 4. RELATED DIRECTIVE:** VA Directive 5005, Staffing.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** None.

**CERTIFIED BY:**

/s/  
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**BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY  
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\*Use in conjunction with the OPM Standard.

[APPENDIX G43. LICENSED PROFESSIONAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR  
QUALIFICATION STANDARD  
GS-101  
Veterans Health Administration

- 1. COVERAGE.** The following are requirements for appointment as a Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor (LPMHC) in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). These requirements apply to all VHA LPMHCs in the GS-101 series, including those assigned to VA medical centers, Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), Vet Centers, Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) offices, and VHA Central Office.
- 2. BASIC REQUIREMENTS.** The basic requirements for employment as a VHA LPMHC are prescribed by statute in 38 U.S.C. §7402(b)(11). To qualify for appointment as a LPMHC all applicants must:

  - a. **Citizenship.** Be a citizen of the United States. (Non-citizens may be appointed when it is not possible to recruit qualified citizens in accordance with VA Handbook 5005, part II, chapter 3, section A, paragraph 3g.)
  - b. **Education.** 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.
  - c. **Licensure.** Persons hired or reassigned to LPMHC positions in the GS-101 series in VHA must hold a full, current, and unrestricted license to independently practice mental health counseling, which includes diagnosis and treatment.

    - (1) **Exception.** Non-licensed LPMHCs who otherwise meet the eligibility requirements may be given a temporary appointment as a graduate LPMHC under the authority of 38 U.S.C. § 7405(c)(2)(B). 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.
    - (2) **Failure to Obtain License.** In all cases, LPMHCs must actively pursue meeting state prerequisites for licensure starting from the date of their appointment. At the time of appointment, the supervisor will provide the unlicensed LPMHC with the written requirement to obtain licensure, the date by which the license must be acquired, and the consequences for not becoming licensed by the deadline. Failure to become licensed within 2 years from date of appointment will result in removal from the GS-101 LPMHC series and may result in termination of employment.

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(3) **Loss of Licensure.** Once licensed, LPMHCs must maintain a full, valid, and unrestricted license to independently practice mental health counseling, which includes diagnosis and treatment. Loss of licensure will result in removal from the GS-101 LPMHC occupation and may result in termination of employment.

d. **Physical Requirements.** See VA Directive and Handbook 5019.

e. **English Language Proficiency.** LPMHCs must be proficient in spoken and written English in accordance with VA Handbook 5005, part II, chapter 3, section A, paragraph 3j.

### 3. GRADE REQUIREMENTS

#### a. Creditable Experience

(1) **Knowledge of Current LPMHC Practices.** To be creditable, the experience must have demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with current mental health counseling practice. Experience satisfying this requirement must be active professional practice at the post-master's degree level, which is paid/non-paid employment as a professional mental health counselor.

(2) **Quality of Experience.** Experience is only creditable if it is post-master's degree experience as a mental health counselor directly related to the position to be filled. Qualifying experience must also be at a level comparable to LPMHC experience at the next lower grade level. For all assignments above the full performance level, the higher level duties must consist of significant scope, administrative independence, complexity (difficulty) and range of variety as described in this standard at the specified grade level and be performed by the incumbent at least 25% of the time.

(3) **Part-Time Experience.** Part-time experience as a LPMHC is creditable according to its relationship to the full-time workweek. For example, a LPMHC employed 20 hours a week, or on a 1/2-time basis, would receive 1 full-time workweek of credit for each 2 weeks of service.

(4) **Fellowships or Post-Graduate Training.** Fellowship and post-graduate training programs are typically in a specialized area of clinical practice, i.e., mental health counseling. Training as a fellow or post-graduate may be substituted for creditable experience on a year-for-year basis.

(5) **Practicum in a VA Setting.** A VHA practicum experience may not be substituted for experience, as the practicum (field placement) is completed prior to graduation with a master's degree in mental health counseling or related field.

b. **Grade Determinations.** In addition to the basic requirements for employment, the following criteria must be met when determining the grade of candidates.

#### (1) GS-9 Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor (Entry Level)

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** The entry level is used for LPMHCs with less than one year of post-master's degree experience or for LPMHCs who are graduates, not yet licensed at the independent practice level.

(b) **Assignments.** Individuals assigned as GS-9 LPMHCs are considered to be at the entry level and are closely supervised, including co-signatures where required, as they are not functioning at the full performance level. They are typically assigned to VHA areas that do not require specialized knowledge or experience. Since they are not practicing at an independent level, they should not be assigned to areas where independent practice is required, such as in a CBOC, unless there is a licensed LPMHC in the area who can provide supervision for practice. Under supervision, LPMHCs at this level provide professional mental health counseling services.

(c) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to the basic requirements, the candidates must demonstrate the KSAs below:

1. Ability to engage in information gathering, problem identification, diagnosis, treatment planning, implementation, evaluation and follow-up.
2. Knowledge of current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders in formulation of treatment goals and application of appropriate clinical interventions using professional counseling practices.
3. Basic knowledge of professional counseling practice with emphasis on human development principles through cognitive, affective, behavioral or systemic interventions, and strategies that address high risk behaviors, wellness, personal growth, and career development across the life span.
4. Ability to use a wide variety of individual, group, or family counseling interventions; demonstrates sensitivity to diversity and possesses multicultural counseling skills.
5. Ability to serve on an interdisciplinary team with focus on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and relational functioning of individuals, groups and families and on the counseling approaches, strategies, and techniques that will best help patients function effectively.
6. Basic skill in the use of computer software applications for drafting documents, data management, maintaining accurate, timely and thorough clinical documentation and delivery of services, such as Telehealth.
7. Knowledge and understanding of existing relevant statutes, case laws, ethical codes, and regulations affecting professional practice of counseling.
8. Ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, with people from varied backgrounds.

(2) **GS-11 Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor (Full Performance Level)**

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, candidates must have at least 1 year of post-master's degree mental health counseling experience;

**OR**

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In addition to the basic requirements, a doctoral degree in mental health counseling, or a related field may be substituted for the required 1 year of professional mental health counseling experience.

(b) **Assignments.** This is the full performance level for LPMHCs. At this level they are licensed to independently practice professional counseling and to provide mental health services within the knowledge, theory, and training foundations of professional counseling. They may be assigned to any mental health VHA area, consulting with peers and supervisors as appropriate. LPMHCs may be involved in program evaluation and/or research activities.

(c) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to meeting the KSAs for the GS-9 level, the candidate must demonstrate the KSAs below:

1. Ability to make professional evaluations, decisions, and recommendation for treatment planning and implementation.
2. Advanced knowledge and mastery of the fundamentals of the counseling process which includes defining patient/family problems and maintaining an effective counseling relationship.
3. Ability to provide subject matter consultation to colleagues and students on the counseling process within various specialty areas, build on the foundation of competence through regular meetings and discussions to explain assignments, review progress of cases and confer about the counseling perspectives and orientation.
4. Ability to provide complex crisis intervention and stabilization to patients who are in psychological distress.
5. Ability to establish goals/treatment through a collaborative process with the patient utilizing advanced counseling skills, including evidenced-based practices and screening/assessment.
6. Ability to use a wide variety of individual, group, or familial counseling interventions; demonstrates sensitivity to diversity and possesses multicultural counseling skills.
7. Ability to fully utilize the current DSM in making diagnoses and formulation of treatment goals and application of appropriate clinical intervention using professional counseling practices.
8. Ability to develop and deliver psycho-education groups that include life skills, family support, and community integration.

**(3) GS-12 Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor Program Coordinator**

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, candidates must have at least 1 year of progressively complex experience equivalent to the next lower grade level. Experience must have been in a major specialty treatment program area such as, but not limited to, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), mental health intensive case management (MHICM), or other areas

of equivalent scope and complexity. Experience must demonstrate possession of advanced practice skills and judgment, demonstrating progressively more professional competency.

(b) **Assignments.** LPMHC Program Coordinators are administratively responsible for a clinical program and provide treatment to patients in a major specialty. They manage the daily operations of the program, develop policies and procedures, and prepare reports and statistics for facility, VISN, and national use. They may supervise unlicensed graduate LPMHCs and may administratively manage any employees assigned to their program.

(c) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to meeting the KSAs for GS-11 level, the candidate must demonstrate the KSAs below:

1. Advanced knowledge in program planning and development of policies and procedures.
2. Ability to make key decisions in the hiring and identification of top candidates.
3. Ability to provide leadership in facilitating the process of coordinating program consults, assessments, admissions, care assignments and discharges.
4. Ability to provide subject matter consultation to other colleagues and students within the field of counseling working on an interdisciplinary team.

(4) **GS-12 Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor Supervisor**

(a) **Experience, Education, and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, candidates must have at least 1 year of progressively complex experience equivalent to the next lower grade level. Experience must demonstrate possession of advanced practice skills and judgment, demonstrating progressively more professional competency.

(b) **Assignments.** At this level, 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.

(c) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to meeting the KSAs for GS-11 level, the candidate must demonstrate the KSAs below:

1. Ability to administratively supervise other providers and conduct meetings.
2. Ability to maintain a professional environment by following organizational policies, guidelines and safety standards.
3. Ability to establish and clearly communicate guidelines and performance expectations for staff.

**PART II  
APPENDIX G43****(5) GS-13 Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor Program Manager**

(a) **Experience, Education and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, candidates must have at least 1 year of progressively complex experience equivalent to the next lower grade level. The experience must demonstrate possession of advanced practice skills and judgment, demonstrating progressively more professional competency.

(b) **Assignments.** LPMHCs manage the daily operations of multiple programs, develop and implement program policies and procedures, or serve as chief or principal counselor to a number of LPHMCs. They are responsible for oversight of administrative and programmatic resources and monitoring of outcomes. They prepare reports and statistics for facility, VISN, and national leadership. Decisions may affect staff and other resources associated with the programs managed and are made while exercising wide latitude and independent judgment. They may be responsible for the program's budget.

(c) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to meeting the KSAs for GS-12 level, the candidate must demonstrate the KSAs below:

1. Ability to make judgments and decisions associated with program management.
2. Ability to monitor program outcomes using data driven quality assurance process.
3. Ability to develop productivity standards appropriate to each service provided.
4. Ability to manage a wide range of programs which include the operation and management of key clinical, training or administrative programs.

**(6) GS-14 LPMHC Program Manager Leadership Assignments (Care Line Manager/VISN/National)**

(a) **Experience, Education and Licensure.** In addition to the basic requirements, candidates must have at least 1 year of progressively complex experience equivalent to the next lower grade level. They must demonstrate possession of advanced practice skills in administration, demonstrating progressively more professional competency skills and judgment.

(b) **Assignments.** Typical assignments include serving at a facility as a care line manager or at the VISN /VACO level. A care line manager is assigned to manage, direct, and oversee complex treatment programs within the medical center. Supervisory responsibilities cover multiple disciplines that may be separated geographically or in multi-division facilities. They have responsibility for staffing, work assignments, budget, ensuring availability and timeliness of clinical services to be provided and admission criteria for the program, day-to-day program operation, and all reporting requirements. Leadership positions at the VISN or national level are characterized by their scope, level of complexity, significant impact on VHA mission, significant importance to the VISN, etc. They direct mental health, behavioral science or other patient care program components at the VISN or national level or direct organizational development at the national level. Duties are exercised with wide latitude, autonomy, and independence. They have delegated authority to determine long range work plans and assure that

implementation of the goals and objectives are carried out. They may serve as consultants to other management officials in the field, VISN, or national level.

(c) **Demonstrated Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** In addition to meeting the KSAs for GS-13 level, the candidate must demonstrate the KSAs below:

1. Advanced knowledge and skill in management/administration of multidisciplinary mental health programs at complex facilities and/or across multiple sites which includes supervision, consultation, negotiation, and monitoring.
2. Demonstrated global knowledge of mental health counseling practice to develop, maintain, and oversee programs in all settings.
3. Ability to provide consultation on policy implementation, qualification standards, counseling practice, and competency with medical center director, VISN, or national program managers that are consistent with organizational goals and objectives.
4. Advanced knowledge of evidence-based practices and mental health practice guidelines in multiple professional areas, and the ability to use these resources to guide the program staff in providing appropriate treatment interventions.
5. Ability to influence high level officials in adoption of, and conformance to, performance measures, monitors, and other policy guidelines.

#### **4. DEVIATIONS**

- a. The appointing official may, under unusual circumstances, approve reasonable deviations to the grade determination requirements for LPMHCs 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-11 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]**