

Improving Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention Practices for VA Psychologists through a Change to Title 38 Hiring and Pay Authorities

Introduction

Continued attention to Veterans' mental health services has brought to the forefront the difficulties VHA has in recruiting, hiring, and retaining quality mental health professionals, specifically doctoral-level psychologists. There are compelling reasons to move psychologists to a full Title 38 standing.

Background / Problems

There are three hiring authorities in VHA: Title 5, Title 38, and Hybrid Title 38. Title 5 employees are traditional civil service employees such as accountants, clerks, human resource specialists, computer assistants, and others included in the General Schedule (GS) and Wage Grade (WG) pay systems. Title 38 employees are physicians, dentists, podiatrists, chiropractors, optometrists, registered nurses, physician assistants, and expanded-duty dental auxiliary professionals.¹ Physicians and dentists have a special pay authority (Title 38, Section 7431) that allows for a combination of market pay, base pay, specialty pay, and performance pay. Currently, Hybrid Title 38 employees include psychologists, respiratory and physical therapists, dental hygienists, licensed practical nurses, and medical technologists. Among this group, psychologists and some pharmacists are the only doctoral-level, licensed, independent professionals.²

Despite the recent growth of VA mental health services,³ psychologists have gone from fifth to third in the occupations with the largest staffing shortages in VA.^{4,5} With the increase in demands for psychological care resulting from the growing Veteran population who served in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the increases in problems now experienced by Korea and Vietnam Veterans, psychologists must be hired and retained to meet those treatment demands.

Recruitment to and retention within VA have been a challenge for several reasons.

- a. Title 5's inability to use viable market salary levels makes VA less competitive compared to other psychologist employment opportunities.
- b. According to the Dept. of Labor Statistics, psychologists are one of the highest-credentialed lowest paid doctoral level providers in the country.⁶
- c. Within the current federal GS pay scale, psychologists reach the top of their full performance level for pay (GS 13, step 10) in 21 years or fewer, with no means of advancement unless they leave clinical practice and move into administration.
- d. Comparing the pay scales of psychologists within VA to those, for example, in academic settings, shows that VA psychologists at the full performance level (GS-13) have average salaries that are approximately 74% of their academic peers. By 21 years, VA psychologists are earning only about 70% of their academic peers.⁷

The work of psychologists is invaluable to the mission of the VA. Research has repeatedly shown that psychotherapy is extremely effective and often the recommended first line treatment in treating the most common MH issues our Veteran's face, including PTSD, suicidality, depression, and anxiety.⁸ Research

clearly shows that, for almost all mental health issues, psychotherapy is superior to medications, especially over time. Moreover, even in cases of serious mental illness, research shows that medications plus psychotherapy is the best treatment and aids in medication adherence.^{9,10} Psychologists' training encompasses a unique combination of assessment, therapy, and research skills needed to develop and implement new and effective treatments. Veterans receiving services in VA frequently have highly complex mental health problems, including posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury with multiple comorbidities as well as the more common problems such as substance abuse and depression. VA psychologists have become particularly adept at treatments at a level above that which is generally available elsewhere, utilizing state-of-the-art, evidence-based approaches to treatment of mental illnesses. Retaining psychologists who demonstrate excellence in treating Veterans is a more critical issue than ever before. Title 38 would allow for appropriate compensation to retain this talented workforce.

Solution

Title 38 and Section 7431 allow for specific recruitment incentives and scaling of salary to reflect individual skills and talents. Pay for an individual is based on a combination of market pay, base pay, specialty pay, and performance pay. Moving VA psychologists to Title 38 and expanding Section 7431 to include doctoral-level psychologists allows VA to set salary level according to individual providers' strengths, talents, and specialties, and would greatly improve recruitment and retention of highly skilled psychologists.

Sources

¹ VA Pamphlet 05-68 (2011, March). Master Agreement between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Federation of Government Employees.

² Burk, Jeffrey. (2009, May). Update on Implementation of Hybrid Title 38 Authority in VA. VA Psychology Leadership Conference, San Antonio.

³ VA Announces Aggressive National Recruitment Effort to Hire Mental Health Professionals June 11, 2012. <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2325>

⁴ Dept. of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, Office of Healthcare Inspections, Report No. 15-00430-103. OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration's Occupational Staffing Shortages January 30, 2015. <http://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-15-00430-103.pdf>

⁵ Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, Office of Healthcare Inspections, Report No. 16-00351-453. OIG Determination of VHA Occupational Staffing Shortages September 28, 2016. <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-16-00351-453.pdf>

⁶ Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/home.htm>

⁷ Improving recruitment, hiring, and retention practices for VA psychologists: An analysis of the benefits of Title 38. [www.avapl.org/pub/Title 38 White Paper AVAPL.pdf](http://www.avapl.org/pub/Title%2038%20White%20Paper%20AVAPL.pdf)

⁸ Dept. of Veterans Affairs, VA Research Currents (2015, Feb 4). Group therapy shows promise for suicidal Veterans. <http://www.research.va.gov/currents/winter2015/winter2015-14.cfm>

⁹ Effective Treatments for PTSD patient education brochure. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov>

¹⁰ Benzodiazepines and PTSD patient education brochure. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov>