

OPTOMETRY PROMOTION INFORMATION GUIDE

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Important References:

VA Optometry Websites: <http://www.va.gov/optometry/> (internet), <http://vaww1.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/index.asp> (intranet)

Federal Pay Tables for Clinical Optometrist and Chiropractor: <https://vaww.va.gov/OHRM/Pay/#>

Appendix G5. Optometrist Qualification Standard: VA Handbook 5005, Part II Appendix G5 (April 15, 2002)
https://www.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/HB5005_APPENDIX_G5_Section_B_-_Qualifications.doc

Optometry Professional Standards Board Checklist
https://www.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/VACO_OPSB_Checklist_03_13.docx

Pay Administration: VA Handbook 5007/10: Within Grade Increases and Periodic Step Increases (February 6, 2004)
http://vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/Directives-Handbooks/Direct_hand.htm (look in 5007/10, Part III, Ch 5) (**Note:** VA intranet website)
-OR- <https://vaww.va.gov/ohrm/Directives-Handbooks/Documents/5007-10.DOC>

VA Handbook 5017 Part V: Title 38 Special Advancements and Cash Awards (June 3, 2019) (**Note:** VA intranet website)
https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/VA_Handbook_5017_Pt_V_UPDATED_Title_38_Special_Advancements_6-3-19.pdf
https://vaww.va.gov/vapubs/viewPublication.asp?Pub_ID=1017&FTtype=2 (full Handbook, Parts I-V)

Special Attention to:

"How Does a VA Optometrist Get Promoted to a Higher Grade?" by Dr. Dwayne D. Young, St. Louis VAMC—Optimum VA article, October 1989

"My View of the Professional Standards Board (PSB)" by Dr. Robert Newcomb—Optimum VA article, April 1990

Special Thanks to Dr. L. Roy Thompson for his guidance on several aspects of the information herein, and OPM.gov for such plentiful website information.

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 - [Credit for Unused Sick Leave](#)
 - [Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance](#)

General Synopsis of Terms and Pay Grades:

Federal pay levels are called pay *grades*, and one's grade determines one's salary range (follow the link to the [Federal Pay Tables](#)). Optometrists may be placed in one of five grades (depending on the individual's qualifications):

- GS-11 (Associate Grade)
- GS-12 (Full Grade)
- GS-13 (Intermediate Grade)
- GS-14 (Senior Grade)
- GS-15 (Chief Grade)

Each pay grade is divided into 10 *steps*, for instance someone near the top of Full grade might be considered to hold the level of GS-12, step 9 (Full Grade, step 9 or simply 12-9), whereas someone in the first part of that same grade might be at the level of GS-12, step 2.

Optometrists and other professionals within the Veterans Health Administration fall under [Title 38 of the United States Code](#), where civil service employees fall under [Title 5 of the US Code](#). Before October 21, 1976, Title 38 only included allopathic and osteopathic physicians and dentists, but the VHA Optometry Service (along with the Podiatry Service) was transferred into [Part V, Chapter 73, Subchapter 1, §7305 of Title 38](#), United States Code by [Public Law 94-581](#) with the establishment of the Director of Optometric Service position.

Title 5 is a merit-based, or "Rank in Position" system in which one's position description determines one's pay grade, whereas Title 38 is a non-merit based, or "Rank in Person" system in which personal qualifications affect pay grade. Title 5 exists as a government-wide, civil service entity. Title 38 applies to Veterans Health Administration employees alone and was created by Congress after WWII so that the VA could promote clinicians based on professional qualifications, while their clinical duties (direct patient care) remained unchanged.

Grade promotions for Title 38 personnel are determined by education, experience and personal performance, instead of job description or seniority. Such that an optometrist (or other professional) may achieve Chief pay grade without being the Chief of Optometry or Chief of the Section. Conversely, it is possible to hold the title of Chief of Optometry without achieving a Chief pay grade, for instance, one may be at the level of GS-13 (or Intermediate Grade) while still being Chief of the Optometry Section at a medical center.

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Qualification Standards and Grade Requirements Overview:

Basic Requirements Overview:

- 1) US Citizenship (Noncitizens may only be appointed when recruitment of citizens is not possible)
- 2) Doctor of Optometry degree received from a school or college of optometry approved by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.
- 3) Unrestricted licensure in a State, Territory or Commonwealth of the United States or the District of Columbia.
- 4) Physical standards (See VA Directive 5019: Occupational Health Services <https://vaww.va.gov/ohrm/Directives-Handbooks/Documents/5019.docx>)
- 5) English language proficiency.

Grade Requirements Overview:

Associate Grade (GS-11): Basic requirements only.

FULL GRADE (GS-12): Two years of optometric practice or its equivalent [*is still required*]. One year of approved residency training or its creditable equivalent acceptable to the [Accreditation] Council on Optometric Education of the American Optometric Association is acceptable in lieu of the 2 years of practice. Candidate must have demonstrated the professional competence and performance necessary to provide independently the full range of clinical optometric diagnosis and treatment for all the most prevalent types of vision dysfunctions and the detection and referral of patients with ocular disease or ocular manifestations of systemic disease.

*** [See Plan Ahead Advice](#)

NOTE: While overall time-in-grade requirements are rescinded for Title 38 employees, 2 years of optometric practice (or its equivalent) is required, per the qualification standards, in order to achieve Full Grade.

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INTERMEDIATE GRADE (GS-13): Meets the requirements in paragraphs (1), (2), and (3) below:

- 1) FOUR YEARS OF OPTOMETRIC PRACTICE OR ITS EQUIVALENT [*is still required*]. One year of approved residency training or its creditable equivalent acceptable to the [Accreditation] Council on Optometric Education of the American Optometric Association is acceptable in lieu of 2 years of practice.
- 2) The optometrist at this level has successfully passed the examinations of the National Board of Examiners in Optometry and has attained either of the following:
 - a) The stature that would warrant appointment at the clinical instructor or higher level at a school or college of optometry.
 - b) The professional ability and personal attributes which have merited significant recognition by a recognized professional organization, such as election to a Fellowship in the American Academy of Optometry.
- 3) Has achieved a high level of professional attainment as illustrated by one or more of the following examples:
 - a) Is a recognized expert in the diagnosis and treatment of unusual and complicated visual dysfunctions. Typically, in this capacity serves as a consultant to optometrist and other professionals in other health facilities or provides expert clinical services in such areas as the partially sighted or contact lenses for aphasics.
 - b) Has assumed responsibility for a multi-faceted optometric program including clinical research and/or training requiring a high degree of competence and skill in developing innovative and new and advanced instrumentation and treatment techniques. Typically, the program is in an educationally affiliated health care facility having an optometric training program of moderate scope involving liaison with other medical services and affiliated schools.
 - c) Has played a significant part in the conduct of vision research in a problem area of considerable scope and complexity which required novel approaches and which resulted in answers to important questions or important changes in existing methods and techniques. Publications authored by the optometrist are of considerable value to others in the individual's field. Typically, overall contributions are recognized by serving on important committees or other bodies in the profession.
 - d) Has had full responsibility for carrying out an optometric training program of significant size in which the optometrist has been responsible for maintaining liaison with the affiliated school and other educational institutions and professional or scientific organizations. Innovative approaches in development of curriculum and course content and in expanding and improving the educational program have been displayed by the individual.

*** [See Plan Ahead Advice](#)

NOTE: Membership of a professional or volunteer organization (by itself) will not qualify for section 2 above.

NOTE: While overall time-in-grade requirements are rescinded for Title 38 employees, 4 years of optometric practice (or its equivalent) is required, per the qualification standards, in order to achieve Intermediate Grade **and above**.

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SENIOR GRADE (GS-14): Meets the requirements for Intermediate grade and the requirements in paragraphs (1) and (2) below:

- 1) The optometrist at this level possesses such academic stature as would warrant a faculty appointment of a professional level in an approved school or college of optometry.
- 2) Has demonstrated recognized superior professional attainment as evidenced by one or more of the following examples:
 - a) Has served as a team leader in attacking major optometric problems affecting the continued provision of quality care health services at a VISN, statewide, or national level. There is such confidence in the optometrist at this level that there is unusual support of the individual's recommendations and conclusions.
 - b) Has had responsibility for carrying out a major optometric program segment on a national level.
 - c) Has conducted high level studies in a difficult area of vision research which has contributed to a substantial advance in the health field, with important professional publications.

*** [See Plan Ahead Advice](#)

NOTE: Membership of a professional or volunteer organization (by itself) will not qualify for section 2 above.

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CHIEF GRADE (GS-15): *Meets the requirements for Senior grade and must demonstrate a sustained very high level of professional performance with evidence of exceptional professional and/or administrative development by the following:*

- 1) Has assumed substantial professional and/or administrative responsibilities in which the individual is expected to fully advise and make professional clinical and educational recommendations as to courses of action on problems and considerations of national scope in all areas of optometry. Typically, the optometrist at this level has had responsibility for a major optometric program segment on a nationwide basis and has been consistently called upon to represent the organization in an authoritative manner in matters dealing with development of new and/or revised concepts and programs having a major impact upon the academic, medical, and optometric communities.
- 2) Outstanding professional attainment. Examples of such attainment are:
 - a) Achievement of outstanding results in research which are regarded as having a major impact on advancing the field.
 - b) Significant number of noteworthy publications in professional journals.

NOTE: While the standards are quoted within the Full, Intermediate, Senior and Chief grade portions above, this listing is merely an overview of the qualification standards, and many of the requirements are vague and subject to interpretation. Any questions regarding the full standards should be directed to the actual notice in the VA Handbook which may be reached through the [OD Qualification Standards Link](#). Also check the [FAQ](#) section of this document for hints on how the standards translate into Real World Requirements.

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Grade Promotion Process:

If you have met the requirements for advancement listed within the [Qualification Standards](#), your supervisor will need to recommend your promotion to the next grade. It is a good idea to discuss your plans with your supervisor ahead of time, to insure a smooth process. Each site handles the request slightly differently; some may require a memo from the optometrist seeking advancement to be signed off by a supervisor (and others), while other sites may require that the recommendation and memo or formal request start at the supervisory level. Again, this is a good reason to discuss your plans with your supervisor, to see what the protocol is at your station.

Once your supervisor approves the request for promotion, the process will usually need concurrence by the Service Chief, Chief of Staff, and the Medical Center Director. Some VA's have a Committee that looks at all requests to determine whether the budget can handle it. From there, it will often head to Human Resources (HR). Your HR rep can probably explain the process in full, but HR must put the packet together and send it to the Optometry Professional Standards Board (PSB) at the VA Central Office (VACO) in Washington, D.C. If the Optometry PSB *recommends* promotion, the packet makes a stop at the VACO HR Department for processing before returning to your local VA. **Your promotion is not in effect until your local Director or other approving official signs it into action. The approving official may decline the recommendation by the Optometry PSB for local reasons, but if the official approves the promotion, it goes back to HR for the finishing touches.** Get to know your HR Rep ahead of time, since it generally proves efficient to give that person a 'heads up' on the process. (**Note: There may be extra steps in this process locally, so be sure to find out exactly how your VA does things.**)

The Optometry PSB is composed of three members at any given time. The Director of Optometry Service is the Chairman of the PSB, while the other two members are VA optometrists from the field. The Optometry PSB interprets our Qualification Standards and makes every effort to apply these in a fair and consistent manner.

There are several documents that will need to be provided to the PSB, many of which may be obtained from HR, if you do not already have copies of the documentation saved in your own files. (It is also a good idea to keep copies of all your HR documentation in a file for easy access. Nearly all files from your employment record are being uploaded or are currently located on the VA eOPF website: <https://eopf.opm.gov/va/Login.aspx>.) Your request will need copies of the forms and information on the [PSB Checklist](#):

- 1) Cover letter with request information and Human Resources Point of Contact
- 2) Standard Form 50: Notification of Personnel Action showing Employee's Anniversary Date of Grade (ADG)
- 3) Curriculum Vitae (updated)
- 4) Latest SF 50: Notification of Personnel Action
- 5) Last 3 Proficiency Reports (or what is available)
- 6) Last 3 Board Actions Reports (or what is available) approved by Facility Director
- 7) Recommendation from the rating official

- 8) Evidence of Successful Completion of NBEO exams (for Intermediate Grade and higher)
 - 9) Full Grade: Two (2) years optometric practice or its equivalent. One year of approved residency training or its creditable equivalent acceptable to the ACOE of the American Optometric Association is acceptable in lieu of 2 years of practice, and meet the qualification standards requirements.
 - 10) *Intermediate Grade, **Senior Grade or **Chief Grade: Four (4) years of optometric practice or its equivalent. One year of approved residency training or its creditable equivalent acceptable to the ACOE of the American Optometric Association is acceptable in lieu of 2 years of practice. *Meet qualification standards requirements. **Meet qualification standards requirements for the next lower grade level, and the grade being requested.
- 11) **ALSO: PROVIDE EVIDENCE** of meeting the qualification standards for the promotion for which you are applying

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Step Advancement Process (WIGI, SAA and SAP):

NOTE: Individuals at the top step of their grade cannot receive an increase to base pay; however, they may be recognized with a **Superior Performance Award** in accordance with [Part III of VA Handbook 5017](#).

Step advancement has a similar process to grade promotion. Your supervisor must approve, and HR plays a large part in the process. Step advancements, except for WIGIs, are subject to the recommendation by the Optometry Professional Standards Board (**PSB**) and require specific paperwork:

- 1) Cover letter with Request Information and Human Resources Point of Contact
- 2) [Standard Form 50 \(SF 50\)](#) Showing Employee's Anniversary Date of Grade (ADG)
- 3) Curriculum Vitae (updated)
- 4) Latest SF 50: Notification of Personnel Action
- 5) Last 3 Proficiency Reports, including a current report (or what is available)
- 6) Last 3 Board Actions Reports (or what is available) approved by Facility Director
- 7) Recommendation from the rating official

There are three **main** types of step advancements or increases:

PERIODIC STEP INCREASES (PSI), A.K.A. WITHIN GRADE INCREASES (WIGI)

Per VA Handbook 5007/10 ([Pay Administration](#)), Part III, Chapter 5, Section 1.a/b/c.1 (February 6, 2004), periodic step increases (one step) may be granted to any optometrist who is **not** at the maximum rate of his/her grade after a waiting period of 104 weeks (2 years). (If an OD, whose work is "of an acceptable level", is below step 10 within a pay grade, he or she will receive a one-step increase in pay every 2 years on the Anniversary Date of Grade (**ADG**)). This is the one process that is generally handled by Human Resources (**HR**), and does not require a request sent to the Optometry PSB.

Question: A question was raised as to whether the date of the WIGI will be reset when someone receives an increase from an SAA. Let's say a doc has an ADG of October 16, 2008, then received a 3-step SAA in on December 24, 2009. The question was: is he/she **still** eligible for a WIGI on October 16, 2010?

Answer: Yes. The WIGI is also a somewhat "automatic" HR issue, and the doc doesn't need to request anything. The WIGI time-frame is on a 2-year schedule based solely on a person's Anniversary Date of **Grade**, so every 2 years after the date that a person is placed at his/her current **grade**, he/she will be eligible for a Periodic Step Increase (provided he/she is not already at step 10). The caveat to this is that occasionally human errors do take place, and an HR representative will accidentally reset a person's ADG after a step advancement. The take home: *It is generally a good idea to check the official record after any advancement to make sure your ADG is listed correctly.*

*This question most likely forms around the question of an equivalent increase, as one of the requirements for receiving a WIGI is that "no 'equivalent increase' in compensation was received during the period under consideration. An SAP *is* considered an 'equivalent increase' (not an SAA), and no two such advancements may be granted in succession within the same grade.*

*** **NOTE:** There is some confusion as to the exact waiting period for a Periodic Step Increase, and it was brought to my attention that some of us are under the impression that when a clinician is below step 3 in his or her grade, the waiting period for WIGI is only 52 weeks. This is not true for optometrists, physicians, dentists or podiatrists (though it may be true for other professions). Please reference:

[Within Grade Increases and Periodic Step Increases: VA Handbook 5007/15, Part III Chapter 5.](#)

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SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR ACHIEVEMENT (SAA)

Regulation for Special Advancements for Achievement and Performance (SAAs and SAPs) will be found in [VA Handbook 5017, Part V](#).

- 1) **CRITERIA FOR SAA.** F/T, P/T, and intermittent ODs appointed under 38 U.S.C. §7401(1) or §7405(a) may advance within grade from one to five steps, on the basis of professional achievement *above that expected for the grade level or assignment*, provided they demonstrate a high level of performance and assumption of greater responsibility.

An employee is **not** eligible for a SAA if the professional accomplishment was achieved prior to appointment or as a result of VA funding, e.g., paying for training, paying for certification. The following is a list of the types of professional accomplishment that may be achieved:

- a) **CERTIFICATION.** Attainment of certification by a *national* certifying body, unless such certification is: a condition of employment, a qualification requirement for promotion, or used to justify a higher-level grade. An employee may only receive an SAA for attainment of specialty certification the *first time* that it is received; it cannot be granted for a renewal or after a lapse in the certification.

Must meet *all* the criteria below (documentation of criteria must be included in the request for SAA):

- i) Issued by a national certifying body
- ii) Required attendance, virtually or in person, at a training class or self-taught coursework/reading or other training required by the national certifying body
- iii) Contain evidence that the employee passed a test at the end of the training program or successfully passed an examination as part of the certification process

NOTE: Local, state, or regional certification programs, or certification for work experience based upon receipt of another certification, are not acceptable

- **Supervisor's Endorsement.** The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:
 - That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. The most recent rating of record is not sufficient unless it was issued within the past 30 calendar days
 - How the **[knowledge gained by obtaining the certification]** will benefit VA (and/or the duties that are being assumed for which the certification was obtained). Examples must be provided
 - How the employee will apply the knowledge in the performance of his/her current job duties

- b) **ELECTION TO OFFICE.** After a minimum of one term in office in a professional organization, at the state or national level, in recognition of significant and distinguished contributions to the employee's occupation.

Must meet *all* the criteria below (documentation of criteria must be included in the request for SAA):

- i) Include a letter from the organization appointing the employee to office for a designated period of time
- ii) Include specific information about accomplishments made while serving in office with confirmation of these accomplishments by the Chair/President, or other appropriate official if the employee is the Chair/President
- iii) Include information confirming the employee has completed at least one term in the office of the professional organization

- This award will only be given after completion of at least one term. Only one SAA will be issued for this accomplishment, regardless of the number of terms served

- **Supervisor's Endorsement.** The supervisor must indicate in the written submission in support of the SAA:
 - That at the time of the achievement and at the time of the SAA recommendation, the employee is performing at an Excellent/Highly Satisfactory or Outstanding level. Previous ratings of record may be used to support this level of rating during the term in which he/she served
 - The employee's current level of performance unless the most recent rating of record was issued within the past 30 calendar days
 - How the employee's accomplishments while serving with the **[professional organization]** have benefited VA. Examples of these accomplishments must be provide

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- c) **APPOINTMENT TO STATE LICENSING BOARD (SLB) OR NATIONAL CERTIFYING/ACCREDITING BODY.** After serving a minimum of one term on a SLB or with a National Certifying/Accrediting Body related to the practice of the employee's occupation.

Must meet *all* the criteria below (documentation of criteria must be included in the request for SAA):

- i) Include a letter from the organization appointing the employee to the position for a designated period of time
- ii) Include specific information about accomplishments made while serving in office with confirmation of these accomplishments by the Chair/President, or other appropriate official if the employee is the Chair/President

- iii) Include information confirming the employee has completed at least one term in the SLB or National Certifying/Accrediting Body
- Consideration for SAA will only be given after completion of at least one term. Only one SAA will be issued for this accomplishment, regardless of the number of terms served
- **Supervisor's Endorsement.** Same as [Supervisor's Endorsement for Election to Office](#) (insert the words "**SLB or National Accrediting Body**" within the brackets)

- d) **PUBLISHED RESEARCH.** Independently producing or serving as a principal assistant or major contributing member of a research project that advances patient care or health care and authors or co-authors results in a national or international journal.

Must meet *all* the criteria below (documentation of criteria must be included in the request for SAA):

- i) Include a copy of the national or international publication containing the article resulting from the research project, ensuring that it demonstrates the employee was the author or co-author
- ii) Include sufficient information to explain how the research advances patient care or health care
- iii) Include the name and role of the employee in the journal article with sufficient information to demonstrate he/she independently produced or was serving as the principal assistant or a major contributing member of the research

- **Supervisor's Endorsement.** Same as [Supervisor's Endorsement for Certification](#) (insert the words "**knowledge gained by participating in Published Research**" within the brackets and ignore the wording in the parentheses)

- e) **EDUCATION.** Attainment of a higher level of academic achievement than required for the occupation, unless such education is a condition of employment for the current position held, or is a qualification requirement for promotion to a higher grade, or is used to justify a promotion to a higher-level grade or assignment

Must meet *all* the criteria below (documentation of criteria must be included in the request for SAA):

- i) From an educational institute of higher learning accredited by the U.S. Department of Education
- ii) In a health care field related to the individual's current occupation with VA

- **Supervisor's Endorsement.** Same as [Supervisor's Endorsement for Certification](#) (insert the words "**knowledge gained by obtaining the higher level of education**" within the brackets and ignore the wording in the parentheses)

- f) **PROFESSIONAL AWARD.** Receipt of a non-monetary professional award, at the state or national level, in recognition of significant contributions to the employee's field of expertise.

Must meet *all* the criteria below (documentation of criteria must be included in the request for SAA):

- i) Include a copy of the nomination for the professional award, which must provide sufficient information to explain the employee's significant contribution to the employee's field of expertise
- ii) Be a professional award given at the state or national level

- **Supervisor's Endorsement.** Same as [Supervisor's Endorsement for Certification](#) (insert the words "**employee's professional contribution that warranted state or national recognition through the issuance of an award**" within the brackets and ignore the wording in the parentheses)

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- 2) **NUMBER OF STEPS FOR SAA.** A step increases base pay, the cost of retirement benefits, and life insurance for covered employees, and results in a higher basic pay adjustment upon promotion. Accordingly, this type of recognition may increase an organization's budget into the future. Therefore, the PSB must be fiscally responsible when recommending the number of steps and must carefully assess the employee's contribution to the Agency and its mission. A four- or five-step advancement should only be granted in extremely unusual situations when the achievement is deemed to be an exceptional contribution to the Agency and its mission.
- 3) **TOP STEP (STEP 10) OF THE GRADE.** Employees at step 10 of their grade cannot receive a step increase. For those who meet all the criteria for a SAA, the PSB will make a recommendation to the approving official for amount of cash award that may be appropriate, based on the value of the employee's contribution to the Agency/mission. Only employees at step 10 may receive cash in lieu of an SAA. All cash awards will be documented on [VA Form 4659](#).
- 4) **CONSISTENCY CRITERIA.** National PSBs and local facilities may develop criteria to assist with consistency of recommendation for awarding SAAs. However, local HR must ensure the criteria are met for each award submission.

- 5) **DISCRETION OF THE APPROVING OFFICIAL.** Approving officials (i.e., supervisors, chiefs of staff, facility directors, etc.) may approve or disapprove awards, at their discretion, for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made by the employee to the Agency or its mission.

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6) **PROCESSING/DOCUMENTING SAAs FOR TITLE 38 EMPLOYEES (INCLUDING THE USE OF PSBs).**

 Employees will submit evidence of professional accomplishment within **14 calendar days** after the achievement is obtained, but documentation may be accepted up to 30 calendar days after the achievement **when extenuating circumstances exist**, e.g., lengthy illness, inability to get documentation from certifying body.

NOTE: Agency budget limitations are not an extenuating circumstance. Facilities should appropriately allocate and manage the annual award budget so that deserving employees are recognized throughout the fiscal year. **Lack of funding at the time of achievement will not result in the employee being recognized later, or when funds become available.**

- a) The immediate supervisor, or higher-level official, reviews the submission and **within 14 calendar days**:
- Determines whether or not to support the submission, with a formal recommendation for an SAA. (**NOTE:** Determination by the immediate supervisor or higher-level official is discretionary.)
 - Consults Fiscal/Human Resources to determine if award budget allows for SAA and compliance with local award policies
 - If criteria are met and funding is available, recommends SAA including the appropriate justification as outlined above
- b) The award nomination and all required justification and documentation is forwarded to the service chief, or Chief of Staff or Associate Director, who submits it to HR so that it is **received no later than 30 calendar days after the achievement**, or **60 calendar days after the achievement when extenuating circumstances exist**, e.g., supervisor was on extended leave or additional information from the employee was needed
- c) HR conducts an initial technical review of the award prior to submission to the Optometry PSB to ensure that all information has been provided by the employee and supervisor, and the policy requirements have been met. Additional information obtained by Human Resources during the technical review process is attached to the award nomination.

If the award submission **does not** meet technical requirements due to lack of justification, it is returned to the supervisor **within seven (7) calendar days** with an explanation of what information is needed or why technical requirements have not been met.

If the award meets technical requirements, HR submits the nomination to the PSB **within seven calendar days following receipt of the award**. Human Resources documents (and submits to the PSB) that an HR technical review was completed. A copy of the local SAA policy is submitted with the nomination.

- d) The PSB reviews and recommends to approve or disapprove the submission. If recommending approval, the PSB also recommends an appropriate number of steps to be granted. The PSB documents on the board action its justification in support of the recommendation. The board action, with recommendation and justification from the PSB, is forwarded to the appropriate HR Office on VA Form 10-2543
- e) Prior to forwarding to the appropriate approving official, HR reviews and signs the board action to certify the board's recommendation meets **technical and regulatory** requirements
- f) The approving official makes the final decision on the board's recommendation and completes/signs the board action, as appropriate. Once the approving official signs VA Form 10-2543, HR contacts the supervisor to initiate [Standard Form 52 \(SF-52\)](#) for the number of steps approved for SAA
- Approving officials approve or disapprove SAAs at their discretion [for non-discriminatory reasons](#)
- g) The SAA is processed and is **effective the pay period following the date signed by the approving official**

The Human Resources Management Officer at the VA Maryland Healthcare System, or a designee, serves as the technical representative to the VA Central Office (**VACO**) Optometry Professional Standards Board (**PSB**).

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SPECIAL ADVANCEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE (SAP)

Regulation for Special Advancements for Achievement and Performance (SAAs and SAPs) will be found in [VA Handbook 5017, Part V](#).

- 1) **CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE**. FT, PT, and intermittent ODs who demonstrate sustained high level of performance and professional competence above that normally expected of employees in the grade and profession, and demonstrate exceptional skills and aptitudes in the care and treatment of patients, or who have made noted contributions in some phase of their profession, may be considered for SAPs

NOTE: Supervisors/managers may only be considered for SAPs at the end of the Executive Career Field rating cycle

- a) **ADVANCEMENT**. For Optometrists, one step may be granted on the same due date established for a PSI, only if the employee is below the top step of their grade upon receipt of their WIGI. The advancement shall be regarded as an equivalent increase. No two such advancements may be granted in succession within the grade
- b) **DISCRETION**. Approving officials may approve or disapprove awards, at their discretion, for non-discriminatory reasons, e.g., budget limitations, disagreement with the value of the contribution made to the Agency or mission
- c) **COMBINATION AWARD**. Employees may receive a Superior Performance Award and an SAP, but the amount of the award cannot exceed the value of the accomplishment

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2) **PROCESSING/DOCUMENTING SPECIAL ADVANCEMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE**

- a) Human Resources Management Officers notify appropriate officials in anticipation of eligibility. Approximately 90 calendar days prior to the employee completing the waiting period for a PSI (or WIGI), the facility receives from Austin Automation Center (AAC), VA Form 97, Notice of Pending Personnel Action, stating the employee is eligible for consideration for SAP
- b) The immediate supervisor or higher-level official will submit appropriate justification (as outlined in the SAA section) with completed [VA Form 4659](#), the performance appraisal or proficiency rating, and generate an [SF-52](#). The award nomination is forwarded to the service chief, or Chief of Staff or Associate Director, who submits it to HR, so it is received no later than 30 calendar days following the completion of the employee's PSI waiting period
- c) HR conducts an initial technical review of the award prior to submitting the request to ensure that all information has been provided and the policy requirements are met. If the submission does not meet technical requirements due to lack of justification, it is returned to the supervisor within **seven calendar days** with an explanation of what is needed. If the award meets technical requirements, HR submits the nomination to the Optometry PSB **within seven calendar days** following receipt of the award submission, documenting the award nomination meets technical requirements (or providing an explanation as to why it does not, when applicable)
- d) The PSB makes specific recommendations with the appropriate number of steps to be granted, when applicable. The board action, with supporting justification from the PSB recommending approval or disapproval, is forwarded to HR on VA Form 10-2543
- e) HR reviews and signs the board action to certify it meets technical and regulatory requirements, then forwards it and the justification to the approving official
- f) SAPs are processed as soon as possible after the end of the employee's rating cycle but **no later than 90 calendar days** after the end of the rating cycle

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Tips and Recommendations for Efficient Advancement:

The following recommendations are based on conversations with more tenured VA optometrists, the [articles](#) of Dwayne Young and Robert Newcomb cited in the references at the top of the document, and perusal of the official VA documents listed as references.

- 1) **Start planning from day one!** The successful optometrist will *ask questions* of senior optometrists and avoid the mistakes that most of us have made in the promotion process.
- 2) **Speak with other optometrists and your facility supervisors.** Remember, if you've seen one VA, you've seen ONLY one VA. Leadership is different at each facility, and requests for advancement need to be approved by local leadership. Knowing what the Optometry PSB expects is a necessity, but **the Optometry PSB makes recommendations** to your facility director or leadership, and **the local leadership has the final right of approval.** Find out what your local leaders expect for promotions and advancements.
- 3) Plan your advancements carefully and with diligence. Remember that you cannot apply for a step increase at the same time you apply for a grade promotion; it must be one or the other.

IMPORTANT note: you may often use an accomplishment to advance several steps through an SAA, then mention that same accomplishment when applying for your next grade promotion, but if you use an accomplishment to receive a grade promotion, you cannot then turn around and use that same accomplishment toward an SAA for a step increase within your new grade.

- 4) When you advance a grade, you advance based on pay rate, and it works out to whatever step *within the next grade* that would be equivalent to the pay rate increase that you would receive if you were to advance approximately 2 steps within your current grade. (Confusing? Take a look at the [Pay Table](#) and note that at GS-12, step 10 pays more than a GS-13, step 2.... The necessity for a pay increase equivalent to *greater than 2* steps turns out to automatically place someone advancing from a step 10 in one grade to a step 6 in the next grade. A step 9 would likely advance to a step 5 in the next grade, and so on, ensuring that the advancement equals an increase in pay.
- 5) Know your Anniversary Date of Grade (ADG). This date is important for grade promotions up to Intermediate grade as well as periodic step increases (PSI / WIGI) and Special Advancement for Performance (SAP) increases.
- 6) Know your HR rep, and keep in touch with your supervisor. You may be busy, but so is your supervisor, and you cannot expect her/him to remember your ADG or accomplishments and offer you the increases you deserve. It's best not to throw everything at this person at one time anyway. Let your supervisors and leadership know your accomplishments as you achieve them, make known your plans and goals, and give supervisors a heads up before you submit for advancement.

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- 7) Keep copies of everything... You passed the National Boards? Have a copy of your certification handy. Licensed in a state? Keep a copy in an accessible file. Your board actions and SF-50s will be on file with OPM at <https://eopf.opm.gov/val>. And it pays to keep your CV updated with each new accomplishment. *Remember, anything on your CV that you will use to advance will need to be accompanied by evidentiary support.*
- 8) Be specific in your requests. Have you published quite a few articles that you think would warrant a 5-step increase for an SAA? Go ahead and request to your heart's desire. The Optometry PSB or your local facility director may overrule you and offer fewer steps, but wouldn't you hate to request (and receive) only one step, when you could have advanced three?
- 9) Be prepared to think outside the box sometimes. The Qualification Standards outline some of the things that are acceptable when applying for a promotion, but should a doc go above and beyond? Should an OD opt to take part in local or Medical Center activities that may not pertain to optometry, such as assisting teaching BLS at the medical center, submitting a Newsletter article (non-peer reviewed and therefore not contributing to the requirements for Chief Grade), or getting involved in a Medical Center Committee?

The traditional approach seems to be "well if it's not optometry-related, I won't waste my time" or "if it's not an article that will fulfill the Chief Grade requirements, it's not worth anything." But... consider this: **Any time you enter a request for promotion or advancement, that request has to make it past several hurdles before it ever sees the Optometry PSB.** The Optometry Board knows what applies to optometry and what doesn't, and so may your supervisor (if you have a Chief of Optometry), but what about your Chief of Surgery/Primary Care, Chief of Staff, or your Director? Contributing regularly at your facility goes a long way to making a good local impression, and getting involved can assist you or your clinic in many ways.

Consider as well that while a clinical Newsletter article, medical center activity, or a local committee assignment might not really apply to a grade promotion request, it can certainly spruce up an anemic request. Each of these types of

contributions may not be worthy of advancement when standing alone, but they can certainly punch up a memo asking for advancement or promotion. When you publish a journal article, why apply for a 2-step increase when you could possibly request a 3-step if you have been more active in federal healthcare, the VA, and other optometric interests? Just a thought!

- 10) ONE MORE VERY IMPORTANT PIECE OF INFORMATION: **TIMING IS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE HERE.** If you put in for any type of advance, it is not considered part of your record until your Director signs it into effect. ***Any achievements on your part during the interim (from the time you submit for the step increase or grade promotion to the time it goes into effect) will be counted as if they were part of the advancement package already being submitted/reviewed.*** What does this mean?

Let's say you are at GS13-10 and you put in for a grade promotion in May. Thinking you will probably receive your promotion by September, you make plans to attend Academy and take the oral exam to become a Fellow on October 24th (after all, it could be worth up to three steps, right?) This seems like good planning...it sounds efficient, and you hope to request a step increase less than one year after requesting a promotion. Unfortunately, once you submit your promotion paperwork, the whole process is out of your hands. If the paperwork gets stopped somewhere along the trail (or lost!... these things do happen), the process could be delayed for several months.

Your promotion is then signed into effect on October 29th, 5 days **after** the date you were inducted as a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry. Since you became a Fellow **before** your new Anniversary Date of Grade, your achievement counts no more than if it had been submitted as part of your promotion package. You will not be able to use it for a step increase. Remember that your achievements must happen **after** your promotion's **effective date**.

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Example Promotion Requests:

NOTE: All VAMCs or VISNs were not created equal when it comes to promotions requests. Some prefer a memo, while some prefer a letter. Some VAMCs send everything through the VA Director before it goes to HR (even with SAAs and SAPs), while others let HR and the Professional Standards Board handle everything first. In some cases your supervisor will keep an account of your progress and help you out, but in most cases you are on your own. Remember that while promotions and increases are **recommended** through the Optometry PSB, your local leadership will need to officially approve any advancement requests. You want to make sure that your supervisor, Chief, and local director are behind your promotion request.

It will generally be up to you to see that the request is made (make sure you have met the qualification standards requirements first, then CHECK WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR regarding the local process). Generally, your best bet is to take care of as much of the process yourself as possible ...other people involved in the process *usually* appreciate having less to do (this is a very general statement, of course). The following are example memos and a good place to start (you may want to use the VA Standard Forms memo). **A cover letter is a good idea and a professional touch.**

IMPORTANT: ***Make sure that you provide documentation to support any and all claims within the promotion or advancement request. Nothing may be considered by the board unless accompanied by evidentiary support.***

ALSO: When promoting to **Chief Grade**, consider using only the **level** of the grade in your request and cover letter (GS-15 or Grade 15), instead of the term *Chief Grade*. Many non-ODs (and some ODs) still equate the term "Chief" with a rank-in-position title (see [General Synopsis of Terms and Pay Grades](#)) and believe a person cannot achieve Chief Grade without holding a *Chief of Optometry* title or other supervisory position (this is not the case for Title 38s, as we are rank-in-person). Sometimes using a different term *may* avoid a misunderstanding. Not a guaranteed fix, but worth a try!

Department of
Veterans Affairs

Memorandum

Date: November 11, 1920
From: I. C. Yu, OD
Subject: Request Consideration for Special Advancement for Achievement - I. C. Yu, OD

To: Director, Anywhere VA Medical Center
Thru: Chief, Optometry Section (000a)
Chief, Surgical Care Service Line (000)

1) Request consideration for **Special Advancement for Achievement advancement of FIVE steps**. I have fulfilled the requirements set out in **VA Handbook 5017, Part V: Title 38 Special Advancements and Cash Awards: Criteria for Special Advancement for Achievement (SAA)** that pertain to the following criteria:

- a) **Certification:** On October 30, 1920 I was inducted as a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry (AAO).
 - AAO is the national academic organization for optometry in the United States.
 - Requirements included self-study, written case reports, finishing a residency program in the past, and 2 previously published articles.
 - I passed the oral board examination on Friday, October 29th, 1920
- b) **Election to Office:** I was elected to the Board of the Armed Forces Optometric Society (AFOS) during the national business conference in October 1919. On October 26, 1920 I completed my first term in office, and I begin my second term this year.
 - Included are my letters of appointment from 1919 and re-appointment from October 1920.
 - During my first term as a member of the Board, I undertook to write the Procedure Manual for our organization. I was also tasked with organizing the committees and committee structures for our Vice President.
- c) **Appointment to National Certifying/Accrediting Body:** During the AAO conference in October 1919, I took the course to become an Accreditation Council on Optometric Education (ACOE) Consultant. On October 27, 1920 I completed my first term as an ACOE Consultant.
 - Included are my letters of appointment from 1919 and re-appointment from October 1920.
 - During my first year as an ACOE Consultant, I went with a team to re-accredit the optometry residency program at the S'Wonderful VAMC in February 1920.
 - In June 1920, I was lead for the team sent to accredit the optometry residency program at the S'Marvelous VAMC.
- d) **Published Research:** Copeland J, Yu IC. Novel Objective Refraction Using the Streak Retinoscope. *J of Optom, a New Field*. Nov 1920; Vol 1 No 3:24-36.
 - In this article, my mentor, Dr. Copeland and I show that refractive error may be easily estimated to a nearly exacting degree on a non-communicative patient or infant. Using the streak retinoscope designed by Dr. Copeland last year, along with either a meter rule or trial lenses, we show how any refracting optician or optometrist can provide glasses for all patients. This will assist with those veterans who cannot or will not openly communicate, and with infants, will avoid the development of refractive amblyopia.

2) Thank you for your time and attention to consideration of advancing me four steps via a Special Advancement for Achievement.

I. C. Yu, OD

Circle: Concur Do Not Concur

Signature: _____

Roland Stone, OD, FAAO

Chief, Optometry Section

Circle: Concur Do Not Concur

Signature: _____

Carter L. O'Pay, MD

Chief, Surgical Care Service Line

Department of Veterans Affairs

Memorandum

Date: April 4, 1920
From: I.M. Here, OD, FAAO
Subject: Request Consideration for Promotion to Senior Grade – I.M. Here, OD

To: Director, Anywhere VA Medical Center
Thru: Chief, Optometry Section (000a)
Chief, Surgical Care Service Line (000)

1. Request consideration for promotion to **Senior grade**. I have fulfilled the requirements for promotion as set forth in Optometrist Qualification Standard: VA Handbook 5005, Part II Appendix G5:
 - a. As required by Optometrist Qualification Standard: VA Handbook 5005, Part II Appendix G5, Section B, D:1, “*The optometrist at this level possesses such academic stature as would warrant a faculty appointment of a professional level in an approved school or college of optometry,*”
 - i. Currently appointed to the Anywhere College of Osteopathic Medicine with the accompanying title of *Part-time Faculty Instructor, Clinical Track, Discipline of Optometry*
 - ii. Currently appointed as Adjunct Faculty at University of Guam—Eye Doctor School
 - b. As indicated by Optometrist Qualification Standard: VA Handbook 5005, Part II Appendix G5, Section B, D:2 (a), “*Has served as a team leader in attacking major optometric problems affecting the continued provision of quality care health services at a VISN, statewide, or national level,*”
 - i. 1916-1918: Represented Anywhere VAMC at the VISN Eye Collaborative
 - Serving as primary coordinator for optical contract issues for the VISN
 - ii. 1917-1918: Secretary/Treasurer for MyState Optometric Association
 - c. As indicated by Optometrist Qualification Standard: VA Handbook 5005, Part II Appendix G5, Section B, D:2 (b), “*Has had responsibility for carrying out a major optometric program segment on a national level,*”
 - i. Currently serve the Armed Forces Optometric Society (AFOS) as Chair of the Wonderful Committee
 - d. As indicated by Optometrist Qualification Standard: VA Handbook 5005, Part II Appendix G5, Section B, D:2, “*Has demonstrated recognized superior professional attainment...*”
 - i. Established a student externship program with the University of Guam—Eye Doctor School in April of 1916; currently the liaison between the Anywhere VAMC Eye Clinic and UGEDS
 - ii. Serving as a Consultant for the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education (ACOE) since December of 1916
 - iii. Serving as a member of the Anywhere VAMC MyHealthVet Process Action Committee
 - iv. Presentation: Here IM. Good Name for a Poster. Southern Educational Congress of Optometry, Atlanta, GA. February 1916.
 - v. Presentation: Here IM, Here UB. Nother Good Name. Armed Forces Optometric Society Continuing Education Conference, Atlanta, GA. February 1916.
 - vi. Presentation: Here IM, Here UB, Cold IM. Impressive Name for a Presentation. American Academy of Optometry Conference, BigTown, US. November 1918.
2. Thank you for your time and attention for consideration of my advancement to senior grade.

I.M. Here, OD, FAAO

Circle: Concur Do Not Concur

Circle: Concur Do Not Concur

Signature: _____

Signature: _____

Roland Stone, OD, FAAO
Chief, Optometry Section

Carter L. O'Pay, MD
Chief, Surgical Care Service Line

Frequently Asked Promotion Questions:

- 1) ***Per VA Handbook 5005/58 (June 14, 2012), the Time-in-Grade requirements were eliminated for Title 38 employees. What does this mean for me? What changed?***

Good question! This was certainly a positive thing for Title 38 employees, especially for our young optometrists or new optometrists. The only thing that changed, though, is the time-in-grade requirement. The optometry qualification standards and rules for advancement from one grade to another did not change (see [Tips and Recommendations #4](#)).

This means that 2 years of optometric practice (or equivalent) are required to be placed at Full grade (12), and that 4 years of practice (or equivalent) are required to achieve Intermediate grade or above (13 and up). Since those requirements were written into the qualification standards, they still stand. Note that in order to achieve Senior grade, an OD “meets the requirement for intermediate grade” as well as those for Senior grade. As well, in order to achieve Chief grade, a person “meets the requirement for senior grade” as well as those for Chief grade and “must demonstrate a sustained very high level of professional performance with evidence of exceptional professional and/or administrative development”. None of that changed. What changed was the amount of time required to wait before requesting a promotion to GS14 or GS15.

What does this mean for the individual OD? For those go-getters who get involved early, plan early, publish early, and become leaders early... you may be able to promote early.

- 2) ***HR from one VA indicated to an optometrist that a special advancement award moves back the periodic step increase (PSI)—aka within grade increase (WIGI)—that takes place every 2yrs. Sometimes the regulations are so confusing that even human resources cannot make sense of them. Here is what we found:***

This may seem to be true according to [Pay Administration: VA Handbook 5007/10 \(February 6, 2004\)](#), where it states:

b. Conditions of Eligibility for a Periodic Step Increase (PSI). A PSI will be granted when:

- (1) An employee’s work is of an acceptable level of competence;
- (2) No “equivalent increase” in compensation was received during the period under consideration; and
- (3) The benefit of successive step increases shall be preserved for any person whose continuous service is interrupted by active military duty.

The definition of “equivalent increase” comes into play. General cost of living increases and SAAs are not considered equivalent increases, but special advancements for performance *are* considered equivalent increases.

Also, [OPM.gov](#) has offered a wonderful definition of “equivalent increase”:

An “equivalent increase” is considered to occur at the time of any of the following personnel actions:

- A within-grade increase, excluding (1) a quality step increase, or (2) an interim WIGI if that increase is later terminated
- A promotion (permanent or temporary) to a higher grade
- Application of the maximum payable rate rule in 5 CFR 531.221 that results in a higher step rate within the employee’s GS grade, except for application of that rule in a demotion to the extent that the employee’s rate of basic pay after demotion does not exceed the lowest step rate that equals or exceeds the employee’s rate of basic pay immediately before the demotion (For example, in 2009 a GS-13, step 3, employee (\$75,323 GS rate) accepts a voluntary demotion to a GS-12 position. The agency sets her pay using the maximum payable rate rule at GS-12, step 10 (\$77,194 GS rate). The increase in pay is not an equivalent increase because the employee’s pay was set at the lowest step that exceeded her rate of basic pay before promotion.)
- Application of the superior qualifications and special needs pay-setting authority in 5 CFR 531.212 that results in a higher step rate within the employee’s GS grade

A check with the HR department at the Salem VAMC agrees that an SAA would not affect an employee’s PSI/WIGI. Sometimes a human error may be involved though, see also the box in [Periodic Step Increases](#).

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- 3) ***Is it possible to advance to Chief Grade when you work in a CBOC?***

Yes, you can get to GS-14 and even GS-15 from a CBOC, but it usually takes more planning.

- 4) ***Do I have to achieve FAAO to get to Intermediate, Senior or Chief Grade?***

No. How’s that for a simple answer? There is no place in the Qualification Standards where it states that Fellowship in the Academy is a requirement to promote past Full Grade.

While the simple answer really is “no,” the implications are a little (though not much) more complicated. In order to promote from Full to Intermediate Grade an OD must attain either of the following:

- a) The stature that would warrant appointment at the clinical instructor or higher level at a school or college of optometry.
- b) The professional ability and personal attributes which have merited significant recognition by a recognized professional organization, ***such as*** election to a Fellowship in the American Academy of Optometry.

The Qualification Standards require **either** stature that would warrant appointment as a clinical instructor **or** recognition by a professional organization *such as* the American Academy of Optometry... not both. Take note that although many of us read that second part as a requirement to become a Fellow in the Academy, even that part of the standard is vaguely written. Fellowship is a good suggestion and is automatically declared by the Qualification Standard to be acceptable. This does not mean that recognition from other organizations would not be acceptable. Anything else would require a ruling by the Professional Standards Board.

The Qualification Standards for Senior and Chief Grade never even mention Fellowship in the American Academy of Optometry, and attaining a level of Fellowship in the Academy after achieving the level of Intermediate Grade would not be of any use in promoting to Senior or Chief Grade. It **would** be of use as a step increase within a grade (see [Tips and Recommendations for Efficient and Successful Advancement](#)). Many VA optometrists and educators strive to become Fellows and support the Academy. We encourage each other in that endeavor and there are many among the VA who have achieved Diplomate.

5) **What should I expect when boarding? For example, if I know of someone who is planning to come from private practice into the VA system, at what level would that person be brought in?**

While it is not entirely possible to predict what the Professional Standards Board will recommend when a new employee is boarded, the board adheres to the [Optometry Qualification Standards](#) which can be found on the [website](#).

Note: A new employee who is brought in directly after finishing a residency (or soon thereafter), can generally expect to be recommended (by the PSB) at the level of Grade 12, Step 10. This is not a rule or law, just an observation, and local facilities may have different standards or may overrule the PSB.

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6) **I'm at a step 9 within my grade, and I am due for my next within-grade increase (WIGI) at the same time I am eligible for a promotion to the next grade. If I apply for my grade promotion, will I lose my WIGI? (In other words: Will I be promoting from a step 9 in my grade to a step 5 in the next, or will I move up to a step 10 first so that I can promote to a step 6 in the next grade?)**

That is a very good question. Keep in mind that WIGI increases are an HR issue, while grade promotions are more of a PSB/director issue. Consider these things:

- 1) When you apply for the grade promotion, you will not likely receive it **exactly** when you want to. In fact, that is highly doubtful. You can aim for an exact date, but unless your Anniversary Date of Grade (ADG) falls at the beginning of a pay period, there isn't even a slim chance of the promotion taking place on the exact date of your ADG.
- 2) If you time your request right (perhaps about 3 months before your ADG in order to get the grade promotion at least close to that date), and **if** the request gets through all the red tape in a timely fashion (a really big **if**), 2 things could happen:
 - a. Your promotion could go through early, and your director has the option of signing it into effect up to 2 weeks before your current ADG (this is unlikely at many VA's)
 - i. If this happens, you may not get the WIGI, since you have not been at your current grade long enough, and the WIGI goes through on the **exact date** of the ADG
 - b. Your grade promotion will go through, but not go into effect until after your ADG
 - i. If this happens, you will get the WIGI automatically beforehand

I spoke with an HR rep who says the HR department here tries to look out for the employees. **If they notice** a WIGI is coming up, they try to get the director to hold off signing a promotion into effect until just after the WIGI. There is apparently a little leeway and they try to always do this to the benefit of the employee, but he could not speak for other HR departments, since this is a thoughtful courtesy.

You could do one of several things to try to get your grade promotion on time and still get the WIGI:

- 1) Speak to your HR rep and see what the policy is at your VA... then do what needs to be done, or
- 2) **SAFEST:** Wait until after the WIGI has passed to submit for a grade promotion (or at least submit close enough to your ADG that you know it won't go through quickly enough to keep you from your WIGI), or
- 3) Submit a little earlier, but speak to your HR rep or director, make them aware of your upcoming WIGI, and request that any promotion not be signed into effect until after your ADG

In these instances, it's always good to contact your HR rep. They can be very helpful with all of this.

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7) How do I serve optometry on a statewide or national level (as mentioned in the Qual Stds)?

My personal and unofficial advice:

A) Join the **Armed Forces Optometric Society (AFOS—<http://www.afos2020.org/>)**. AFOS is an international organization representing *all* federal optometry to the AOA as our “state” organization. **AFOS is important to VA Optometry on many levels.** To join see <https://www.afos2020.org/aws/AFOS/pt/sp/why-join>. To get involved, you must be an AFOS/AOA member in good standing:

- 1) Contact the Executive Director or the Vice President through the [website](#) to ask if any committees are in need help. Committees descriptions found at: <https://www.afos2020.org/aws/AFOS/pt/sp/committees>. AFOS has the following committees:

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Awards Committee | Communications Committee |
| Education Committee | Membership Committee |
| Nominating Committee | State Legislative Relations Committee |

- 2) Read the quarterly Newsletter and contact the Vice President or Committee Chairs to see if you can assist or join their respective committees.
- 3) Attend the FSO meeting in the spring (in conjunction with SECO) or the fall AFOS Annual meeting (in conjunction with the Academy meeting), meet your fellow federal service ODs, and offer to help.
 - There has been some confusion, so it is important to note that both the FSO (Federal Service Optometry) meeting and the AFOS Annual meeting are conducted by AFOS. At one time the FSO meeting was *conducted* by AFOS, but *hosted* by different branches of federal optometry each year. At that time the FSO meeting lasted nearly a week. In 2008, AFOS members voted to shorten the FSO meeting and allow the CE Committee to plan the CE for both meetings.
 - The FSO Meeting (mainly a continuing education meeting) is offered in conjunction with the late winter/early spring SECO meeting in Atlanta, GA. The Annual Meeting, which offers both continuing education and the AFOS business meeting, is offered in conjunction with the annual AAO Meeting in fall.
- 4) Get involved with the [AFOS Board](#). This will require getting deeply involved in AFOS and may take several years to achieve.

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B) Join the **National Association of VA Optometrists (NAVAO—<http://www.navao.org/>)** and get involved. NAVAO is our national organization within the VA, where we represent ourselves and discuss our own issues. The organization has grown over the years and provides a wealth of knowledge and information helpful to all VA optometrists, but would be especially helpful for new VA ODs. The website has pages providing information on different subjects within VA Optometry, as well as a page where an OD can obtain COPE approved continuing education. The Annual Meeting for NAVAO is held during the Academy Meeting in the fall. You can attend that meeting and get to know other VA optometrists. Getting involved may mean:

- 1) Volunteer!
- 2) Run for office or join one of NAVAO’s committees. Each of the Board members either chairs a committee or works as an Executive Board Liaison with one of the committees. The executive members of the board are decided by a vote among the membership. You can speak to the committee chairs to see if they need help on the committees.
- 3) To find information about the board go to: <https://www.navao.org/about-us/navao-executive-committee-and-board-members/>. The following is a listing of the board member titles:

| Executive Committee | Board Members |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| President | Membership Director |
| Vice President | Events Committee Director |
| Secretary | Newsletter Editor |
| Treasurer | Technology Director |
| Immediate Past President | |

- 4) To find information about the committee structure go to: <https://www.navao.org/about-us/committees/>. The following is a list of the committees:
 - Executive Committee (see above)
 - Finance Committee (Treasurer is Chair)
 - Membership Committee (Membership Director is Chair)

- Events Committee (Events Committee Director is Chair)
- Newsletter Committee (Newsletter Editor is Chair)
- Technology Committee (Technology Director is Chair)

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C) Become a **Fellow** in the **American Academy of Optometry (AAO—<http://www.aaopt.org/>)**, and get involved in that organization.

- 1) Fellowship in AAO is an honor and a privilege. It takes some planning and effort, but once you have achieved the level of Fellow in the Academy, it's a good idea to get more involved in the organization. (Remember that Fellowship in the Academy can assist in gaining GS-13 Intermediate Grade within the VA, or you can use the accomplishment to assist in obtaining a step increase.)
- 2) Becoming a Diplomate within AAO is also an honor and a privilege. It involves a great deal of hard work and dedication, and anyone who achieves such a level of recognition is deserving of ample respect.
- 3) Section or Special Interest Groups (**SIGs**) are ways to get involved. Attending section meetings is an easy way to meet people and understand the Academy. Note that Sections and SIGs are encouraged to submit papers on specific topics (such as Academy Position Papers). Some Sections and current SIGs are listed below. (see <https://www.aaopt.org/membership/sections-sigs>)

| Sections | Special Interest Groups (SIGs) |
|--|---|
| Anterior Segment Section Binocular Vision, Perception and Pediatric Optometry Section Comprehensive Eye Care Section Cornea, Contact Lenses, and Refractive Technologies Section Glaucoma Section Low Vision Section Optometric Education Sections Public Health and Environmental Vision Section | Academic Medical Center Optometrists (AMCO) SIG Fellows Doing Research SIG Neuro-ophthalmic Disorders in Optometry SIG Nutrition, Disease Prevention and Wellness SIG Retina SIG Vision in Aging SIG Vision Science SIG |

- 4) If committee involvement is more to your liking, keep in mind that volunteers are *appointed* to committees by the President-elect for 2-year terms. The appointments are made at the annual meeting during even-numbered years. The following are Committees within AAO:

| Committees |
|--|
| Admittance Committee Awards Committee Chapters Committee Communications Committee Education Quality Assurance Committee Exhibits Committee Faculty Student Liaison Committee Lectures and Workshops Committee Membership Committee Nominating Committee Research Committee Scientific Program Committee |

- If your interest involves CE planning, consider the Lectures and Workshops Committee, the Research Committee, or the Scientific Programs Committee.
 - The Education Quality Assurance Committee looks for volunteers to sit in on presentations and assess the quality of the presentation. Members should expect to allow two ½-days at the Academy meeting in order to fulfill this commitment.
- 5) Election to the AAO Board of Directors (see <https://www.aaopt.org/home/about/about-leadership>) is a multi-step process involving nomination by the Nominating Committee, completion of the requested paperwork, interviewing with the Nominating Committee, and election by the membership. Each office is a 2-year appointment, but many appointees are re-elected and move up within the offices of the Board.
 - 6) Chapters are another way to get involved within the Academy. Some states or foreign organizations have a local Chapter. For some of us, this is a more feasible way to participate. To contact a local Chapter, see <https://www.aaopt.org/membership/us-and-international-chapters>.

D) Become involved in a **PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATION**. Optometry has an established, well-respected organization in: the **American Academy of Optometry Foundation (AAOF—<https://www.aaopt.org/home/aaof>)**.

AAOF was founded in 1947 and is a 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is *to develop and provide financial support for optometric research and education in vision and eye health to improve patient clinical care*. The Foundation, associated with the American Academy of Optometry, provides fellowships, scholarships, grants, and residency educational awards (more than \$470,000 in 2018 alone). AAOF is also known for providing student and resident travel grants to attend the Academy meeting each year. There are multiple awards and grants available in four categories: Optometry Students, Residents, Graduate Students, and Optometry and Vision Scientists (Faculty). See <https://www.aaopt.org/awards-and-grants>.

- E) Join the **American Optometric Association (AOA—<http://www.aoa.org/>)** and get involved. The AOA is an enormous machine in its own right, and there are many ways to become involved. Once a member you may:
- 1) Consider training to become a consultant for the **Accreditation Council on Optometric Education (ACOE—<https://www.aoa.org/optometrists/for-educators/accreditation-council-on-optometric-education>)**. *For this you MUST be a member of AOA, and you may need to have a recommendation from a Council member or another consultant. It also requires a bit more time and dedication in the training process and travel as a consultant.*
 - 2) Join your state organization and get involved at the local level. *Remember that AFOS is the 'state' organization for federal ODs.* Still, many federal optometrists join their local state organization as well as joining through AFOS. That offers two different ways to make a difference at the state level.
 - 3) Join one of the three following AOA Sections: [Contact Lens & Cornea Section](#), [Vision Rehabilitation Section](#), and [Sports and Performance Vision Section](#).
 - 4) Get involved at the national level. To do this, offer assistance in a state organization, and once involved, express a desire to work on the national level. Involvement in the committee structure of the AOA is by [Board](#) appointment only, though you may request a nomination from your "state" or local society.
 - 5) Remember though: some types of political activities are frowned upon for federal employees, so before getting **politically** involved in *any* organization, make sure you have read VA policy on the subject and familiarize yourself with the Hatch Act (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-107/pdf/STATUTE-107-Pg1001.pdf#page=7>), here is a document meant to further explain the Hatch Act in the Digital Age (<https://fas.org/sqp/crs/misc/R44469.pdf>).
- F) Another well-known, respected **PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATION** to become involved with is associated with the AOA: **Optometry Cares, The AOA Foundation** (<http://www.aoafoundation.org/>).

Optometry Cares, The AOA Foundation is the organization that brought you the [InfantSEE®](#) program (along with Johnson & Johnson Vision <https://www.jjvision.com/about-us>). With strategic ties to the AOA, the AOA Foundation also manages [VISION USA](#), administers [OPTOMETRY'S FUND FOR DISASTER RELIEF](#), offers various scholarship grants and educational assistance.

Optometry Cares even maintains the [Archives and Museum](#) for the optometric profession (within the AOA), along with the [Optometric Historical Society](#). There is even an [Optometric Historical Society Committee](#).

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- G) Join **AMSUS—The Society of the Federal Health Agencies** (formerly the Association of Military Surgeons—US) (<http://www.amsus.org/>) and get involved.
- 1) AMSUS has annual meetings, and VA optometrists have been involved in planning these. Every year a different branch of federal service medicine hosts the annual meeting, and when the VA hosts the meeting, it is a **great** time to get involved. (VA hosted the November 2011 meeting).
 - 2) *Every* annual meeting, even when VA is not hosting, needs volunteers from each branch of the federal service, and annual meetings may have an Optometry Section. One way to participate is simply to volunteer to work with the current year's Optometry Section (or even volunteer to chair that section, if you are willing to work hard).
 - 3) Contact AMSUS through the website to volunteer. You may also contact the meeting coordinator Jeanette Naiman at Jeanette.Naiman@amsus.org or by calling AMSUS directly (301-897-8800 ext.16), or go to the annual meeting and offer to help from there.

- H) Join the **American Public Health Association (APHA—<http://www.apha.org/>)** and get involved.
- 1) APHA has 32 [Member Sections](#) (along with a Student Assembly). One of the sections is [Vision Care](#), but ODs may be involved in many of the sections. Each section has a [Chair](#), and some have leadership rosters and section officers. Contacting one of these chairs would be a good start.
 - 2) APHA has an annual meeting in the fall (usually October or November) that takes place in various cities. The organization also has [State and Regional Affiliates](#), where members can participate locally.
- I) Get involved with your own State Board. Many VA ODs have officer positions on state boards.
- J) Join the **World Council of Optometry (WCO—<https://worldcouncilofoptometry.info/>)**. The WCO Mission is to facilitate the development of optometry around the world and support optometrists in promoting eye health and vision care as a human right through advocacy, education, policy development and humanitarian outreach.
- 1) WCO has 4 committees listed on the website: [Education Committee](#), [Public Health Committee](#), [Biennial Congress Standing Committee](#), and [Legislation, Registration and Standards Committee](#),
 - 2) The [Board of Directors](#) come from all over the World and seek to represent the world of optometry.
 - 3) [Membership](#) is available to countries, affiliates, corporations, and individuals.
- K) Join the **Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO—<https://www.arvo.org/>)**. ARVO offers multiple ways to volunteer and become involved:
- 1) There are at least 14 different [committees](#) and applications to join the committees are accepted between the beginning of December through the beginning of January.

| Committees |
|---|
| Advocacy and Outreach Committee |
| Animals in Research Committee |
| Annual Meeting Program Committee |
| Awards Committee |
| Commercial Relationships Committee |
| Continuing Medical Education Committee |
| Diversity Initiatives Committee |
| Ethics and Regulation in Human Research Committee |
| Finance Committee |
| Global Members Committee |
| International Chapter Affiliate Committee |
| Members-in-Training Committee (students) |
| Professional Development and Education Committee |
| Publications Committee |

- 2) ARVO offers three (non-science) mentoring opportunities to help encourage and develop the career of member students, trainees, early-career investigators and up-and-coming ARVO leaders. Timeframes range from several weeks to one-year commitments.
 - [Developing Country Eye Researcher Travel Fellowships \(DCERF\) Mentor](#)
 - [Women's Leadership Development Program \(LDP\) Mentor](#)
 - [Global Mentorship Program \(GMP\) Mentor](#)
- 3) ARVO offers a few short-term [volunteer service opportunities](#) at the annual meeting, such as:
 - Reading student CVs and offering career advice
 - Serving as a judge for the Members-in-Training Poster Award competition
- 4) [Engagement Opportunities](#): ARVO offers a variety of ways for members to engage through quick tasks to get involved and plug into the global ARVO community.
- 5) It is possible to earn a [Fellow of ARVO \(FARVO\)](#) designation, a designation that may be used after one's credentials, much the way FAAO is used for Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry. Fellows may be designated as Silver, Gold or Emeritus status.

- 6) There are also multiple ARVO [Scientific Section and Cross-sectional Groups](#), and members should select the one most closely related to their research topics.

| Scientific Sections | Cross-sectional Groups |
|--|---|
| Anatomy and Pathology/Oncology (AP) Biochemistry/Molecular Biology (BI) Clinical/Epidemiologic Research (CL) Cornea (CO) Eye Movements/Strabismus/Amblyopia/Neuro-ophthalmology (EY) Glaucoma (GL) Immunology/Microbiology (IM) Lens (LE) Physiology/Pharmacology (PH) Retina (RE) Retinal Cell Biology (RC) Visual Neuroscience (VN) Visual Psychophysics/Physiological Optics (VI) | Genetics Group (GEN) Low Vision Group (LV) Multidisciplinary Ophthalmic Imaging Group (MOI) |

- 7) The [Board of Trustees](#) is comprised of elected members from ARVO's 13 Scientific Sections along with elected and trustee-appointed officers. The president and vice president(s) are elected from within the Board each year. The executive vice president is elected by the general membership to a five-year term and is a voting member of the Board of Trustees.

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- L) Get involved in national, local or VISN VA committees. Contact the Chief of Optometry, Chief of Surgery, or other in-the-know people at your medical center to see if there are committees you can join. There are also several established VA Optometry organizations that are sometimes in need of volunteers or appointees, such as:

- 1) **VISN Mentor.** *These positions do not open often but need to be filled when they do.*
 - **REMEMBER** Mentors must have detailed knowledge of the promotions process (beyond simply reading this guide). Though ODs are not *required* to be at Senior or Chief grade in order to participate, it is advised and even expected. One should have achieved *at least* the level of Intermediate Grade, Step 10, along with a working knowledge of promotions within the VA (in other words, one should have been promoted *at least* one grade and preferably have received at least one step increase through SAA or SAP). **IT WOULD BE UNWISE AND UNFAIR TO UNDERTAKE A POSITION AS ADVISOR TO OTHER DOCTORS WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OR ABILITY TO BACK UP THE ADVICE.**
 - *Mentoring may require a good deal of one-on-one or even face-to-face time with other docs, and it requires responding to emails in a timely fashion.*
- 2) **Teleretinal imaging (TRI).** *This program is coordinated on many levels, from the eye care perspective, to primary care, to IRM concerns. It is a large undertaking, and the VA takes the program very seriously.*
 - Each medical center has a point of contact for this.
 - Each VISN has a Tele-retinal Imaging Coordinator.
 - There are ways to get involved at a national level, though that *will* take a great deal of time and effort. There is an [Optometry Field Advisory Committee](#) sub-committee assigned to this program.
 - Several assigned imaging centers with trained imaging readers (eye docs) are dispersed throughout the US. **NOTE THAT BEING A TRAINED IMAGING READER IS CONSIDERED PART OF THE JOB, NOT A POSITION FOR PROMOTION**, but VISN TRI Coordinators are usually trained readers as well.
- 3) **Systems Redesign and Improvement.** *This VA section is important. It is a good place to get involved.*
 - Every medical center has a committee on which to serve, along with a Coordinator, who chairs the committee, and these committees are often in need of members.
 - Systems redesign is another program with an [Optometry Field Advisory Sub-committee](#) assigned to assist with changes or optometry needs within the program.
- 4) **Optometry [Field Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) or [Field Advisory Sub-Committees](#)**
 - Occasionally a new Sub-Committee will emerge within the FAC, and those committees need able members who are willing to provide ideas, time, and elbow grease in or order to achieve the committee goals.
 - Current Committees sometimes need new members. Most committees need someone who is willing to work hard and provide some much-needed ideas. **Remember** that being on a committee is not

the same as being able to show that you have achieved something on that committee, and promotion requires evidentiary support.

- 5) **Optometry Service Conference Calls** keep all of us up to date on VHA Optometry and optometric concerns. Volunteer opportunities are often mentioned in these calls.
 - Calls take place from **3:00 – 4:00pm**, on the **third Friday** of each month.
 - To call in, Dial: **800-767-1750** (the access code is **16019#**)
 - An agenda will be sent out by the VHA Optometry Service Director's Office prior to the call
 - *VHA Optometry Service, National Program Director:* John C. Townsend, OD, FAAO
 - *VHA Optometry Service, Administrative Officer:* Kathleen "Kathy" L. Gernhart
- 6) **Get on the VISN 19 Optometry National email distribution list by contacting Dr. Shannon S. Kessler at Shannon.Kessler@va.gov.** Her Contact card lists her at the Denver VA Jewell Clinic in Aurora, CO.
 - *This is an unofficial, voluntary, VA Optometry email list on which many of us are listed.* It allows VA ODs to communicate broadly with each other to distribute information, ask questions, and learn about what is affecting VA Optometry. Some docs use this list to ask questions about how others run their clinics, while other docs pose philosophical questions, and some just let others in on a vision joke.
 - **Updates of this document and others will be distributed over this email list as well.** If you have already joined the list, consider advising other VA ODs to join!
- 7) Consider becoming at least semi-involved in VA research. Many VA optometrists are always looking for a research project in which to get involved...ask around!
- 8) For other opportunities, visit: https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/External_Links.asp (intranet website)

NOTE: Many of the above options take time and planning. You will not simply walk onto a Council or a Board of Directors anywhere without getting involved and proving your worth first. These options will also take some (or even a great deal) of your free time, and some may require travel.

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8) **How would the requirements for the standards for GS-15 Chief Grade translate into real world requirements?**

Chief Grade (GS-15): Meets the requirements for Senior grade and must demonstrate a sustained very high level of professional performance with evidence of exceptional professional and/or administrative development by the following:

- a) Has assumed *substantial professional and/or administrative responsibilities* in which the individual is expected to fully advise and make professional clinical and educational recommendations as to courses of action on problems and considerations of national scope in all areas of optometry. Typically, the optometrist at this level has had *responsibility for a major optometric program segment on a nationwide basis* and has been **consistently called upon to represent the organization in an authoritative manner** in matters dealing with development of new and/or revised concepts and programs having *a major impact upon the academic, medical, and optometric communities*.
- b) Outstanding professional attainment. Examples of such attainment are:
 - i) Achievement of outstanding results in research which are regarded as having a major impact on advancing the field.
 - ii) **Significant** number of **noteworthy** publications in professional journals.

For part a):

Get **INVOLVED WITH** (do not simply join, and expect to be promoted) optometric programs, organizations, and committees, to the point where you make your name known on a national level. This is how one becomes involved enough to have "*responsibility for a major optometric program segment on a nationwide basis*" in a way that you are "*consistently called upon to represent the organization in an authoritative manner*". In other words, joining a committee is a means to achieve this goal. Being a member is not the goal in itself. You will need not only to show your membership (with evidentiary support), but you will need to show evidence of what you have achieved and how it affects optometry or the VA.

Lecturing is wonderful and can be rewarding and introduce you to many opportunities, but the only true way to demonstrate "*administrative responsibilities*" is to participate in an administrative effort within optometry. This could mean being involved in optometry within the VA. It could also include working within other optometric organizations, *some* of which are outlined [above](#). Be creative, but there really are not many ways to avoid committees or organizations for this standard. The point is to make an impactful effort to affect optometry and optometrists on a national level... to be useful in the profession.

Someone asked if being a residency program supervisor fulfilled this requirement.... It *usually* does, mainly due to the extensive administrative responsibilities involved with being a good supervisor or leader. Being a residency program supervisor, a clinic supervisor, or a section/service chief supports a promotion request for Chief grade because the work involved, and the impact of these positions, can be exponential.

For part b):

There is no definition within the standard, and nothing is written down that specifies how many publications may be considered “*noteworthy*”. That said, at this time it has been observed that the VA Optometry PSB considers *two or more “significant” publications over the course of one’s career* to meet this standard. (This is one instance in which achievements within previous grade levels may still count toward a grade promotion.) This is a fairly recent change. Some of us may remember that 3 or more, or 4 or more, was the “magic number” in the past, but for now, two or more publications are acceptable to the VA Optometry PSB.

Some of us may find that local leadership has a different definition of “*significant number*”, which is why it is always a good idea to keep open communication lines with your immediate supervisor, local leaders, HR rep, and approving official (usually the Director or Chief of Staff).

Notice that the publications are to be considered “*noteworthy*”. That description is important, and it roughly translates to one of the following:

- Publishing an important, official document, such as a VA directive
- Publishing in a respected, peer-reviewed journal
 - Publishing in a journal that is non-peer reviewed will not contribute to Chief grade. This is not meant to discourage an author of such articles, but non-peer reviewed journal articles, as the articles may be of import or enlightenment to other clinicians. Such simply will not be considered “*noteworthy*” for the purposes of achieving Chief grade.
 - The American Academy of Optometry put together a [list of approved peer-reviewed journals](#) that are acceptable for “*noteworthy*” publication.

The official list (above link can also be found on the [VA Intranet Optometry Administration Page](#), under **CAREER-RELATED DOCUMENTATION**, *Publication in Peer Reviewed Eye Journals*) only includes journals related to eyes or vision, but that doesn’t mean those are the only journals allowed. This list was composed by AAO and our PSB accepts it as valid, so that authors have an idea where to publish. There are about five possibilities for an article’s acceptance/rejection by the PSB:

- 1) **ACCEPTABLE**: Any article published in the journals on the list
- 2) **LIKELY ACCEPTABLE**: Any article published in a journal which uses proper peer review and has high respectability within the medical community (e.g., say Archives of Neurology)
 - Any unknown journal within the medical community, even those which say they use peer review, would be investigated to see how they operate, what is required to publish, how many reviewers they use, etc., before the Optometry PSB would make a voting decision.
- 3) **UNACCEPTABLE**: Any journal known to have a poor peer review process or a poor reputation
- 4) **UNACCEPTABLE**: Any journal which requires payment before the article may be published (excluding payment for extras, such as color photos instead of B/W photos)

Important note regarding articles used to achieve Chief Grade: One does not have to be the primary, secondary or even tertiary author of these publications. Any number of authors is acceptable to the Optometry PSB.

BUT...Such would not suffice for the purposes of achieving SAA under the new SAA/SAP regulations, where **one needs to be the principal or co-author** to receive credit.

NOTE: Chief Grade is not easy to achieve. The best way to promote to GS15 is to plan ahead while you are at the level of GS12 or GS13. It is unrealistic to expect to be placed in a position “responsibility for a major optometric program segment on a nationwide basis” without putting several years of effort into the program first. Get involved early and move up within an organization using seniority status. Also, publishing takes time (and revisions). Much of the process will be outside your control. Publish while you are still at GS12/13, and you will have the time to work on your articles. Good Luck!

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ADDENDUM A: INTERESTING LINKS AND PAGES FOR OPTOMETRY

Career Improvement and/or VHA Optometry Contacts

National and Professional Optometric Organizations Links Page:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/External_Links.asp

VA Optometry Field Advisory Committee:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/Optometry_FAC_Subcommittee_Members_listing_9-2019.xlsx

VA Optometry Pay Tables:

<http://vaww.va.gov/OHRM/Pay/#T38>

VA Optometry Qualification Standards:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/VA_Handbook_5005-2-G5_Optom_Qualification_Standard-Apr2002.doc

VA Optometry Service Directory Page:

http://www.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/Service_Directory.asp

VA Optometry VISN Consultants Page:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/Optometry_VISN_Consultants_Listing_8-2019.xls

VA Optometry VISN Mentors Page:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/Optometry_VISN_Mentors_Listing_12-2019.xls

Clinical Practice

American Academy of Ophthalmology Clinical Practice Guidelines:

<https://www.aao.org/guidelines-browse>

American Optometric Association Clinical Practice Guidelines:

<http://www.aoa.org/optometrists/tools-and-resources/clinical-care-publications/clinical-practice-guidelines>

National Formulary

<https://vaww.cmopnational.va.gov/cmop/PBM/National%20Formulary/Forms/AllItems.aspx>

NEI Outreach Materials (Handouts for Patients)

<https://www.nei.nih.gov/learn-about-eye-health/resources-for-health-educators/outreach-materials?topic=All&type=All&audience=All&language=All>

VA Directive 2009-038, VHA National Dual Care Policy

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/VHA_Directive_2009-038_Dual_Care_Policy.pdf

VHA Handbook 1173.12, Prescription Optics and Low Vision Devices

http://vaww.va.gov/vhapublications/ViewPublication.asp?pub_ID=1269

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Clinic Planning

VA Directive 1121, Eye and Vision Care:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/1121_D_2019-10-02.pdf

VHA Optometry Eye Clinic Space Planning Criteria:

<http://www.cfm.va.gov/til/space/SPChapter233.pdf>

VHA Optometry Panel Size:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/VA_Optomtry_Service_PACT_Recommendations-12-2014_FINAL.doc

VA Optometry Resident Supervision:

http://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/VHA_Handbook_1400-01_Resident_Supervision_12-19-2012.pdf

VA Optometry Student Supervision:

https://vaww.va.gov/OPTOMETRY/docs/VHA_Handbook_1400-04_supervision_trainees.pdf

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ADDENDUM B: AWARDS

VA Form 4659, Incentive Awards Recommendation and Approval:

VA FORM 4659: INCENTIVE AWARDS RECOMMENDATION AND APPROVAL (<http://vaww4.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/VA4659.pdf>)

This is a way for your immediate supervisor to request a cash (or other type of) award for a special achievement on your part. Apparently, there is no limit on the cash request, though requesting a very large amount would be considered a waste of VA resources and time. For a *significant* contribution within the VA, it is not unheard of to request a \$5,000 cash award, though the actual award is usually much less than requested (usually half or less, from what I understand).

What constitutes a significant contribution will be up to you, your supervisor and your local VA facility. It is completely subjective. Since there are no rules or qualification standards for these types of awards, this is a situation where your VISN Mentor probably cannot help you. We may be *One VA*, but each facility has a personality all its own. Like people, each VA approaches these things from a different perspective (and so will each supervisor). You will have to find out what your VA is like in this regard, but it never hurts to try.

As noted in the [SAA section of the Guide](#), (under the section **Top Step (Step 10) of the Grade**), if you put in for a SAA, but you are at the top of your grade, the Optometry PSB may recommend an appropriate cash award. It will be based on the value of the employee's contribution to the Agency/mission. Only employees at step 10 may receive cash in lieu of an SAA. All cash awards will be documented on VA Form 4659.

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VA Handbook 5017/9, Part I, Section 3-6: Awards

A) **PAYMENT OF AWARDS AND NECESSARY EXPENSES RELATED TO EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION**

...

- c) **Superior Performance Awards** will be paid as lump-sum awards and should not be considered part of the basic pay of the employee.

...

- 4) **COMBINATION AWARDS.** Authorized combinations of awards include cash and honorary; time off and honorary; cash and time off; and in extraordinary cases, cash and a Quality Step Increase (QSI) or time off and a QSI. To ensure compliance with the intent of applicable laws and regulations, adhere to the following guidelines when granting combination awards.

- a) **Combining Cash or Time Off With a Quality Step Increase (QSI).** QSI's are substantial awards that affect everything from current and future budgets, to the recipient's retirement benefits. The granting of QSI's along with an award for cash or time off should be rare, and done only in extraordinary circumstances.
- b) **Don't Exceed the Value of the Accomplishment.** The value of an accomplishment(s) should be determined by using either the Scale of Awards Based on Tangible Benefits or the Scale of Awards Based on Intangible Benefits (see Appendix A to Part III of VA Handbook 5017/9).

Time off is not a cash award, but it does have an intrinsic value. This value can be determined by multiplying the amount the employee makes per hour by the number of hours of time off. For the purpose of this procedure, the value of a QSI is the increase to the employees pay the first year.

Example, if the value of the employee's accomplishment is, e.g., \$2000, a supervisor may give an employee making \$25 per hour 20 hours of time off (20 X \$25/hr. = \$500), and a \$1500 cash award. Under extraordinary circumstances, if the same employee's accomplishments during the rating year are valued at \$3500, and a QSI would be a \$3000 increase to pay, the employee could receive a QSI and \$500 cash—or a QSI and up to 20 hours of time off.

- c) **Different Levels of Approval.** In order to ensure that the granting of combination awards is reasonable and appropriate, one of the two parts of the award should be approved at a level above the approval official for the first award. Note that it should be clearly stated in the justification of the award going to the higher level approval official that the award is part of a combination award.

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- 5) **AUTHORITY TO APPROVE AWARDS.** Authority to approve awards is subject to the provisions outlined below....
- a) **Cash Awards.** All cash awards must be approved at a higher management level than that which recommended. However, key officials, including the Secretary and Deputy Secretary, may act as both the recommending and approving official on all monetary awards within their delegated approval authority.
 - i) Refer to VHA Handbook 5017/9 for award amounts https://vaww.va.gov/vapubs/viewPublication.asp?Pub_ID=1017&FType=2
 - b) **Time Off Awards.** Key officials are authorized to approve time off awards up to 40 hours. Unless otherwise covered in a supplemental organizational policy issued by a key official, all time off awards in excess of 1 workday must be approved at a higher level than the individual who recommended the award.
 - c) **Honor Awards.** The Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration is authorized to approve Secretary's awards. Key officials are authorized to approve organizational honor awards and may delegate that authority to lower levels.
- 6) **AWARD RESTRICTIONS**
- a) **Aggregate Salary Limitation.** The amount of combined basic pay, allowance, differential, bonus award or other cash payment that an employee can receive during the calendar year is limited to the salary of Executive Level 1 (\$219,200 in 2020, see <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/>), except for title 38 physicians and dentists where the calendar year limitation is the salary of the President of the United States (from 2001-2020: \$400,000 annually, not including other expense accounts).

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ADDENDUM C: VA FORMS FOR USE

Standard Form (SF) 50, Notification of Personnel Action:

<https://vaww.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/SF50-1page.pdf>

Standard Form (SF) 52, Request for Personnel Action (w/ Electronic Signature capability):

<https://vaww.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/SF52.pdf>

VA Form 10002, Consent for Use of Written or Verbal Statement, Picture and/or Voice

<https://www.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/VA10002.pdf>

VA Form 10-2543, Board Action (fillable w/ Electronic Signature capability):

<https://vaww.va.gov/vaforms/medical/pdf/vha-10-2543-fill-elecsign.pdf>

VA Form 2105, Memorandum: [https://vaww.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/VA2105\(1%20pg\).pdf](https://vaww.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/VA2105(1%20pg).pdf)

VA Form 4659, Incentive Awards Recommendation and Approval:

<http://vaww4.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/VA4659.pdf>

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ADDENDUM D: CAN YOU “BUY BACK” YOUR VA RESIDENCY YEAR TOWARD RETIREMENT?

During an optometry residency within the VA, no deductions from the resident's salary pay are made toward retirement—this is a **non-deduction** period of civilian federal service.

Some types of non-deduction civilian federal service may be credited toward retirement by making a deposit. A deposit or “buy back” of this type is known as a **Civilian Service Deposit (CSD)**. (There is another type of “buy back” for military service known as a Military Service Deposit (MSD) that applies to those who have served in the military.) Eligible service deposits (CSD or MSD) made by a federal employee allow for prior service to be applied toward that employee's Retirement Service Computation Date (RSCD) or annuity.

FERS Employees

For employees under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), the deposit consists of payment of the retirement deductions, plus interest, which would have been withheld from one's salary or pay, if covered by FERS during the period of employment when retirement deductions were not withheld. (This deposit is not a requirement.)

Per OPM.gov (<http://www.opm.gov/retire/pre/fers/index.asp>): Generally, non-deduction service cannot be credited under FERS, unless it was performed before 1989 and a deposit is made.

Deposit for Service Ending before January 1, 1989 and Covered by FERS: You can make a deposit for creditable Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) service you performed before 1989 during which retirement deductions were not withheld from your pay. Interest is charged from the midpoint of periods of service and is compounded annually. Interest is charged to the date the deposit is paid in full or the annuity begins, whichever is earlier. If you do not pay for a period of this type of service, you will not receive credit in determining your eligibility to retire or in computing your retirement benefit.

Deposit for Service Ending on/after January 1, 1989 and Covered by FERS: With certain minor exceptions, a Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) employee cannot make a deposit for non-contributory service performed on/after January 1, 1989. The exceptions:

- U.S. Senate Child Care Center service
- Peace Corps/VISTA service
- service under the Foreign Service Pension System (FSPS)
- service performed before 12/31/90 with the Democratic or Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee or the Democratic or Republican National Congressional Committee
- service with the Library of Congress Child Development Center prior to 12/21/00

None of these exceptions apply to an optometry residency at the VA.

What does this mean for VA optometrists under FERS?

- 1) If you did a VA residency **before** January 1, 1989, and you wish to “buy back” your residency year to affect your retirement calculations, you should contact your local Human Resources Rep to get the ball rolling. You will have to fill out paperwork that HR will help you attain, and then your request will be sent to OPM in order to calculate what you owe for the deposit. Expect the OPM process to take about 6 months or so.

For those who are concerned about the cost, you will not have to commit to paying your CSD until you see how much you owe, and it may cost less than you expect. One VA OD completed his residency in 1985, and then applied to OPM to make a CSD in 2005. His deposit was around \$700 or so... not much compared to the benefits of retiring a little earlier, especially considering an ultimate “high three” salary rate.

- 2) If you did a VA residency **after** January 1, 1989, you do not have the option of “buying back” your residency year.

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CSRS Employees

For employees under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), the deposit consists of payment of the retirement deductions, plus interest, which would have been withheld from one's salary or pay, if covered by CSRS during the period of employment when retirement deductions were not withheld. (This deposit is not a requirement.)

Per OPM.gov (<http://www.opm.gov/retire/pre/csrs/index.asp>), a deposit may be made for non-deduction service as follows:

Deposit for Service Ending before October 1, 1982 and Covered by CSRS: You can make a deposit for creditable Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) service you performed before October 1982 during which retirement deductions were not withheld from your pay. You will receive retirement credit for all this service **whether or not you pay the deposit**. However, **unless you pay the deposit in full, your annual benefit will be reduced by 10 percent of the deposit amount due at retirement**. Also, **any annuity due your surviving spouse will be reduced proportionately**. Interest is charged from the midpoint of periods of service through the date of the bill. If full payment is received within 30 days after the bill is issued, no additional interest is charged. Otherwise, interest will be computed after each payment at the rate of 3 percent for the interval since the most recent payment you have made. You may pay installments of \$50 or more, but paying the full amount minimizes further interest charges. After each payment we will send you an updated account statement.

Deposit for Service Ending on/after October 1, 1982 and Covered by CSRS: You can make a deposit for creditable Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) service you performed on or after October 1982 during which retirement deductions were not withheld from your pay. Unless you pay the deposit in full, you will not receive credit for the service in the computation of your annuity. Interest is charged from the midpoint of periods of service and is compounded annually. Interest is charged through December 31 of the year before the year in which the bill is being issued. If full payment is received by December 31 of the year in which the bill is issued, no additional interest will be charged. If not, interest will be computed once each year as of December 31 based on the unpaid balance at that time. Interest is applied at the rates described in the table below.

What does this mean for VA optometrists under CSRS?

- 1) If you did a VA residency **before** October 1, 1982, you do not *have* to "buy back" your residency year to receive retirement credit for your residency year. If you choose *not* to make a Civilian Service Deposit (CSD), your annual retirement benefit will be reduced by 10% of the **deposit amount** due at retirement, and you will not receive the full annuity to which you are entitled.
- 2) If you did a VA residency **after** October 1, 1982, you will have to make a CSD in order to receive any credit for your residency year toward the computation of your annual annuity.

You will have to fill out paperwork that HR will help you attain, and then your request will be sent to OPM in order to calculate what you owe for the deposit. Expect the OPM process to take about 6 months or so. For those who are concerned about the cost, you will not have to commit to paying your CSD until you see how much you owe, and it may cost less than you expect.

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ADDENDUM E: OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

H.R. 2647, Defense Authorization Act 2010: Legal Changes of Interest

http://intelligence.senate.gov/pdfs/military_act_2009.pdf

Subtitle A—General Provision, Section 1901. Credit for Unused Sick Leave (p.426 of 655) states:

SEC. 1901. CREDIT FOR UNUSED SICK LEAVE.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Section 8415 of title 5, United States Code, is amended—

(1) by redesignating the second subsection (k) and subsection (l) as subsections (l) and (m), respectively; and

(2) in subsection (l) (as so redesignated by paragraph (1))—

(A) by striking “(l) In computing” and inserting “(l)(1) In computing”; and

(B) by adding at the end the following:

“(2)(A) Except as provided in paragraph (1), in computing an annuity under this subchapter, the total service of an employee who retires on an immediate annuity or who dies leaving a survivor or survivors entitled to annuity includes the applicable percentage of the days of unused sick leave to his credit under a formal leave system and for which days the employee has not received payment, except that these days will not be counted in determining average pay or annuity eligibility under this subchapter. For purposes of this subsection, in the case of any such employee who is excepted from subchapter I of chapter 63 under section 6301(2)(x) through (xiii), the days of unused sick leave to his credit include any unused sick leave standing to his credit when he was excepted from such subchapter.

“(B) For purposes of subparagraph (A), the term ‘applicable percentage’ means—

“(i) 50 percent in the case of an annuity, entitlement to which is based on a death or other separation occurring during the period beginning on the date of enactment of this paragraph and ending on December 31, 2013; and

“(ii) 100 percent in the case of an annuity, entitlement to which is based on a death or other separation occurring after December 31, 2013.”.

(b) EXCEPTION FROM DEPOSIT REQUIREMENT.—Section 8422(d)(2) of title 5, United States Code, is amended by striking “section 8415(k)” and inserting “paragraph (1) or (2) of section 8415(l)”.

(c) EFFECTIVE DATE.—The amendments made by this section shall apply with respect to any annuity, entitlement to which is based on a death or other separation from service occurring on or after the date of enactment of this Act.

According to the OPM synopsis provided at <http://www.opm.gov/retire/pubs/bals/2010/10-101.pdf>:

Section 1901 – Credit for unused sick leave under FERS

Section 1901 permits unused sick leave to be used as service credit in the computation of benefits under FERS, but not for establishing title to an annuity or in the computation of average salary. Sick leave will be used in the computations in the same manner it is used in CSRS computations. **Effective October 28, 2009, individuals separating with title to an immediate annuity or who die leaving a survivor eligible for a survivor annuity will be entitled to credit for 50 percent of their unused sick leave. Effective for separations and deaths occurring on or after January 1, 2014, 100 percent of the unused sick leave will be available.**

The provisions apply to unused sick leave to the individual’s credit under a formal leave system and for which the employee has not received payment. In the case of individuals who have annuities computed under the provisions of both CSRS and FERS, only sick leave not included in the CSRS part of the calculation will be available under FERS. In addition, in the case of an employee who is excepted from subchapter I of chapter 63 under section 6301(2) (x) through (xiii) of title 5, United States Code, (which applies to certain high level officers and employees) the days of unused sick leave include any unused sick leave standing to his or her credit when he or she was excepted from this subchapter.

This provision will greatly affect those of us who rarely call out of work and have built up a great deal of sick leave. It also removes the incentive to “burn” sick leave before retiring, which is expected to affect productivity in a positive way.

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Subtitle B—Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance, Section 1911-1919 (p.430-438 of 655)

This section will not be quoted due to the length of the text, but an OPM synopsis provided by the same link above states:

Section 1911-1919 – Non-foreign area retirement equity assurance

For decades, individuals employed in certain non-foreign areas outside of the contiguous 48 states (Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and other U.S. territories or possessions) have been eligible for a non-foreign Cost of Living Allowance (COLA). While such non-foreign COLA payments are not subject to income tax, they are also not basic pay for retirement purposes. Individuals receiving non-foreign COLA payments have not been eligible for locality pay, with the result that their basic pay has fallen further behind the rest-of-US (RUS) locality pay each year.

These provisions permit a phased conversion from non-foreign COLA to locality pay over a three year period beginning in 2010. **Individuals who separate from service from 2010 through 2012 will have the right to elect to have the non-foreign COLA allowances received during that period count towards retirement credit, to the extent that the non-foreign COLA allowances plus any locality pay received do not equal more than the RUS locality pay.** Such election must be filed not later than December 31, 2012. The statute makes provisions for agency and employee payments based upon those elections, which must be made to OPM. OPM will issue regulations to carry out the election and payment process.

This is very good news, as far as the retirement process goes, for those feds working in places like Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, where in the past, Cost of Living Allowances were offered instead of locality pay. Locality pay is included in any computations of base pay and “high three” for retirement purposes, though it is taxable income. COLAs, while not subject to income tax, also are not included in retirement computations.

There were other changes made by H.R. 2647 in 2010, and the OPM synopsis link above is a great source for understanding those changes, but these two are listed here since they were among the most anticipated changes.

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