

The federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has issued qualification standards formally recognizing Marriage and Family Therapists as mental health specialists within that agency's clinical division, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The standards, released on September 28th, are the culmination of four years of VA work after AAMFT and our allies secured Congressional approval to include MFTs (and Mental Health Counselors) as VA mental-health practitioners in 2006. This is an important way to expand the pool of mental health providers available to meet the growing needs of veterans.

The standards establish levels of employment within the VA's GS-101 series for MFTs, entitled "Marriage and Family Therapist Qualification Standard," similar to positions currently used for clinical social workers, and those newly established for Mental Health Counselors:

GS-9 Marriage and Family Therapist (Entry Level) – for licensed MFTs with less than one year post-degree experience.

GS-11 Marriage and Family Therapist (Full Performance Level) – non-supervisory position for licensed MFTs with at least one year post-degree experience OR with a Doctoral degree in MFT or a related field.

GS-12 Marriage and Family Therapist Supervisor – for MFTs with at least one year of experience equivalent to the qualifications of the GS-11 position above, who will supervise MFTs in lower grades.

GS-12 Marriage and Family Therapist Program Coordinator - for MFTs with at least one year of experience equivalent to the qualifications of the GS-11 position above, who will be administratively responsible for a clinical specialty program such as for homeless veterans or intensive case management, but not necessarily required to supervise other staff.

GS-14 Marriage and Family Therapist Program Manager - for MFTs with at least one year of experience equivalent to the qualifications of either of the GS-12 positions above.

The regulations require MFTs to have a master's or doctoral degree from a program accredited by the Commission for the Accreditation of Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE), or from one of the following related mental health fields: psychiatry, clinical psychology, clinical social work, or psychiatric nursing.

It is important to note that while AAMFT provided input to the VA Expert Panel that developed these qualification standards, AAMFT did not have control over the final standards. AAMFT intends to submit formal comments to VA regarding our concerns about the exclusion of MFTs who have degrees from non-COAMFTE-accredited academic programs. It also is important to note that VA has discretion as to the types of mental-health professions to be employed; there is no mandate that MFTs have preference over other mental-health practitioners.

We are continuing to work with VA to obtain a government-wide Occupational Series from the federal Office of Personnel Management (OPM). This General Series, which may be issued by OPM only upon a federal agency's formal petition, would affect all federal agencies, thus facilitating hiring of MFTs throughout the federal government.

At present, VA is uncertain of the process to post new MFT jobs, but expects to use some combination of postings at the websites USAJobs.gov and/or VA.gov. We will be monitoring implementation of the new law to ensure that MFTs are being adequately considered for VA mental health positions.