



**Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Benefits Administration**

**Senior Executive Service
Candidate Development Program**

Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program (SESCDP) is designed to train, develop and certify, employees for SES positions within VBA who exhibit outstanding executive potential.

The Senior Executive Service was established to create a cadre of senior talent with vitality and initiative tempered with leadership skills and organizational ability. Each administration within the VA is responsible for cultivating talent and encouraging senior personnel to apply for their program. Each administration's program is a meld of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), VA and agency requirements.

The Purpose

The VBA SESCODP has the following purposes:

- To identify individuals who have demonstrated the potential for executive leadership and who possess the basic attributes necessary for becoming skillful and competent VA senior executives;
- To provide formal training and development opportunities that are designed to enhance and augment the candidates' basic managerial skills, competencies, and characteristics;

- To create a pool of well-developed, qualified and diverse candidates eligible for noncompetitive placement in SES positions and for ensuring continuity of operations within VBA;
- To develop, strengthen and broaden the candidates' knowledge and understanding regarding the mission, structure, organization issues, and operation of the Agency/Department and thereby foster executive mobility among VA programs in order to achieve continuous organizational renewal;
- To prepare program participants for certification by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) of their managerial qualifications for noncompetitive appointment to the Senior Executive Service.

An executive development program is actually a process comprised of tools, resources, activities, evaluation of learning and growth, and reflection on learning which when organized and matched to an individual's needs prepares that individual for a number of executive positions. The goal of this executive development program is to develop candidates in OPM's five fundamental executive qualifications or core competencies:

- Leading Change
- Leading People
- Results Driven
- Business Acumen
- Building Coalitions/Communications

Executive Core Qualifications (Core Competencies)

(from the "Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications", OPM, 1/98)

Reference page 27 of the Guide for the behavioral definitions for each core competency.

The Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) describe the leadership skills needed to succeed in the SES; they also reinforce the concept of an SES "corporate culture". This concept holds that the Government needs executives who can provide strategic leadership and whose commitment to public policy and administration transcends their commitment to a specific agency mission or an individual profession.

OPM has identified five fundamental executive core qualifications. The ECQs were designed to assess executive experience and potential - not technical expertise. They measure whether an individual has the broad executive skills needed to succeed in a variety of SES positions - not whether he or she is the most superior candidate for a particular position.

Successful performance in the SES requires competence in each ECQ. The ECQs are interdependent; successful executives bring all five to bear when providing service to the nation.

ECQ # 1 - Leading Change

This core qualification encompasses the ability to develop and implement an organizational vision which integrates key national and program goals, priorities, values, and other factors. Inherent to it is the ability to balance change and continuity - to continually strive to improve customer service and program performance within the basic Government framework, to create a work environment that encourages creative thinking and to maintain focus, intensity and persistence, even under adversity.

Leadership competencies include:

- Continual Learning
- Creativity and Innovation
- External Awareness
- Flexibility
- Resilience
- Service Motivation
- Strategic Thinking
- Vision

ECQ #2 - Leading People

The core qualification involves the ability to design and implement strategies which maximize employee potential and foster high ethical standards in meeting the organization's vision, mission, and goals.

Leadership Competencies include:

- Conflict Management
- Cultural Awareness
- Integrity/Honesty
- Team Building

ECQ # 3 - Results Driven

This core qualification stresses accountability and continuous improvement. It includes the ability to make timely and effective decisions and produce results through strategic planning and the implementation and evaluation of programs and policies.

Leadership Competencies include:

- Accountability
- Customer Service
- Decisiveness
- Entrepreneurship
- Problem Solving

- Technical Credibility

ECQ #4 - Business Acumen

This core qualification involves the ability to acquire and administer human, financial, material, and information resources in a manner which instills public trust and accomplishes the organization's mission, and to use new technology to enhance decision making.

Leadership Competencies include:

- Financial Management
- Human Resources Management
- Technology Management

ECQ # 5 - Building Coalitions/Communication

This core qualification involves the ability to explain, advocate, and express facts and ideas in a convincing manner, and negotiate with individuals and groups internally and externally. It also involves the ability to develop an expansive professional network with other organizations.

Leadership Competencies include:

- Influencing/Negotiating
- Interpersonal Skills
- Oral Communication
- Partnering
- Political Savvy
- Written Communication

The Program Requirements

VBA's 12 - 18 month program, length varies depending on the individual developmental needs, integrates the following components:

- Orientation
- Individual Needs Assessment
- Individual Development Plan (Action Plan)
- Mentoring
- Development Assignment
- Shadowing Assignment
- "Classroom" Training
- Reading

- Continuous Learning

Although the program will vary for each candidate, the stated structure of tools, resources, activities and learning events will be available for the candidates. Some of these activities necessarily precede others, as one may be needed for prerequisite learning before being able to fully experience the other. Some require work time to occur between learning events so that some application and reflection can occur before going on to another assignment.

However, some of the learning activities may have already taken place prior to the candidates enrollment in this program and will be considered as part of the program fulfillment.

The broad areas of candidate development that are integrated into the executive development program are:

The **Orientation** begins the program and helps build the team spirit and commitment to one another which may be instrumental for learning and development later in the program and to begin developing a network for those who will become VBA executives. The orientation week will allow each candidate to become familiar with the program requirements, policies, and expectations, and to provide interaction with senior management officials. OPM requires that each candidate has documented an official starting and finishing date for the program. The orientation week establishes the official starting date for all candidates. Finishing dates will vary for each candidate. **(The Orientation Component is required by VA/VBA.)**

To assist VBA in determining and identifying group and individual strengths and weaknesses, one or more VA/VBA prescribed competency-based **Individual Needs Assessment** will be administered. The assessment(s) will also ascertain which executive core qualifications need to be developed or strengthened during the program both for the group and the individual.

VBA has selected for one of the competency based individual needs assessment, the Leatherman Leadership Questionnaire (LLQ). Candidates will be asked to complete this questionnaire prior to the orientation program. The LLQ is a comprehensive, valid, and reliable tool for assessing the knowledge of supervisors and managers relating to key leadership skills. Results from the LLQ will provide valuable insight into an individual's strengths as well as areas in which improvement is needed. Group results will also enable VBA to pinpoint training needs and specifically design courseware for the class that will supplement the program's curriculum.

One additional assessment that will/may be used is OPM's Leadership Effectiveness Inventory (LEI). The LEI focuses exclusively on the core competencies needed by public sector executives, managers, and supervisors and addresses the real world of public management. The LEI will be administered and results delivered to candidates during the Orientation Week. **(The Individual Needs Assessment Component is required by**

OPM.)

Creation of an **Individual Development Plan (IDP) or Action Plan** is the process by which the candidates benchmark their current skills, prior experience, demonstrated knowledge and perceptions, competencies, and abilities and forecast their potential for growth in each of these areas. The developmental areas are closely tied to the VBA's five core competencies. The candidate's individualized plan will be based on results from the identified areas from the LLQ.

During the orientation session, each candidate will complete a draft IDP (action plan) reflecting education, training, and planned developmental activities. The IDP is to be prepared in coordination with the candidates' SES mentor and the supervisor of record. The IDPs will be reviewed and approved by VBA management. Candidates will have the opportunity to modify/change their plans before being 'accepted' as the official action plan for his/her program. **(The Individual Development Plan Component is required by OPM.)**

The **Mentoring** element for the SESCO DP will be a collaborative experience with mentor and candidate developing a learning partnership. The ultimate goal of this partnership is the development of one of our most important resources - effective leaders. Mentors must be a members of the SES.

Mentors must be willing to become:

- a coach, to motivate;
- a consultant, to identify problems and aid in finding solutions;
- a teacher, to support skill and competency development; and,
- a relationship builder, to facilitate and further interpersonal communication skills and relationships for our candidates.

Mentors will be required to work closely with their candidate throughout the entire program; attend an orientation/training session; and sign a Mentoring Agreement. The mentor is critical to the candidate's success in the program and instrumental in their success should they become an executive with the VBA.

The mentoring relationship has as its core purpose the professional and leadership development of the mentoree through the counsel and guidance of the mentor. The mentor program is closely tied to the input and tracking of the candidate's IDP and will directly assist the mentoree in the development and completion of the IDP. The IDP is most crucial to the candidate's successful experience in this program and will guide the candidate to the learning activities best suited for their development.

A successful mentoring relationship provides positive outcomes from both through the expansion of knowledge, skill, energy, and creativity. Candidates are encouraged to select mentors who have a genuine interest in the candidate's development, sensitivity to other's needs and development, excellent listening skills, time availability, commitment,

confidentiality, coaching and feedback skills and in addition has experiences and expertise which compliment rather than mirror the candidates.

The most successful mentor/candidate relationships are those where the mentor's natural style and approaches differ significantly. Both need to be open to others' ways and in this way both learn extensively from the different approaches and styles they encounter from each other.

To optimize the mentor relationship and to ensure candidates are truly matched to a mentor that is best suited for their growth, VBA will follow a systematic model of mentor matching and training. Each candidate is required to compile a biography profile. Each mentor is required to complete an application and biography profile. Information from both the candidates and the mentors will be placed on-line with The Mentoring Connection, a professional consultant, and the matching process begins.

Mentors are asked to complete a detailed application listing their experiences. The purpose of this detailed listing is to enable the candidates to indicate potential mentors with experiences that they lack in their own background. Matches are based not on quantity of experiences but type and variety.

Candidates will have the opportunity to access the system and select their five top choices for mentors. Mentors will also be asked to access the system and select their top five candidates based on information from the candidates biography profile. Based on the information from the profiles, The Mentoring Connection, will then determine and advise VBA on the best matches for the candidate and the mentor. **(The Mentor Component is required by OPM.)**

One or more **Developmental Assignments**, totaling four months in duration, will be required by each candidate during the program. All assignments will be full-time service and outside the candidate's position of record which will broaden the candidate's practical knowledge of the overall functioning of both VBA and VA. The assignments will also increase the candidate's capacity to effect the delivery of seamless service. Assignments will take into consideration the candidate's work history, specific developmental objectives as identified in the IDP, strengths and weaknesses and should generally be in an area in which the candidate has little or limited experience. Assignments may be inside or outside VBA, VA, government or with private industry.

In addition, the candidate has the responsibility to demonstrate that the learning taking place links to his/her IDP. Finally, the candidate will be responsible for designing a recommended strategy for improvement of one process or policy in the developmental assignment. This recommendation will be shared with the director, with the candidate's mentor, and with other candidates in the SES program. In this way, not only does the candidate learn from the developmental assignment/experience but others learn as well, and the visited department of the VBA have an opportunity for improvement.

This type of action learning, offers a realistic learning experience for the candidate and

enhances the productivity and return on investment for the time spent in training. It also optimizes learning for VBA employees other than the SESCO candidates (i.e. mentor, director, other managers and employees at the station, and other SES candidates in the program).

To assist candidates in identifying potential assignments, VBA Service, Staff and Station Directors will be asked to ascertain if their site has a suitable developmental assignment for the SESCO. A composite listing of VBA assignments will be made available to all candidates. The candidates along with the mentors, will elect two of the potential assignments. In a collaborative effort between the sponsoring Director, the mentor and VBA Executive Resources Board (ERB) developmental assignments will be made. The Director will be asked to summarize the experience and learning that the candidate obtained from entire experience.

It is the responsibility of each candidate to seek out, identify and secure potential developmental assignments that align with their IDP. **(The Developmental Assignment Component is required by OPM.)**

One or more 3-5 day **Shadowing** experiences will be undertaken by each candidate. The emphasis is upon observing new skills and tasks being carried out in a new line of business or functional area. It also gives the candidate an opportunity to learn, practice and improve their senior staff skills. Candidates will be encouraged to seek out shadowing assignments within other parts of the VA and other federal departments. Candidates can shadow their mentors; however, if they choose to do this, they will also have to perform one additional shadowing assignment. **(The Shadowing Component is required by VA/VBA.)**

The **Classroom Training** for the SESCO is multifaceted. There are some mandated programs that all candidates must participate in and still others that offer much flexibility and choice for each candidate.

- Candidates are required to participate in a **Long-term Educational Program**, of at least 80 hours. **(The Long-term Educational Program Component is required by OPM.)**

VBA will satisfy this requirement by having all candidates attend two VBA programs developed by the Aspen Institute. The programs will satisfy the objective of instilling a government-wide perspective on executive management. The first experience will cover four of the five core competencies and a second experience (in development) will cover the fifth core competency (Business Acumen).

For those candidates who have already attended the first Aspen Institute Program, opportunities to attend additional seminars and workshops sponsored by OPM, Federal Executive Institute (FEI), SES Forums, and other private executive leadership courses at MIT, Stanford, Brookings, Harvard, or other appropriate institutions will be identified. Those candidates who have previously attended the FEI program may still be afforded

an opportunity to attend another provider of executive training.

Six SESCDP candidates will have a opportunity to attend a new FEI Program entitled, "Leadership for Results" (LR). The LR Program's format is new and unique for executives. The focus is on thinking about and acting on a specific business issue. Selection of the TEAM program will be determined by VBA ERB.

- SESCDP candidates will participate in **Leadership VA (LVA)**. LVA is an internally focused leadership development program that orients participants to VA's strategic directions and senior administrators and enables participants to build professional coalitions. **(The LVA Component is required by VAVBA.)**
- SESC
prevailing and emerging HR issues that both cut across VA and are peculiar to VBA. Examples of such issues are diversity, recruitment and retention, coaching/mentoring, HR systems and processes, partnership, and others that we judge to be relevant. **(This HRS Component is required by VAVBA.)**
- Participation in **Additional Training** as identified from the results of the LLQ is required. **(The Additional Training Component is required by VBA.)**
- Depending on each candidate's needs and objectives, his/her IDP may include **Supplemental Learning Activities**. These may include internal or external training in specialized fields e.g., financial management, information technology, media relations; participation on various committees, task forces, or working groups; and/or completion of special case studies, projects and initiatives. Some of these supplemental activities may be counted towards fulfillment of either the developmental assignment or shadowing assignment. Learning will be centered around the application and practice of the core competencies for successful executives. **(The Supplemental Learning Activities Component is required by VAVBA.)**

Supplemental learning objectives that are covered by this portion of a candidate's education include but are not limited to the following:

- Apply leadership traits and attributes to management functions;
- Assess the implications of decisions on the organization and approach issues and communications using a strategic focus;
- Use a data driven method of selecting challenges, issues and improvements;
- Identify and eliminate artificial and surmountable barriers; dismantle paradigms and stovepipe decision making barriers;
- Gather, analyze and evaluate data and consider anticipated and unplanned contingencies as a basis for decisions;

- Select innovative ways to accomplish the plans;
- Create a project plan with alignment of budget and times; leveraging resources against workload;
- Project results and impact of plan on all areas (*own function, other functions, stakeholders, customers*);
- Develop tracking mechanisms for project implementation; and,
- Assess the implications of decisions on the organization and approach issues and communications using a strategic focus.

Reading is an underlying element throughout this program. Candidates are being provided with 'living' reading lists by core competencies. The lists provide a starting point and suggestions. Formal group reading assignment books will be made; however, the selection is not limited to only those books on the lists. Selection of books will be a joint decision between candidate and mentor. Each candidate will be required to read at least one book that supports each core competency. **(The Reading Component is recommended by VBA.)**

During the program, candidates will be divided into five groups (one for each core competency). Each group will select a book that has not been read. Then the group will prepare a 30 minute presentation to be given to the other candidates and selected executives. The group will apply the book's lessons to one area of VBA operations and develop a business case for why the VBA should change course, adopt a new strategy, or validate current practices based on the reading. The other candidates and executives will listen to the group's business case and provide feedback on the merits as well as the group dynamics, presentation, techniques, and skills.

Presentations will be incorporated as part of other SESCDP formal programs and/or we will use the VBN Satellite or Video Conference technology.

The 12 - 18 month SESCDP program is a short time for a manager to become qualified to be an leader. The successful leader recognizes that learning is a life long process. **Continuous Learning** should become second nature to every leader and executive. **(The Continuous Learning Component is recommended by VBA.)**

This program builds a culture of continuation of learning in the following manner:

- Toward the end of the program, with assistance from mentors, IDPs, post-assessment results, candidate's written action plan, and recommendations of others, the candidates will identify personal practices and plans for continuous learning.

- Six months after completion of the program, VBA Employee Development and Training Office will provide an assessment to determine the level of continued learning and development of each candidate.

Candidate Status

During the program, candidates who are VBA employees continue to work in the position held at the time of selection, unless assigned to another position. Non-VA candidates will be appointed to a specially established position while in the SESCO.

No SES Position Guarantee

While the SESCO is an important source of candidates for SES positions, successful completion of the program does not guarantee selection for such a position. There is no guarantee, either implied or stated, that each candidate will be placed in an available SES position. Selection is at the discretion of VBA and will be based on organizational needs and requirements. Although it is hoped that the VBA SESCO candidates will stay within VBA, there is no restriction for employees leaving VBA or VA. Employees may search out and apply for SES positions within VBA, VA or government wide.

Mobility

Each SESCO candidate is required to sign and have witnessed, a copy of the VA SES Geographical Mobility Agreement. This can not be waived for any candidate. This agreement ensures that every candidate is fully knowledgeable and consents to the possibility of reassignment to another VBA station.

Termination

A candidate's participation in the VBA SESCO will automatically terminate upon separation from the Agency. Participation may also be terminated at the candidate's request or by action of the ERB.

When termination is initiated by the VBA ERB, the candidate's progress must be judged to be deficient, unnecessarily protracted, or otherwise less than satisfactory. This includes determination that his/her performance has been deemed unacceptable or the candidate has failed to complete program requirements in the designated time frame. The candidate must be given a written notice that includes the effective date and reason for program

termination. Termination of program participation is not subject to adverse action procedures and does not, in itself, affect the candidate's employment status.

Documentation

VBA's Office of Human Resources (OHR) will maintain records documenting the date each candidate begins the program, i.e., the beginning date of the VBA Orientation and Individual Development Plan, and the date each candidate completes the program. In addition to preparing an IDP, the candidate and his/her mentor will be required to submit interim progress reports for developmental assignments of more than 30 days and final reports to HR which will be forwarded to the ERB for review.

Developmental assignment supervisors will be required to establish expectations and outcomes in discussion with the candidate at the beginning of each developmental assignment and will submit a written report on the performance of the candidate at the end of the assignment period.

These performance reports will be used to assist the ERB in evaluating candidates' development during the program and will also serve as input to rating officials for the candidate's annual performance evaluation. The content of the end-of-assignment performance report will include observations about the candidate's accomplishment of assignment objectives, attainment of executive competencies and an assessment of the candidate's readiness for placement in the SES.

Mentors will be responsible for a written evaluation of the candidate's overall progress throughout the program.

Final reports may be submitted to the OHR through the appropriate management official. OHR will prepare the final packages for the ERB and OPM approval.

Certification

Upon the successful completion of a candidate's development plan, VA's ERB will review and evaluate each candidate's record and performance. With VBA's ERB endorsement and final approval by the Secretary, records will be sent to an OPM SES Qualifications Review Board (QRB) for certification.

If the candidate is not recommended by the ERB for certification, participation in the SESCO is terminated and the candidate is notified in writing of the basis for the decision. This (or a candidate's decision to withdraw from the program at any time) does not preclude the candidate from applying directly for SES positions.

Within three years of QRB certification, candidates are eligible for noncompetitive placement

in any SES position for which the graduate is appropriately qualified. Certified candidates are responsible for seeking out and applying for any SES position they want to pursue. The SES certification received from OPM's QRB is valid for the life of the holder; however, to stay as an active member of the SES, re-certification is required every three years.

Responsibility

The SESCDP has many facets:

- The Office of Field Operations (OFO), jointly with the Office of Employee Development and Training, will oversee and supervise the program; approve the IDPs; participate in the selection of the mentors; and, coach the mentors. OFO is the primary sponsor of the relationship between the mentors and mentorees.
- The Office of Employee Development and Training (20T) is responsible for the training, administration and leadership development portion of the program. They will also fund the travel and training for all segments of the program.
- The Office of Human Resources (20A2) is responsible for candidate documentation as listed in the Documentation section.
- The Human Resources Development Team (053) will be responsible for continual review and VA oversight of the program.
- The VBA Executive Resources Board (ERB) has management oversight of the program.
- The SES candidates have responsibility to ensure that they are available for all of the required training activities and able to travel as required for the program. Scheduling of individual developmental assignments, shadowing assignments and other executive training programs will be the responsibility of the candidates with approval and coordination from their supervisors or other VBA management. Candidates must also maintain documentation of these activities. Documentation of the developmental assignments must include a narrative that shows substantial developmental outcomes from the work experience.
- The candidates and HR will work in collaboration to submit required paperwork to OPM for review and certification.
- The Office of Personnel Management will issue SES certification to each qualifying candidate.

Funding

The Office of Employee Development and Training (20T) will request, secure, and

administer funding for all of the SESCDP candidates and mentors. Funding will be done via Status of Funds (SOF) transfer, to each station based on Travel Authorities submitted to 20T from each candidate and their mentors.

Evaluation

Evaluation will be on-going throughout the program and will be in several formats:

- Several written evaluations from the mentors throughout the program;
- Written evaluations from the individual developmental assignments directors;
- Candidate's review of the reading assignments and exercises;
- Candidates evaluation of their own assignments and of the program; and,
- Administration of a post program assessment tool.

Conclusion

Once this initial VBA program is concluded and evaluated, modifications will be incorporated into the overall program. The changes will be based on the evaluations from candidates and mentors, the post program assessments, and other sources. VBA will then conduct additional sessions of the SESCDP. VBA will create and maintain a pool of well qualified employees for SES positions that coincides with VBA's succession planning.