

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness  
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs

Atlanta Oversight Division  
75 Spring Street, SW., Suite 1018  
Atlanta, GA 30303-3109

**Classification Appeal Decision**  
**Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code**

**Appellant:** [appellant]

**Agency classification:** Social Worker  
GS-185-11

**Organization:** [organization] Section  
[organization]  
[location] Veterans Affairs  
Medical Center (VAMC)  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
[location]

**OPM decision:** Social Worker  
GS-185-11

**OPM decision number:** C-0185-11-02

/s/ Virginia L. Magnuson  
Virginia L. Magnuson  
Classification Appeals Officer

October 16, 2003  
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

PERSONAL

[appellant]

[address]

[location]

[name]

Human Resources Manager

Department of Veterans

Network Business Office, VISN [#]

[address]

[address]

[location]

Deputy Assistant Secretary for

Human Resources Management

Department of Veterans Affairs

810 Vermont Avenue, NW.

Room 206

Washington, DC 20420

## **Introduction**

On June 25, 2003, the Atlanta Field Services Group, U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), accepted a classification appeal from [appellant]. Her position is currently classified as Social Worker, GS-185-11. She works in the [organization] Section, [organization], [location] Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), [location]. The appellant is requesting that her position be reclassified as Social Worker, GS-185-12. We received a complete administrative report on July 22, 2003. The appeal has been accepted and processed under section 5112(b) of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

## **General issues**

The appellant indicates that the position she occupies has not received the grade level it warrants. She states that other positions that perform substantially the same work that she performs, both within the Veterans' Integrated System Network (VISN) [#] and throughout the VA, are paid at higher levels, and she believes her position should be graded consistent with those positions. In addition, the appellant makes various statements regarding her agency's review and evaluation of her position during the classification process. In adjudicating this appeal, our only concern is to make our own independent decision on the proper classification of her position.

By law, we must make that decision solely by comparing the appellant's current duties and responsibilities to OPM standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Since comparison to established standards, not other positions, is the intended and exclusive method for classifying positions, we may not consider the classification of other positions or other alternative approaches to compensation as a basis for deciding an appeal. Therefore, we have considered the appellant's statements only insofar as they are relevant to making that comparison.

Like OPM, the appellant's agency must classify positions based on comparison to OPM standards and guidelines. However, the agency also has primary responsibility for ensuring that its positions are classified consistently with OPM appeal decisions. If the appellant considers her position so similar to others that they all warrant the same classification, she may pursue the matter by writing to her agency personnel office. In doing so, she should specify the precise organizational location, classification, duties, and responsibilities of the positions in question. If the positions are found to be basically the same as hers, the agency must correct their classification to be consistent with this appeal decision. Otherwise, the agency should explain to her the differences between her position and others.

In reaching our classification decision, we have carefully reviewed all information furnished by the appellant and the agency, including information obtained from telephone interviews with the appellant and her supervisor.

## **Position information**

The appellant is assigned to position description number [#]. Both the appellant and her supervisor certified the accuracy of the position description.

The appellant actively participates as a member of a multidisciplinary treatment team, including attending meetings and engaging in the collaborative decision-making process regarding patient care.

The primary purpose of the appellant's position is to conduct, coordinate, plan, implement, and monitor social work services to the patient population associated with the renal program and in concert with the renal/hemodialysis interdisciplinary treatment team. The position requires the incumbent to provide the full range of professional social work services on behalf of veterans, their families, and other customers of the medical center. The incumbent must identify, evaluate, and interpret social and environmental factors which affect medical diagnosis and response to treatment. She must resolve or minimize emotional, personal, financial, and legal problems that may interfere with the patient's full recovery. She provides case management, individual therapy, group and family therapy, emotional support, discharge planning, and referrals to community resources as needed. She is also responsible for renal/hemodialysis patients at the VAMC's in [location] and [location], as these medical centers do not operate a renal program. In addition, the appellant coordinates treatment for transient patients when travel takes them through the [location] area.

The appellant officially reports to the supervisory social worker, a recently vacated position. In the interim, the appellant reports to the Social Work Executive, who sets objectives for the social work program and is responsible for administrative, technical, and professional supervision, as needed. The appellant has overall responsibility for case management; professional consultation; direct practice including psychosocial evaluations; discharge planning; group counseling; advance directive; and social work coverage. She identifies what needs to be done and independently plans and carries out assignments. Her work is reviewed in terms of technical adequacy and conformance with applicable procedure and policies, as needed.

The appellant's position requires knowledge of the principles and theoretical concepts of social work as well as administrative mechanisms appropriate to her assigned program. It also requires the ability to use data collection techniques and to provide statistical data to agencies and organizations, such as the Southeastern Kidney Foundation, which collects such data. The appellant's position description and other material of record furnish much more information about her duties and responsibilities and how they are performed and are incorporated by reference into this decision.

### **Series, title, and standard determination**

The agency has placed the appellant's position in the Social Work Series, GS-185, and titled it Social Worker. The appellant does not contest the series or title determination. Based on our audit and review of the record, we concur. The published standard for the GS-185 series must be used for grade level analysis.

### **Grade determination**

The appellant maintains that the “complex patient” quality of her caseload, along with the independence of her job performance and her associated administrative duties impact the level of difficulty of her duties in such a way as to alter the character of the caseload and the freedom of practice characteristic of performance, which are the two grade-distinguishing criteria for this series. She states that she has program responsibility including developing and maintaining professional standards of service and effecting changes that will promote efficient practice and coordination of social work services with other programs of service to the same group of veteran clients. We will consider the information provided only insofar as it is relevant to applying the GS-185 standard to her work.

The GS-185 standard uses two basic elements to define assignment characteristics, content, and supervisory control. Two basic variables that affect the grade levels of positions are (1) the character of the caseload and (2) the freedom of practice characteristic of performance. The first refers to the difficulty of problems present in the assignment and the degree of professional skill and judgment required by the social work decisions and the services they involve. The second reflects the recognition of the social worker’s competence through decreased supervisory control that allows independent performance of work. These variables are considered in concert when making grade level determinations.

At the GS-11 level, social work assignments involve intensive social work services requiring the exercise of mature professional judgment and the flexible use of a wide range of social work skills. This level represents performance of services in serious and complicated cases with demonstrated effectiveness based on sufficient training and experience to require a minimum of supervisory control and guidance, and permit independent exercise of authoritative judgment. GS-11 social workers carry full professional responsibility and use highly developed professional skills for cases presenting a wide range of psycho-social and environmental problems with no limitations as to the difficulty of services that would be performed.

GS-11 social workers actively participate in program planning and in the development and maintenance of public understanding and sound working relationships with local agencies and community resources. At this level, social workers evaluate and advise medical staff of social factors relating to illness, hospitalization, diagnosis and recommended treatment of patients; have responsibility for social work aspects of integrated treatment programs; and furnish continuing social work services to patients and their families while they are learning to live with illness or disability of a family member. Also included at this level are assignments involving responsibility for providing continuing social work services at field locations without a supervisor available for consultation. Such assignments typically involve travel in an assigned territory and/or require extensive coordination of services with a wide range of residents of various communities such as local lawyers, physicians, and public officials, and with local social agencies.

At the GS-11 level, social workers make independent professional decisions and recommendations for agency actions that can have serious impact on the life of the person served. They independently give interpretations of case histories to other professionals or persons involved in the case and make recommendations that can be relied on for soundness of judgment and maturity of insight on problem cases. The supervisor is kept informed of the

progress of the work and is available for consultation on substantive problems. GS-11 social workers are accountable for identifying problems that should be brought to the attention of the supervisor, and for taking the initiative in determining when the supervisor should be consulted. However, a lack of immediate or direct supervision does not result in delegation of responsibility for the effect or results of difficult decisions and services, or for program responsibility.

The appellant's position operates with wide latitude and requires mastery of social work skills and independent professional judgment comparable to the GS-11 level. As at this level, the appellant manages all social work aspects of integrated treatment for patients associated with the renal/hemodialysis program at the VAMC and local community dialysis centers and for transient veterans needing treatment. She orients clients with advanced renal disease regarding diagnosis, treatment, finances, medical insurance, VA benefits, community dialysis centers, the VA dialysis unit, and referrals for community placement. She also identifies and makes recommendations for further psychiatric, chemical dependency, and additional social support needs. She seeks supervisory guidance infrequently, and then only on substantive problems or decisions of a precedent-setting nature.

The appellant provides comparable GS-11 level continuing social work services. Her clinical responsibilities include, but are not limited to, conducting psychosocial evaluations, individual and group counseling, and education of patients and families regarding advance directives. The appellant independently determines patient/client eligibility and conducts needs assessments on renal clients. She develops comprehensive care plans, establishes resource identification and referral, and coordinates and monitors renal/hemodialysis services associated with the medical center. The appellant networks both within and outside the VA to meet the needs of renal patients. She coordinates dialysis transfers as well as transient dialysis care for patients and veterans. She independently negotiates dialysis care using a variety of funding mechanisms such as VA benefits, Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance resources, and authorizes payment for treatment on a fee services basis for eligible veterans through a variety of community centers.

At the GS-12 level, social worker positions are of two general types, namely (1) supervisory positions that include full technical and administrative responsibility for the accomplishment of the work of a unit of three or more subordinate professional workers when the base level of work supervised fully meets the description of grade GS-11 in this standard; and (2) positions which are classified at this level in recognition of program responsibilities which are significant enough to justify grade GS-12 with or without the presence of professional subordinates.

The appellant's position does not involve supervisory responsibilities as defined by the Supervisory Grade-Evaluation Guide. The appellant does have renal/hemodialysis program responsibilities, but these do not meet the intent of the GS-12 level program responsibilities.

GS-12 Social Workers have significant program responsibilities. Typically, they are in charge of the social work program at a separate installation or similar organizational component and have substantial accountability for program effectiveness and modification of service patterns. Work is subject to regulation and procedural direction from the program directors in the central office of the agency and to the local management control of the directors of the institutions such as hospitals and clinics and correctional institutions. As distinguished from positions at GS-11

which are responsible for providing continuing social work services at a field location, positions classified at the GS-12 level on the basis of program responsibilities characteristically combine program development and evaluation with service functions.

The record shows that the appellant's supervisor exercises this degree of program responsibility in that he is accountable for the Social Work Program at the medical center, including responsibility for planning, organizing, directing, controlling, and evaluating the total program. In contrast, the appellant's program responsibilities are limited to participating in the planning of the social work services specific to the renal/hemodialysis program. Her decision-making authority and program responsibility are limited to patients and clients of the renal program and do not extend outward to the overall social work program. The appellant's knowledge, depth of experience, and opinion regarding social work services are valued by colleagues and her supervisor. Her advice and counsel is often sought by less experienced social workers. However, with regard to overall social services program responsibility, the appellant's authority is limited to identification and recommendation of program needs. Her supervisor is the decision-making authority for developing and maintaining professional standard of service and effecting changes that will promote efficient practice and coordination of social work services with other programs of service to the same group of veteran clients.

As another type of assignment, GS-12 Social Workers may be responsible for serving various beneficiary groups scattered over a large geographical area when assignments include direct social work practice in cases with complex problems, organization of community services on behalf of beneficiaries, development and coordination of procedures for the use of these community services by related staffs and satellite facilities, and development and maintenance of working relationships and agreements with other organizations having responsibilities for the same groups of people.

As noted earlier, the appellant's position includes responsibility for providing continuing social work services at two additional field locations. Her services to clients of the [location], and [location], medical centers are localized rather than scattered over a large geographical area. While the appellant has direct interaction with the clients as well as the community centers in these areas and she provides extensive coordination of community services, she is not providing the administrative program oversight and combined program development and evaluation with service functions comparable to the GS-12 level as discussed previously.

### **Decision**

The appellant's position is properly classified as Social Worker, GS-185-11.