

Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program Agency Guidance and Instructions



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SESCDP Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (Appendix E)

I. Overview

Federal agencies, in partnership with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), are responsible for identifying and developing candidates for the Senior Executive Service (SES) to support Federal executive succession planning. This requires selecting individuals with demonstrated executive ability and preparing them to drive change and ensure accountability.

Under [5 U.S.C. 3396 \(a\) and \(b\)](#), OPM is required to establish programs for the systematic development of candidates for the SES and/or assist agencies in the establishment of such programs which meet OPM-prescribed criteria.

SES Candidate Development Programs (SESCDPs) are structured programs that develop Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) competencies in selected candidates through formal training, developmental assignments, mentoring, and coaching. SESCDPs provide candidates with governmentwide leadership challenges, opportunities to interact with senior employees outside their department and/or agency, interagency training experiences, executive-level development assignments, mentoring, and coaching. Participation develops executive competencies and broadens candidates' understanding of governmentwide programs, missions, and management challenges beyond their home agency.

Agency Executive Review Boards (ERB)s are responsible for oversight of agency programs and ensuring such programs are effective and valuable in supporting succession planning and candidate development.

Agencies must be mindful of merit principles under 5 U.S.C. 2301 in carrying out all functions related to their SESC DP, consistent with § 412.301(f).

In addition to agency-administered programs, OPM may establish a governmentwide SESC DP under § 412.301(b). OPM will provide additional guidance on the governmentwide SESC DP as needed.

This guidance applies to all executive [agencies](#), including Independent Regulatory Agencies and Inspectors General.

II. SESC DP Policy Approval Requirements

Agencies must obtain OPM approval of their SESC DP policy before implementing the program. Agencies must also obtain OPM approval before implementing any substantial modification to an approved program. A substantial change constitutes a new SESC DP, and OPM re-approval must be obtained before initiating a new cohort following such a change. To receive OPM approval, an agency must submit a single overarching SESC DP policy¹ using the OPM-

¹ A policy addendum must be submitted in instances where an agency is establishing a non-standard SES CDP which includes features such as a multi-agency program, a mission critical occupations program, or other such program

developed policy template (Appendix A). Submission of a policy document that does not use the OPM template will not satisfy the approval requirement under § 412.301(c). The policy must include requirements that effectively and efficiently prepare candidates for success in the SES. Agency policies must include and implement the following requirements:

- **Cohort duration** must last a minimum of 12 months and must not exceed 24 months. Agencies may grant extensions of up to 120 days for individual candidates due to extenuating circumstances. Agencies must define extenuating circumstances in their SESCO policy and establish an internal process for documenting and approving individual extension requests. Any extension beyond 120 days requires a formal submission to OPM with supporting documentation.
- Validated executive assessments must be administered as follows:
 - One validated executive assessment must be completed by each applicant during the program application and selection process. This assessment must be tied to the ECQs to determine potential candidates' leadership qualifications and readiness to participate in an SESCO. A validated assessment is one supported by evidence of its validity and reliability in evaluating executive leadership competencies, behaviors, or traits relevant to SES performance. Administering the assessment alone is not sufficient — agencies must document how assessment results were considered in the selection process and incorporate results into the candidate evaluation framework.
 - At least one additional validated executive assessment must be completed by each participant during the program. Agencies must use in-program assessment results to refine program content and identify and implement, as needed, individualized development opportunities that support participants throughout their progression in the program cohort.
 - All assessments must provide an objective measure of an individual's knowledge, skills, or abilities relevant to the ECQs and related competencies.
- **Developmental assignments** must be a minimum of 180 consecutive calendar days of full-time service. The assignment must be to a position other than, and substantially different from, the candidate's position of record. The assignment must include executive-level responsibility and must differ from the candidate's current and past assignments in ways that broaden the candidate's experience and challenge the candidate with respect to leadership competencies and the ECQs. Assignments may extend outside the Federal Government, subject to compliance with applicable law and Federal and agency-specific ethics regulations. The candidate must be held accountable for organizational or agency

that falls outside of the OPM established primary program parameters. The addendum must provide supplemental details (noted in the attached OPM policy template) to the submitting agency's primary policy.

results achieved during the assignment. Where the assignment is in a non-Federal organization, the ERB must provide for adequate documentation of the individual's actions and accomplishments and must determine the assignment will contribute to development of the candidate's executive qualifications.

- **Formal training** must consist of a minimum of 100 hours of formal interagency and/or multi-sector training or experiential learning that relates to the ECQs and related competencies. Agencies may determine their own training topics and may add any agency-specific mission-critical training topics and competencies, and any additional topics and competencies prescribed by OPM through guidance and policy.
- **Mentoring** must consist of a minimum of 10 hours of engagement between each candidate and a mentor who is a member of the SES or is otherwise determined by the ERB to have the knowledge and capacity to advise the candidate consistent with the goals of the SESCO. The mentor and candidate are jointly responsible for a productive mentoring relationship.
- **Coaching** must consist of a minimum of 10 hours of engagement between each candidate and a coach who supports the candidate consistent with the goals of the SESCO. Coaches must be certified by an accredited coaching organization or have completed formal, accredited training. Agencies may also consult the Federal Coaching Network (FCN) to identify qualified coaches, including certified graduates of the Federal Internal Coaching Training Program.
- The OPM-standardized **Executive Development Plan (EDP)** (Appendix B) must be used and completed by each participant. The EDP must address the ECQs, Federal Government leadership challenges crucial to the senior executive, broader agency functioning, interaction with senior employees outside the candidate's department or agency, and governmentwide or multi-agency applicability.
- **Outside agency participation:** To the maximum extent possible, agencies must ensure program participation includes candidates from outside the agency, consistent with § 412.302(b)(2). Until OPM establishes and communicates a specific benchmark, agencies must ensure, to the maximum extent possible, that program participation includes candidates from outside the agency, consistent with § 412.302(b)(2).
- **Minimum placement rate:** Agencies must track and report initial SES placement rates for QRB-certified graduates as part of program evaluation. Agencies must begin tracking and recording initial SES placement rates for QRB-certified graduates immediately upon program launch. OPM will use this data to establish a minimum placement rate benchmark and communicate it through guidance. Until then, agencies must be prepared to provide placement data to OPM upon request. Guidelines on maintaining a minimum

placement rate must be included in agency SESCDP policies, consistent with OPM policy and guidance.

Note: An agency must obtain OPM approval of a single overarching SESCDP policy that establishes enterprise-wide program requirements for the entire agency. This umbrella policy governs all major agency components and subcomponents authorized to conduct SESCDP cohorts. Major agency components and subcomponents may no longer submit standalone SESCDP policies separate from the overarching agency policy and must adhere to the approved agency-level policy when administering individual cohorts. The HQ agency is responsible for ensuring major agency component and subcomponent compliance. Agency components and subcomponents are responsible for ensuring that program cohorts meet all requirements of the approved agency-level policy.

III. ERB Responsibilities

Agency ERBs should provide maximum oversight of its SESCDP to ensure a pipeline of ready-now high-performing candidates for appointment to the SES, which includes:

- Overseeing and being accountable for SESCDP recruitment, merit staffing, and assessment, consistent with SES merit staffing provisions in 5 CFR 317.501;
- Establishing and overseeing a mentoring program for executive development candidates -- ERB members may serve as mentors;
- Approving Executive Development Plans (EDPs) for each candidate;
- Monitoring performance of candidates during the program and oversee a removal policy for candidates not making adequate progress;
- Approving OPM Qualifications Review Board (QRB) submission for all individuals who successfully complete SES CDPs in accordance with chapter 2 of the [SES Desk Guide](#);
- Submitting candidates for QRB review within **80 calendar days** of graduation. The 80 calendar day period begins from the date the ERB certifies the candidate has met the program requirements.
- Ensuring that QRB-certified SESCDP graduates receive full consideration for agency SES vacancies;
- Evaluating the program and developmental activities and recommending alternative approaches; and
- For multi-agency SESCDPs, or an OPM government-wide SESCDP, clarifying the respective roles of the administering agency ERB and the candidate's employing agency ERB, as follows:

- The candidate's employing agency ERB retains primary responsibility for selection oversight, monitoring candidate progress, and QRB submission for its sponsored candidates.
- The administering agency's ERB — including OPM in the case of a governmentwide SESCDP — serves in an advisory capacity to the candidate's employing agency ERB.
- The candidate's employing agency ERB determines when its sponsored candidates have completed all program requirements, including all individual development plan elements approved by the ERB, and certifies their graduation from the program.
- For a participant who does not have an employing agency at the time of selection, the sponsoring agency's ERB is responsible for selection, oversight, and QRB submission upon the participant's completion of the program.

IV. Program Evaluation

Agencies must complete and maintain program evaluations pursuant to training evaluation requirements in 5 CFR 410.202. Agencies must use the OPM-developed evaluation templates, which are located in Appendices C and D (for both the overarching program and individual cohorts, respectively). Ongoing collection of evaluation data will support agencies in identifying program enhancements or alternative approaches to program administration. Agencies must implement programmatic changes based on evaluation results and candidate feedback. Evaluation data should inform updates to program content, structure, and administration prior to the next re-approval submission.

V. Policy Reapproval

Agencies must seek reapproval of their SESCDP policy on a triennial basis (every three years). To obtain reapproval, an agency must submit its current SESCDP policy (Appendix A) along with the completed overarching program evaluation (Appendix C).

Individual participant cohort evaluation templates (Appendix D) are not required for reapproval. However, agencies must complete and maintain cohort evaluations following each cohort and must use that data to identify and implement program enhancements. OPM reserves the right to request any completed cohort evaluation template from the current approval period.

Agencies must also seek OPM approval — outside of the triennial cycle — before implementing any change that substantially alters how the SESCDP complies with the requirements of 5 CFR Part 412. A substantial change constitutes a new SESCDP, and OPM approval must be obtained before initiating a new cohort following such a change.

An existing cohort that is actively underway at the time of a reapproval submission may continue until completion. However, no new cohort may be initiated until OPM approves the resubmitted policy.

VI. Resources

OPM's [SES Desk Guide](#) serves as a key resource agency human resources and executive resources personnel. For assistance, please email SESDevelopment@opm.gov.

Additionally, OPM will hold quarterly SESCDP Roundtable Meetings with program managers and coordinators. These sessions will provide an opportunity for interagency networking, sharing promising practices, and to identify additional resources to support agencies.



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