

Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

This FAQ document provides guidance to Federal agencies on the requirements of the final rule amending 5 CFR part 412, subpart C, effective July 27, 2026. Questions are organized in the order they arise under the regulatory framework. For additional questions, please contact OPM's Leadership, Performance, and Accountability team at SESDevelopment@opm.gov.

Topic 1: Program Approval and Policy Requirements

Do agencies need to resubmit their SESCDP policies for OPM approval as a result of the final rule?

Yes. Agencies that submitted updated policies prior to the issuance of the final rule must resubmit their policies to reflect the requirement modifications made in the final rule. Agencies must use the new OPM-developed template when submitting their updated policies.

OPM will review and approve policies as they are received. New program cohorts may not begin until the final rule is effective (July 27, 2026) and OPM has approved the agency's updated policy. Agencies are encouraged to submit updated policies as early as possible to avoid delays in program initiation.

Can an agency begin a new SESCDP cohort while its updated policy is under OPM review?

No. Agencies may not begin new program cohorts until their updated policy has been approved by OPM. Agencies should plan accordingly and submit updated policies as early as possible to avoid delays.

How often must agencies seek re-approval of their SESCDP policy?

Agencies must seek OPM re-approval on a triennial basis (every three years). Agencies must also seek OPM approval before implementing any change that substantially alters the program's compliance with regulatory requirements. A substantial change constitutes a new SESCDP, and re-approval must be obtained before the agency may initiate a new cohort following a substantial change.

Does every agency component or subcomponent need its own separate SESCDP policy?

No. The final rule requires each department or agency at the headquarters level to submit a single, overarching enterprise-wide policy that covers itself and all subcomponents. An approved agency SESCDP policy serves as the umbrella policy that all agency subcomponents must follow when administering individual SESCDP cohorts.

Agency subcomponents will no longer maintain standalone policies separate from the overarching agency-level policy. However, a major agency component or subcomponent that employs senior executives may be authorized by the agency to conduct an SESCDP, provided it utilizes and adheres to the approved agency policy.

Can OPM establish a governmentwide SESCO DP?

Yes. The final rule includes a provision clarifying that OPM may establish a governmentwide SESCO DP consistent with 5 U.S.C. 3396 and the regulation. This option is designed to support agencies that lack the resources or capacity to operate their own SESCO DP and to increase visibility and access to developmental opportunities across the Federal Government. Should OPM establish a governmentwide SESCO DP, additional guidance on agency participation will be issued at that time.

What are the consequences for an agency that implements an SESCO DP without first obtaining formal OPM approval?

An agency that implements an SESCO DP without first obtaining formal OPM approval may not submit graduates of the program for Qualifications Review Board (QRB) review. Agencies must obtain approval before beginning program activities to ensure graduates are eligible for QRB certification and subsequent SES appointment.

What is the required length of an SESCO DP cohort, and are there exceptions to the maximum duration?

An SESCO DP program cohort must last a minimum of 12 months and must not exceed 24 months in duration. This final rule requirement replaces the proposed rule (duration of 9-12 months) and prior guidance in [*Hiring and Talent Development for the Senior Executive Service memorandum \(May 29, 2025\)*](#) that referenced a nine-month cohort cap.

Exceptions to the 24-month maximum are limited. Agencies may grant extensions of up to 120 days beyond the 24-month duration for individual candidates who cannot complete the program within that period due to extenuating circumstances. Any extension beyond 120 days must be submitted by the Executive Review Board (ERB) to OPM for approval. Extensions are intended to address documented individual circumstances and are not a mechanism for extending the program broadly.

Topic 2: Executive Resources Board (ERB) Responsibilities

What is the ERB's role in overseeing an SESCO DP under the final rule?

The ERB must oversee the agency's SESCO DP and ensure the program complies with regulatory requirements and includes substantive developmental experiences that equip successful candidates to accomplish Federal Government missions as senior executives. Specific ERB responsibilities under the final rule include:

- Overseeing SESCO DP recruitment, merit staffing, and assessment;
- Ensuring the program follows SES merit staffing provisions in 5 CFR 317.501;
- Overseeing development, evaluation, progress, and graduation of candidates;
- Submitting for QRB review, within 80 calendar days of graduation, those candidates the ERB determines possess the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs);
- Overseeing the writing and implementation of a removal policy for candidates who do not make adequate progress.

What is the ERB's responsibility regarding the QRB submission timeline?

The ERB must submit for QRB review, within 80 calendar days of graduation, those candidates it determines possess the Executive Core Qualifications. This timeline is established in the final rule and agencies should plan for it as part of their program administration. Note: that the prior regulation referenced 90 workdays; the final rule replaces that standard with 80 calendar days.

What must the ERB's candidate removal policy address?

The final rule requires the ERB to oversee the writing and implementation of a removal policy for program candidates who do not make adequate progress. The OPM-developed policy template provides additional guidance on criteria for determining failure to progress and the process for temporary pause, permanent removal, and deferral requests.

What is the ERB's role in a multi-agency or OPM governmentwide SESCO?

In a multi-agency or OPM governmentwide SESCO, the candidate's employing agency's ERB is responsible for completing the ERB requirements prescribed under the regulation. The agency administering the multi-agency or governmentwide program serves as an advisor to the candidate's employing agency ERB.

The candidate's employing agency ERB determines when its sponsored candidates have completed program requirements 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.

Topic 3: Candidate Selection and Recruitment

What recruitment requirements apply to SESCOs under the final rule?

Consistent with merit system principles, agencies must ensure that recruitment for the program is open to all groups of qualified individuals within the civil service, or all groups of qualified individuals whether or not within the civil service. The number of expected SES vacancies must be considered as one factor in determining the number of candidates selected, and agencies should, to the maximum extent possible, ensure program participation includes candidates from outside the agency.

Is there a required minimum percentage of participants from outside the agency?

The specific outside-agency participation rate (20%) referenced in prior OPM guidance ([*Hiring and Talent Development for the Senior Executive Service memorandum – May 29, 2025*](#)) has been removed. OPM will collect outside-agency participation data following new cohorts to establish a baseline and then use that data to set a new benchmark goal. Once established, OPM will communicate the applicable benchmark through updated or new guidance. In the meantime, agencies should ensure their programs include candidates from outside the agency and monitor OPM communications for further direction.

Are SESCDP candidates considered hired into an SES position upon selection into the program?

No. Selected candidates are not hired directly into an SES position; they enter a developmental program designed to strengthen leadership skills and prepare them for executive roles. Only upon certification by the Qualifications Review Board (QRB) may a program graduate receive an initial career appointment without further competition to any SES position for which they meet the professional and technical qualifications.

Topic 4: Executive Assessments

How many validated executive assessments are required, and may the same assessment tool be used at both stages?

The final rule requires a minimum of two validated executive assessments per candidate. The first must be conducted during the candidate selection or application process; the second must be conducted during the program cohort.

Agencies must consider the results of the application-phase assessment in identifying which candidates are best suited to participate in the SESCDP and must use the in-program assessment results to identify and adjust, as needed, areas of continuing development for each participant.

The final rule does not prohibit using the same assessment tool at both stages; however, the intent of each assessment is distinct. The first is used to evaluate readiness and suitability for program participation; the second is used to assess continuing developmental needs during the program. Agencies should consider whether the same tool will yield meaningfully different and useful developmental information at each stage. Agencies are encouraged to consult OPM at SESDevelopment@opm.gov for guidance on assessment selection.

Topic 5: Executive Development Plan (EDP)

Is use of the OPM-standardized Executive Development Plan (EDP) template required?

Yes. The final rule requires that each candidate utilize the OPM-standardized EDP template. The EDP must be documented, competency-based, and approved by the agency ERB.

When should the EDP be completed and approved?

The EDP should be completed at the outset of the program, based on the competency needs determination conducted during or following the application process. Developmental assignment goals should be inserted prior to beginning the developmental assignment, and developmental assignment outcomes should be documented upon completion of the assignment. The EDP must be approved by the agency ERB before the candidate begins program activities.

How should agencies document coaching and mentoring hours for EDP purposes?

The OPM-standardized EDP template includes a Coaching and Mentoring Experience log where candidates record the date and duration of each session. Agencies should ensure candidates maintain this log throughout the program, as it serves as the official record of hours completed for both program administration and QRB submission purposes.

Topic 6: Formal Training Requirements

How many hours of formal training are required, and does the final rule prescribe specific training topics?

The final rule requires a minimum of 100 hours of formal interagency and/or multi-sector training or experiential learning activity. This is an increase from the prior 80-hour requirement.

The final rule does not prescribe specific training topics. Agencies have flexibility to determine training topics based on their mission needs and the developmental needs of their candidates. Training must relate to the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) and related competencies. Agencies may add agency-specific mission-critical training topics and competencies, as well as any additional topics and competencies prescribed by OPM through guidance and policy.

What formats count toward the 100-hour formal training requirement?

Formal training includes classroom-based or e-learning courses, seminars, educational programs, and certificate programs. The training experience must include interaction with senior employees outside the candidate's department or agency.

Can training hours be completed concurrently with the developmental assignment?

The final rule does not prohibit the concurrent completion of training and developmental assignment hours. However, agencies should be mindful that the developmental assignment requires full-time service. Program schedules should be designed to allow candidates to fully engage with their developmental assignment responsibilities without compromising the quality of either the assignment or the training experience.

Topic 7: Developmental Assignments

What is the minimum length of a developmental assignment, and must it be completed within the 24-month program window?

The final rule requires a minimum of 180 consecutive calendar days of full-time service. This is an increase from the prior 120-day minimum referenced in earlier OPM guidance and the [*Hiring and Talent Development for the Senior Executive Service memorandum \(May 29, 2025\)*](#), both of which are superseded by the final rule. The 180-day period may not be split across multiple shorter periods to satisfy this requirement.

The developmental assignment is a required program component, and all program requirements — including the developmental assignment — must be completed within the 24-month program window. Given that the developmental assignment alone requires 180 consecutive calendar days, agencies should carefully sequence program components when designing cohort schedules. Candidates who cannot complete all requirements within 24 months due to extenuating circumstances may be eligible for an extension of up to 120 days, subject to agency approval, or longer with OPM approval.

What types of organizations can host a developmental assignment?

Developmental assignments need not be restricted to the candidate's agency, the Executive Branch, or the Federal Government, so long as the assignment can be accomplished in compliance with applicable law and Federal and agency-specific ethics regulations, including the provisions of 5 U.S.C. chapter 41 governing training.

If 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 that the assignment will contribute to development of the candidate's executive qualifications.

What level of responsibility must the developmental assignment include?

The assignment must include executive-level responsibility and must differ from the candidate's current and past assignments in ways that broaden their experience and challenge them with respect to leadership competencies and the ECQs. The candidate is held accountable for organizational or agency results achieved during the assignment. The assignment must be substantially different from the candidate's position of record.

How should agencies handle a situation where a developmental assignment host organization is unable to continue hosting a candidate before the 180 days are completed?

Agencies encountering this situation should immediately consult with their ERB and contact OPM at SESDevelopment@opm.gov. Document all circumstances thoroughly to support any determination about whether the developmental objective was substantially met or whether additional time is needed.

Topic 8: Mentoring and Coaching

What are the minimum mentoring requirements under the final rule?

Each SESCDP participant must have 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 SESCDP. The mentor and candidate are jointly responsible for a productive mentoring relationship and are required to meet for a minimum of 10 hours during the course of the program.

What are the minimum coaching requirements under the final rule, and what qualifications must a coach hold?

Each SESCDP participant must have a leadership or executive-level coach. The coach and candidate are jointly responsible for a productive coaching relationship and are required to meet for a minimum of 10 hours during the course of the program.

The final rule adds a qualification requirement: coaches must either be certified by an accredited coaching organization or have completed formal, accredited training. This requirement ensures coaches have the skills necessary to appropriately support candidates. The final rule also clarifies that a coach's role is to support candidates in developing their own solutions, rather than to advise them directly.

Can agencies use internal Federal coaches to satisfy the coaching requirement?

Yes. Agencies may utilize Federal coaches — for example, graduates of the Federal Internal Coaching Training Program (FICTP) — who are certified in providing coaching services. Agencies that do not have internal coaching programs can partner with OPM to identify and utilize Federal coaches through the Federal Coaching Network (FCN). Leveraging internal coaching resources can significantly reduce the cost of meeting the coaching requirement.

Can a candidate's mentor also serve as their coach?

No. The final rule treats mentoring and coaching as distinct program elements with separate minimum hour requirements and distinct roles. A mentor advises the candidate based on their own experience and career knowledge, while a coach supports the candidate in developing their own solutions.

An individual who meets the qualifications for both roles may serve as a coach for one candidate and as a mentor for a different candidate, provided all regulatory requirements are met. However, the same individual may not serve simultaneously as both the mentor and the coach for the same candidate.

Agencies are encouraged to consult with OPM at SESDevelopment@opm.gov if they have questions about specific arrangements.

Topic 9: Program Evaluation and Re-Approval

What evaluation requirements apply to SESCDPs under the final rule?

Agencies must complete and maintain program evaluations on an ongoing basis to collect data for the purpose of identifying and implementing program enhancements or alternative approaches to program administration. Agencies must use OPM-developed evaluation templates. Evaluations are required:

- Upon completion of each individual SESCDP cohort (cohort-level evaluation); and
- Annually for the overarching SESCDP program.

What must be included in an agency's re-approval submission to OPM?

To seek OPM re-approval of an SESCDP policy, an agency must submit its current program policy and the completed overarching program evaluation template covering the prior three-year period. The evaluation must include initial SES placement rates for graduates who received QRB certification and must demonstrate that the agency maintains a minimum placement rate as specified by OPM policy and guidance.

Are cohort-level evaluation forms required as part of the re-approval submission?

Individual cohort evaluation templates are not required for re-approval. However, agencies must complete and maintain cohort evaluations following each cohort, and OPM reserves the right to request those templates for any cohort during the current approval period. Agencies should treat cohort-level evaluation data as an ongoing program management tool, not solely a re-approval requirement.

What is the minimum SES placement rate agencies must maintain?

The specific placement rate (40%) referenced in prior OPM guidance ([Hiring and Talent Development for the Senior Executive Service memorandum – May 29, 2025](#)) has been removed. The final rule establishes that agencies must maintain a minimum placement rate as specified by OPM policy and guidance, rather than codifying a specific percentage in regulation. OPM will collect placement data following new cohorts to establish a baseline and then use that data to set a new benchmark goal. Once established, OPM will communicate the applicable benchmark through updated or new guidance. Agencies should monitor OPM communications for further direction.

For additional questions, please contact OPM's Leadership, Performance, and Accountability team at SESDevelopment@opm.gov.