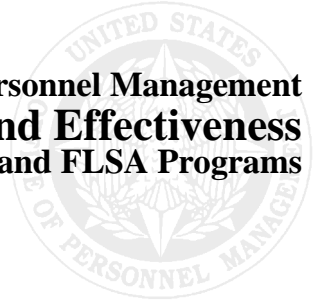


**U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs**



**Chicago Oversight Division
230 South Dearborn Street, DPN 30-6
Chicago, IL 60604**

**Classification Appeal Decision
Under Section 5112 of Title 5, United States Code**

Appellant:	[Appellant]
Representative:	[Representative]
Agency classification:	Medical Administrative Assistant GS-303-7
Organization:	Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center Medical Administration Service [City, State]
OPM decision:	GS-303-7 Title at agency discretion
OPM decision number:	C-0303-07-01

/s/

Frederick J.

Boland
Classification Appeals Officer

10/30/97

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:

[name and address of appellant's
representative]

[name and address of appellant's servicing
personnel office]

Mr. Ronald E. Cowles
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Personnel
and Labor Relations (05)
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

INFORMATION CONSIDERED

- ▶ Appellant's letter of appeal, dated December 23, 1996.
- ▶ Agency letters dated January 13 and February 24, 1997, and their enclosures.
- ▶ Copy of the official description of the appellant's position, number 438-3356-A.
- ▶ Copy of the classifier's evaluation statement.
- ▶ Copy of the official description of the appellant's supervisor's position.
- ▶ Copy of the appellant's performance standards.
- ▶ Copy of the organization chart and statement of functions for the Medical Service.
- ▶ Telephone discussion of duties with the appellant on June 3, 1997.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

- ▶ OPM series definition for Miscellaneous Clerk and Assistant Series, GS-303, dated January 1979.
- ▶ OPM Grade Level Guide for Clerical and Assistance Work, dated June 1989.

INTRODUCTION

The appellant contests his agency's decision in classifying his position. The appellant is assigned to position number 438-3356-A, classified as Medical Administrative Assistant, GS-303-7. He believes his agency misassigned his work to an assistant occupation and did not provide sufficient credit considering the knowledge he brings to the job, the independence with which he works, the officials he advises, and other factors important to determining grade level. These issues are analyzed under the Series and Title Determination and Grade Determination sections of this decision.

The appellant also believes that his position is similar to a higher graded prototype position referenced in VHA Directive 10-93-097 and Personnel Circular Letter No. 05-93-9. The circular suggests, but does not mandate, possible ways medical centers may organize work. The prototype description is one way of organizing work in an area related to the appellant's work. The appellant's work is not compared to prototype descriptions or other positions since such comparisons are not legitimate classification methods. OPM is required by law to classify positions on the basis of their duties, responsibilities, and qualification requirements by comparison to the criteria specified in the appropriate classification standard or guide. Other methods of evaluation are not permitted.

Agencies are, however, required to apply classification standards and OPM decisions consistently to ensure equal pay for equal work. OPM will require an agency to conduct a consistency review upon showing that specifically identified positions at different grades have identical duties. Accordingly, our letter transmitting this decision to the agency advises that it respond to this issue, should the appellant specifically identify a similar position.

JOB INFORMATION

The appellant is one of about five Medical Administrative Assistants who report to the GS-301-13 Program Specialist for Outpatient Services. The appellant provides a range of medical administrative support services in order to ensure that procedural, regulatory, and administrative requirements are met as they relate to the care, treatment, and handling of patients. His duties include processing admissions of patients; determining applicant eligibility for benefits and services; responding to telephone inquiries regarding services and other administrative matters; coordinating with the Medical Officer of the Day (MOD) to resolve patient or family complaints; coordinating patient transfers to and from the Medical Center; advising the MOD on administrative matters; processing requirements resulting from patient deaths or elopements (unauthorized absences); responding to incidents that require immediate action, e.g., fires or other emergencies, maintenance or repair problems regarding facilities, utilities, equipment, or systems, and missing patients; and performing various other duties such as completing daily report logs and entering daily gains and losses into a computer.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

SERIES AND TITLE DETERMINATION

The appellant feels his position should be classified in the Miscellaneous Administration and Program Series, GS-301, because he believes his work requires analytical ability, judgment, discretion, and knowledge of general principles of management. To support his case, he cites sections of his position description, indicating, among other things, that he may be asked to oversee the Ambulatory Care and Processing Section, that he must have overall knowledge of the Medical Administrative Service, complete knowledge of all legal and regulatory directives, that he must exercise judgment in providing administrative and legal advice, etc.

Acting, temporary, and other responsibilities that are not regular and continuing are not considered in classifying positions. Our factfinding found some of the position description wording inadvertently conveys a sense of greater authority and responsibility than warranted. For example, the appellant does not provide legal advice to hospital staff, as this is a function belonging to the Medical Center's Counsel and a duty for which the appellant lacks the necessary education and credentials. What the appellant provides is advice on administrative procedures and requirements, many of which are based on law or regulation, based upon his practical knowledge and ample experience in such day to day matters. With this in mind, other wording in the position description, (e.g., indicating that he serves as the principal representative of the Center Director and coordinator of all personal, telephonic, and telegraphic contacts, that he provides assistance to the public in all phases of hospital policies, that he releases information to news media concerning treatment of patients and administrative functions, etc.) may be placed in proper perspective.

The Miscellaneous Administration and Program Series, GS-301, includes Specialists who perform, supervise, or manage two-grade interval work for which no other series is appropriate. Specialist work requires analytical ability, judgment, discretion, and knowledge of a substantial body of administrative or program principles, concepts, policies, and objectives. Although two-grade interval administrative work does not require specialized education, it does require the type of skills

(analytical, research, writing, judgment) typically gained through a college education, or through progressively responsible equivalent experience. Administrative work entails analyzing, evaluating, modifying, and developing the basic programs, policies, and procedures that facilitate the work of Federal agencies and their programs. Specialists apply a knowledge of administrative analysis, theory, and principles in adapting practices to the unique requirements of a particular program.

Two-grade interval administrative work primarily requires a high degree of analytical ability combined with a comprehensive knowledge of: (1) the functions, processes, theories and principles of management; and, (2) the methods used to gather, analyze, and evaluate information. Administrative work often involves: (1) planning for and developing systems, functions, and services; (2) formulating, developing, recommending, and establishing policies, operating methods, or procedures; and, (3) adapting established policy to the unique requirements of a particular program.

In contrast, one-grade interval Assistants carry out work based on the application of established methods and procedures. While they may occasionally develop work plans or recommend new procedures, these typically relate to the function in which they work. The work is performed based on a practical knowledge of the purpose, operation, procedures, techniques and guidelines of the specific program or functional requirement. Assistants typically learn their work on the job and also may attend specific training courses related to their work.

The appellant's primary responsibility is to apply established policies, procedures, and practices to resolve a wide range of recurring administrative issues and problems. His work does not require knowledge of general principles of management, inherent in two-grade interval administrative work, but rather knowledge of an extensive body of rules, procedures, and operations that govern the Medical Center's daily operation.

In performing most of his major duties, the appellant follows detailed (usually written) procedures that require program knowledge and practical experience to apply, but do not require the application of management or administrative theory. Program knowledge and practical experience govern his decisions and written procedures provide guidance in the areas of admissions, determination of legal eligibility for medical care, providing patient transportation, protection of patients' clothing and valuables, providing emergency services to veterans, etc.

Although his position description states that he participates in the systematic review of Medical Administrative Service (MAS) programs and conducts studies to determine compliance with directives, they are of predetermined scope and not of the depth and breadth typically assigned to two-grade interval Specialists, e.g., studies of a Medical Center's systems, procedures, program effectiveness, or organizational structure that require knowledge of management theory and involve assessment of unusual circumstances, variations in approach, incomplete or conflicting data, interpretation of considerable data, etc.

Accordingly, the appellant's position is properly classified to a one-grade interval line of work, rather than to the GS-301 series. His work consists of a variety of intermingled administrative and technical support functions, ranging from advising on patient eligibility to implementing emergency plan procedures. Specialized program knowledge is required in each of these functional areas, but none of them predominates the others. Because there is no single series specifically covering the work that

the appellant performs, it is classified to the Miscellaneous Clerk and Assistant Series, GS-303. The GS-303 series covers one-grade interval work not classifiable elsewhere. It includes positions like the appellant's where the duties are to perform technician, assistant, or clerical work requiring knowledge of the procedures and techniques involved in carrying out the work of an organization within the framework of established guidelines.

The GS-303 series does not prescribe any titles, hence the agency may assign a title consistent with the instructions appearing in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, Section III, H, 2.

GRADE DETERMINATION

Positions classified to the GS-303 series are graded by application of the Grade Level Guide for Clerical and Assistance Work, unless another one-grade interval guide or standard contains more appropriate grade level criteria for evaluating the work. Because of the mixed nature of the appellant's work, we find that the position is best evaluated by the Guide.

The Guide describes evaluation criteria in terms of two narrative factors, Nature of Assignment and Level of Responsibility. These two factors are placed in context with the definition of the grade level as spelled out in law and with illustrative work examples at each grade. The highest level of work described in the Guide is GS-7. For a position to be considered above the GS-7 grade level, the work must clearly and significantly exceed the GS-7 grade level nature of assignments and level of responsibility.

NATURE OF ASSIGNMENT

This factor addresses the knowledge requirements and the complexity of the work.

The appellant's work exceeds the GS-6 level where Assistants perform a segment of the evaluative work of an administrative function and identify issues or problems in order to seek alternative solutions consistent with applicable regulations. In contrast, the appellant has the responsibility for the entire administrative support program within the Medical Center during irregular duty hours in all areas of beneficiary administrative support and facility support. The appellant is expected to not only identify but also to resolve problems and issues that arise in these functional areas. Thus, the position exceeds the level of work characteristic of the GS-6 grade level.

Work characteristic of the GS-7 grade level consists of specialized duties with continuing responsibility for projects, questions, or problems that arise within an area of program or functional specialty. Assignments consist of a series of related actions or decisions prior to final completion, and the decisions or recommendations are based on the development and evaluation of information from various sources. The work involves identifying and studying factors or conditions and determining their interrelationships as appropriate to the defined area of work. The work requires knowledge and skill to recognize the dimensions of the problems involved, collect the necessary information, establish the facts, and take or recommend action based upon application or interpretation of established guidelines. It requires practical knowledge, learned through on-the-job

training and experience, to deal with the operations, regulations, principles, and peculiarities of the assigned program, function, or activity.

The appellant's work compares favorably with work typical of the GS-7 grade level. He has continuing responsibility during irregular tours, which occupies the preponderant amount of work time, to provide guidance, advice, and solutions regarding nonstandard procedural assignments and a wide range of related problems. The appellant advises the MOD on administrative matters such as the eligibility of potential clients for admission and services, the propriety of such actions as involuntary commitments, and the documentation requirements associated with these actions. He ensures that appropriate procedures are followed when a patient is missing, such as initial search and extensive search. He handles incidents such as unruly or severely disturbed patients, and calls in appropriate support as necessary, e.g. police or medical support, and ensures that appropriate notifications and documentation are made. He handles a variety of facility maintenance problems and emergencies by putting emergency plans in motion and determining whether the circumstances of an emergency warrant the authorization of overtime to permit repair during nonadministrative duty hours. As at the GS-7 level, the appellant makes decisions and takes action based on his evaluation of each specific situation, considering factual information that he must seek out and obtain from appropriate personnel, and complying with established VA and Medical Center policies, procedures, and practices for handling these matters.

He develops or obtains all necessary information to provide definitive action on transferring of patients, handling of Category C patients, eligibility of veterans for travel expenses, dealing with the administrative aspects of patient elopements, and contending with unruly or severely disturbed patients. These duties reflect application of GS-7 grade level practical knowledge of medical administrative service program management and related program policies, practices, and procedures. The range and variety of his support duties, the problems he encounters, and his decisions and recommendations are typical of GS-7 grade level assignments described in the guide for Administrative Support Assistant. At the GS-7 level, he is already credited with the performance of work of considerable difficulty and responsibility along special technical lines and requiring comprehensive working knowledge of a special and complex subject matter, procedures, or practice.

The nature of the appellant's work meets, but does not exceed, the GS-7 grade level criteria of the Guide. Therefore, we credit this factor at the GS-7 grade level.

LEVEL OF RESPONSIBILITY

This factor addresses aspects of the work such as supervisory controls, guidelines, and contacts.

The appellant indicates that he performs virtually all duties independently during irregular working hours and exercises considerable judgment in gathering information. He cites his position description, which indicates that he serves as the principal representative of the Center Director; that he works from general guidelines; that he exercises considerable judgment; that he must alter or develop new procedures; that he advises professionals (e.g., doctors and nurses); etc. He also stresses that during a shift, there may be no higher level personnel present to whom difficult or complex issues may be

referred and that no supervisor may be available by phone. He further indicates that he has not found it necessary to call his supervisor for advice or assistance in the past two years.

At the GS-6 level, the supervisor assists with assignments by providing an interpretation of policy or the concepts and theories of the work. Completed work is evaluated for appropriateness and effectiveness. Assistants work under a framework of numerous and varied guidelines, but these are often not completely applicable to the assignment or have gaps in specificity. Assistants use judgment in interpreting and adapting guidelines and base decisions and recommendations on facts and conventional interpretations of guidelines rather than on theory or opinion. Contacts with others are to provide, receive, or develop information in order to identify problems, needs, or issues, and/or to coordinate work efforts or resolve problems.

In contrast, at the GS-7 grade level the supervisor makes assignments by defining objectives, priorities, and deadlines. Assistants work independently, using a general understanding of the expected outcomes and the scope of the assignments, and draw upon experience in resolving the more difficult situations that arise. Completed work is evaluated for appropriateness and conformance to policy. Guides, such as regulations, policy statements, and precedent cases, tend to be descriptive of intent, but do not specifically cover all aspects of the assignment. Guidelines apply less to specific actions and more to the operational characteristics and procedural requirements of the program or function. While personal contacts for GS-7 Assistants are often the same as those for the GS-6, the GS-7 Assistants serve as a central point of contact to provide authoritative explanations of requirements, regulations, and procedures, and to resolve operational problems or disagreements affecting assigned areas.

The appellant works with fewer constraints than is typical of the GS-6 grade level. As in the GS-7 grade level illustration, he performs his day-to-day work independently, resolving most conflicts that arise. The appellant indicates that he generally makes decisions and takes actions, and informs his supervisor after the fact. Only unusual situations lacking clear precedents are referred for higher level decision. The appellant is authorized to act on his own initiative within previously defined parameters to resolve administrative problems. As at the GS-7 level, he uses judgment to select the correct part of the most appropriate guideline to apply to each of a large variety of actions, such as advising on emergency admission or detention procedures, advising patients as to their potential financial obligations, or authorizing off-station patient transportation.

As at the GS-7 grade level, his work is governed by numerous guidelines such as VA and Medical Center regulations, directives, and policies. When there are gaps in specificity in the guidelines or when the guidelines do not apply to the assignment, the appellant makes decisions or recommendations based on practical experience and his judgment of the facts, e.g., concerning patient control and treatment issues requiring immediate action. His work also compares favorably to the GS-7 grade level in that the contacts are with Medical Center staff at all levels, patients and their families, and officials outside of the VA, e.g., law enforcement personnel. (While his external contacts are broader than described in the Guide, the purpose of the contacts is similar and is appropriately credited at this level.) The appellant is considered to be a source of authoritative information regarding administrative procedure. He provides information and advice regarding administrative procedures to the professional staff during his tour of duty. His contention that he

needs to make decisions and resolve problems without immediate supervisory assistance is acknowledged by the Guide ("independently completes assignments in accordance with accepted practices, resolving most conflicts that arise") and appropriately credited at this level.

The level of the appellant's responsibility meets, but does not exceed, the GS-7 grade level criteria of the Guide. Therefore, we credit this factor at the GS-7 grade level.

DECISION

The appellant's work equates to the GS-7 grade level in both Nature of the Work and Level of Responsibility. Consequently, the proper classification of the appellant's position is GS-303-7, with the title according to agency discretion.