

Why Accept a VA Detail or Short-Term Assignment? Benefits to Employees and the Service

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In the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), there are frequent e-mails and requests for employees to accept a detail or short-term assignment across a wide range of positions from administrative to executive leadership. These opportunities afford an employee and the service line valuable benefits and growth opportunities; however, there are reasons why some may be reluctant to pursue these opportunities. In this article, we discuss the barriers to applying for and accepting detail positions and the benefits for the employee and the service lines during periods of standard operations as well as during emergencies requiring alternative staffing strategies.

Details are short-term assignments used to fill a vacant position while hiring for the permanent position or to fill a short-term need (eg, during a pandemic). Details usually last 30 to 120 days, though they may be extended, depending on the position, the number of people willing to serve in the detailed role, and the time to select a candidate for the permanent position. Details can be created for any skill level or type of position to meet an identified need, but they are most often needed for supervisory or leadership roles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the importance of individuals' flexibility and adaptability both within and between roles. Many US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities stood up Incident Command structures to support the changes required to adapt to the needs created by the pandemic. Establishing an Incident Command means that people within the organization must take on new responsibilities, and in many cases, they are detailed to new positions that were not needed or prioritized before the pandemic.

BARRIERS

An employee may be reluctant to apply for or accept a detail because he or she has little to no experience; feels uncomfortable stepping into an unfamiliar role; is concerned about making a leap from a clinical to administrative role; has uncertainty whether the job is a good professional fit; dislikes the lack of a pay increase during the detail period even if the new role has more responsibility; and has concern that serving in the detail may make them ineligible to apply for the permanent position due to a perception of being preselected. Additionally, the employee may recognize the added stress on colleagues because the same amount of work must be completed.

BENEFITS

Although leaving a position for a period of months can be stressful, serving in a detail position provides significant opportunities for professional growth. An employee can gain knowledge and experience in an unfamiliar role before applying for or committing to a permanent position. Those serving in temporary details are often given more support as colleagues and supervisors understand that the role was accepted on short notice with little time to prepare. Other benefits include expanding professional contacts, gaining perspective on a different part of the VHA, and working on skills, such as flexibility, time management, and perseverance. By succeeding in a detail, employees build professional acumen. After taking on additional challenges they become more competitive for future jobs. The VHA Executive Candidate Development Program requires a 120-day detail, serving as either assistant or associate director, chief of staff, or associate director for patient care services/nurse executive as part of the program.¹

Temporarily leaving a service line to detail in a different service line has an impact on the home service because of the restrictions imposed. These restrictions guarantee that the employee can return to the original position at the end of a detail, thus providing a sense of job security; however, the home service line is down an employee.

Given these considerations, the following are key points to establish before undertaking the detail: (1) length of assignment; (2) once started, potential for the assignment to be extended; (3) will the employee be doing any of their prior job or just the new job or a blend of both; (4) possible changes in hours and site of work of the employee; (5) who will supervise the employee; (6) who will write the employee's review; (7) training or skills needed prior to starting; (8) necessary paperwork; (9) how will the new assignment be communicated to others; (10) what happens if the detail ends sooner than planned; and (11) approval and support of all involved parties.

The employee's home service may need a temporary plan to cover the employee's workload, especially if the employee will be detailed to a different service line. The temporary plan may require creativity and flexibility and can be a way to trial the contingency plans for staffing the home service. One benefit to the home service is that the employee will have additional skills on re-

turning that may benefit the home service, and the service will gain a potential leader.

When an employee goes to a different service, that service gains an employee who may bring a new perspective to help solve existing conflicts or problems. This can serve as a time to reset expectations or set new goals prior to the arrival of new leadership. If the detail is a good fit, then there is the chance that the employee may return in the future or refer others to it as a professional opportunity.

CONCLUSIONS

A detail can benefit the employee and the home and host services if planned in advance, and all parties support the process. A short-term leadership or administrative assignment can help an employee gain valuable experience for the future.

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