



TO: Area Directors  
Associate Directors  
Regional Personnel Officers  
Area Personnel Officers

FROM: DHR Director

SUBJECT: Supervisor's Guide for Conducting Reference Checks

This is to remind you of the real need for selecting officials to conduct reference checks before making employment selections. There is so much emphasis on filling vacancies quickly that reference checks are often overlooked. However, conducting reference checks of prior performance, conduct and suitability is crucial if we are to attain a high level of employee performance throughout the IHS. Screening out questionable applicants is a more effective approach to hiring quality personnel than the prolonged procedure of dealing with an unsatisfactory employee.

In the past, there has been some confusion about who was responsible for conducting reference checks- the selecting official or the servicing personnel office. (SPO) staff. Sometimes this confusion resulted in no reference checks being conducted. Since reference checks are part of the selection process, it is HIS policy that selecting officials (not the SPO) are responsible for conducting reference checks.

Therefore, the attached Supervisors' Guide for Conducting Reference Checks has been developed to assist selecting officials in accomplishing this task. The Guide also contains some sample questions for use in conducting reference checks. This Guide is to be included in IHS supervisory training courses.

I expect all supervisors to implement this Guide immediately and its usage is mandatory. IHS supervisors are encouraged to provide full and accurate information when contacted by selecting officials conducting reference checks.

If there are any questions, please consult your Servicing Personnel Office.

I. Policy

The Indian Health Service (IHS) has a policy of selecting and employing only those persons whose performance, conduct and suitability will promote the efficiency of the IHS. In order to comply with this policy, employment selection or job commitment is made.

II. Coverage

This policy applies to all civil service applicants and employees (both current Federal employees and outside applicants) and PHS Commissioned Corps personnel who file for a position with IHS. It covers filling a position in any manner, e.g., by promotion,

reassignment, transfer, change to lower grade, new hire, etc. Nothing in this policy will be construed to violate the provisions of Indian Preferences.

### III. Responsibilities

#### A. Servicing Personnel Offices (SPOs) :

1. When the SPO issues a candidate referral roster to the selecting official, the SPO will include a copy of this Guide. The SPO will annotate the roster with the following reminder notice: "Selecting officials are responsible for conducting reference checks. Reference checks must be conducted on the tentative selectee." This statement will be inserted at the top of the first page of the candidate referral roster.

In the remarks column of the candidate referral roster, the SPO will insert the following statement: "This is to certify that I conducted reference checks on the selectee." This statement will be signed by the selecting official.

2. The SPO staff is available to advise the selecting official on the handling of any adverse or suitability information developed during the reference checks in accordance with the IHS Suitability Policy and Procedures.

#### B. Selecting Officials:

1. After receiving the candidate referral roster from the SPO, the selecting official will review the candidates' job applications and related papers and decide whether to conduct reference checks on several candidates or only on the tentative selectee. Reference checks must be conducted on the tentative selectee.
2. Before starting the reference checks, the selecting official must look at the candidate's response to question #23 on the SF-171, Application for Federal Employment.: "May we ask your present employer about your character, qualifications and work record?"

In cases where a candidate gives a "No" response to question #23, the selecting official should contact the applicant to determine why the present employer should not be contacted. If a satisfactory/ plausible answer is given (i.e., the supervisor is not aware of the candidate's seeking of another position), the candidate should supply alternative reference sources.

However, at some point before final selection, the candidate should allow the selecting official to contact the current employer for a reference check. A selecting official should be cautious about hiring a candidate who refuses such contact with the current employer. As a potential new employer, the selecting official has the right to make an employment selection based on an evaluation of information both collected and withheld.

3. A special situation is the screening of PHS Commissioned Corps personnel occurs when a person is already enrolled in the corps applies for a new position. A member of the corps need only submit a resume and write a letter indicating an interest in this position. This can present difficulty in accessing corps members' background data. After consulting the officer's supervisor, it may also be helpful to consult the resources of the PHS Commissioned Corps Recruitment Office to obtain their assistance in gathering and assessing the information about the candidate's background.
4. The Selecting official will decide who to contact for references. The most likely reference sources are the current and former supervisors of the candidate, some co-workers and possibly the personal references listed on the candidate's application.
5. The selecting official will determine the appropriate questions to ask. This will be based on consideration of the information already available and the job requirements of the position to be filled. A list of sample questions is attached. Any of the sample questions may be omitted if it is clear that the question does not apply to the specific situation. Additional questions may be included depending on the situation for position.
6. The selecting official will decide how to conduct the reference checks and the methods to be used. Typically, it will be by telephone contact. (NOTE: Telephone contacts are faster and better than letters for obtaining references because people are much more likely to verbalize negative comments than to commit them to writing. To avoid litigation, some employers will only confirm what former employees have asserted in job applications).
7. The selecting official should note the candidate's answers to questions #38 through 45 on the SF-171 application concerning being fired, felony violations, firearms or explosives violations, other violations of law, probation or parole, court martial convictions, and Federal debt delinquencies. If there is a "yes" answer to any of these questions, the Servicing Personnel Office should be consulted to help resolve the suitability issue.
8. The selecting official may designate someone else (such as the recommending official) to assist in conducting the reference checks. However, the selecting official is responsible for assuring that reference checks are conducted. In signing the candidate selection roster, the selecting official also certifies that reference checks were conducted on the selectee.

#### IV. Interpretation of Reference Check Information

Reference check information must be carefully interpreted. The value of checks with current employers and associates can be maximized by listening closely and being alert for information that warrants clarification.

A discernible lack of enthusiasm on the part of the current employer in talking about a candidate may indicate a reluctance to be candid about the candidate's problems or substandard performance. When such reluctance cannot be overcome, selecting officials should contact previous employers who may have other perspectives on the candidate's work or character, and who may be more willing to talk about problem areas. On the other hand, the current employer may not be the best source of information if he/she is attempting to encourage the move of an unwanted employee.

#### V. Release of Information

Information collected through reference checks is considered to be the selecting official's memory jogger notes and must not be disclosed to any other persons not involved in the selection decision. These notes must remain under the control of the selecting official when he/she determines they have served their purpose. These notes must be retained for sufficient time to assure that any potential complaints regarding the selection are resolved.

At the end of the SF 171 application, there is a release of information clause which the candidate has to sign. This is the basis for collecting additional information about the candidate.

SAMPLE REFERENCE CHECK QUESTIONS

Candidate's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Contacted \_\_\_\_\_

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Association with candidate: \_\_\_\_\_ Current Supervisor  
\_\_\_\_\_ Previous Supervisor  
\_\_\_\_\_ Co-worker  
\_\_\_\_\_ Friend  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other

Dates of association: From \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.

Questions

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how would you rate the candidate's quality of work?
2. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how would you rate the candidate's quality of work?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how would you rate the candidate's dependability in carrying out assignments on a timely basis?
4. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how would you rate the candidate's ability to organize and prioritize the work and meet deadlines?
5. How regular is the candidate's attendance at work?
6. Are there any tardiness problems?

7. How would you rate the candidate's writing and communication skills
8. How well does the candidate work with others, especially with supervisors, co-workers, serviced clients and patients?
9. Please describe the candidate's personal attributes (e.g. honesty, trustworthiness and overall character)?
10. Has the candidate ever behaved in such a manner as to bring discredit to the organization? (If yes, explain).
11. Does the candidate have any habits which may adversely affect work performance or reliability?
12. Has the candidate's license, certification or registration ever been suspended/restricted? (If yes, explain). NOTE: This question is for positions requiring licensure such as physician, nurse, social worker.
13. (NOTE: This question is for supervisory positions).  
Does the candidate have the ability or potential to:
  - a. Make decisions?
  - b. Delegate responsibility?
  - c. Motivate subordinates?
  - d. Enforce Rules and regulations?
  - e. Establish performance requirements?

- f. Evaluate subordinates' performance?
- g. Provide program direction and leadership?
- h. Plan, organize and monitor work?
- i. Adapt to changing priorities and workloads?

14. Has the candidate ever been suspected, accused or convicted of any kind of patient abuse (i.e., sexual abuse, assault, verbal/emotional abuse, sexual harassment, intimidation, belittlement)?

Note: Whenever patient abuse suspicions or allegations are raised in the reference checks, the selecting official must conduct further inquiry before making a final selection decision.

15. In summary, what are the candidate's strong points?

16. In summary, what are the candidate's weak points?

17. Why did the candidate leave your job? Or want to leave?

18. If you had the opportunity, would you re-hire the candidate?

19. Is there anything else you would care to add about the candidate?