



DENTAL CATEGORY

OF THE UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

USPHS Dental Category

White Paper

2010 DePAC Mentoring Workgroup

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The purpose of the Dental Professional Advisory Committee (DePAC) Commissioned Corps Mentoring Workgroup is to provide a mechanism for transferring the accumulated career knowledge and experience of senior officer mentors to junior officer protégées. The DePAC Mentoring Workgroup serves as a valuable resource for Junior Officers entering United States Public Health Service. As junior officers face numerous decisions along their career paths, mentors can serve as a resource to provide useful information regarding promotions, basic readiness, CV content and format, and other topics involving career progression. This one-on-one relationship provides mentors with the ability to positively assist junior dental officers with advancing their dental careers.

Tasks and Structure

During the past 18 months, the current leadership of the Mentoring Workgroup has directed the group in recruitment of mentors, identifying new protégés, assigning protégés to mentors, and monitoring the mentoring program. Additionally, adjustments to protégé and mentor assignments were made when necessary.

A Workgroup of eight officers representing five Operating Divisions has guided the work. Up to now, the Chairperson(s) have carried out the bulk of the work working as the coordinators of the mentoring program. Five conference calls have been conducted to consult on strategic issues to guide our actions. Email communications have been used by the Chairpersons to update the Workgroup on its activities and to assign tasks.

Accomplishments

Recruitment, matching, and documentation/tracking

- When the current leadership assumed its responsibilities in 2009, it did not appear that a formal process to identify new call to active duty officers and pair them with mentors had been established. For example, there was no record of who the new officers were in 2008.
- Accordingly, as a first step, the Chairpersons sought the names and contact information of all new officers who entered the Corps starting in 2008 and then paired them with mentors. A system was created in collaboration with the Chair of DePAC where every month the Chairpersons of the Workgroup receive the names and telephone numbers of the new officers from the Chair of DePAC. Chairpersons then searched and found the email addresses of the new officers for follow up contact. Upon contacting the 2008 cohort it was confirmed that none of the officers were involved in a mentoring relationship coordinated by the Workgroup.
- As a parallel step, the Workgroup members identified names of senior officers with minimum of 8 years of Commissioned Corps service who could serve as mentors. At the time, there were relatively few officers available as mentors and the list lacked diversity with respect to agency representation. Later on, the Workgroup submitted an email announcement soliciting mentor volunteers that proved productive in getting new mentors.
- To summarize our recruiting and matching efforts,
 - Before 2009, there were 29 available mentors
Currently, there are 67 available mentors
 - Before 2009, there was no record of new call to active duty dental officers being recruited and matched with a mentor

- Currently, 38 new dental officers have been recruited and all of them paired with mentors
- Of the 38 protégés participating in mentoring program, 18 were from 2008, 17 from 2009 and 3 for 2010.

Monitoring

- The Workgroup has identified the need to monitor the mentoring program to determine the effectiveness of the program and promote changes that will lead to better outcomes. Accordingly, a questionnaire was developed and implemented last summer to gauge program effectiveness. The questionnaire was sent to mentors and protégés who had been paired for a minimum of three months. All Workgroup members participated in sending and following up with the questionnaire. In addition to the written questionnaire, the Chairperson(s) maintains “an open door policy,” inviting input on the program on an ongoing basis as well as occasionally contacting officers to see how things are progressing.

This monitoring effort yielded valuable information about the mentoring program. Table 1 gives a breakdown of responses by the year.

Table 1: Responses from Questionnaire

Year	# of pairs	# of pairs responding	Response percentage
2008	18	9/18	50%
2009	17	15/17	88%
2010	3	3/3	100%

Where mentor and protégé have established contact and are in touch with regularity, the mentoring program has seen many benefits. Both mentors and protégés have described the mentoring experience as “positive” and “helpful,” where protégés are “gaining valuable understanding through their mentor’s experiences and knowledge.” The questionnaire was a catalyst for some mentors and protégés to establish contact. As result of the questionnaire and informal follow ups, reassignments have been made for a better fit.

Mentoring Programs in Other Categories

In an effort to see how our mentoring program can improve, the Mentoring Workgroup in one of its conference calls saw the value of learning about mentoring program in other categories. Accordingly, we decided to approach three categories: Nurses, Pharmacists and Therapists. Workgroup members followed up with each category. The following table shows a summary of major mentoring program features of three categories:

Table 2: Major Mentoring Program Features of Three Categories

Agencies	Program Features
Nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a dental representative at Officer Basic Course to hand out a welcoming letter and answers questions • Assign new officer to a mentor for a 6 month period of time • Mentors have a check list that follow and fill in • IT person who captures the information
Pharmacist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0-4 and above with five year of experience can serve as mentors • Mentorship for one year • Expectation: devote at least two hours per month contact • Mentor coordinator who coordinates the program, keeping the committee informed • Letter of appreciation for those who completed the program • Program monitored by telephone contact at 3, 6 and 12 months by the coordinator • One major factor for matching: geographic proximity
Therapist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor agreement: measurable, e.g. contact within two weeks, minimum of two times per month (contact mentors who volunteering to put something on paper, not taking to heart) • Mentor training: website • Mentoring coordinator, has no workgroup • 6 month commitment • Letter of thanks will be issued to mentor once evaluation form is received from mentee (some mentee have said they have not heard from mentor)

Reflections on the mentoring program

The monitoring questionnaire in conjunction with informal follow-ups with protégés and mentors has generated the following thoughts on the mentoring program.

- The Workgroup has found that making new officers aware of the program and inviting them to participate early on is an important element in establishing effective mentor-protégé pairings. Such an approach has revealed that some officers are not receptive to the mentoring program and that we should not assume that all incoming officers want to be paired with a mentor. These two insights have influenced the approach of the Workgroup over the last six months, shifting away from the earlier practice that automatically paired new incoming officers with mentors, without determining if the new officers are interested in the first place.
- The above approach has also shed light on why some officers are not interested in the program. For example, some of the new officers who enter the Corps come with years of experience, this being especially true for the officers who have years of military experience. These officers feel “grounded” and do not see the need for periodic conversations coordinated by the Workgroup. For other new officers, they are in sites that already have officers, who are viewed as accessible.
- Because some officers are already in an informal mentoring relationship—be it at a local site or at a distance — the Workgroup has begun to ask incoming officers if they are already receiving such

mentorship and, if yes, if they would like the Workgroup to recognize it as formal mentoring. In such cases, the Workgroup offers to follow-up periodically with the protégé and mentor and send them the monitoring questionnaire.

- The pairing of mentor and protégé should be done very early on. We have learned that there is a greater success in mentoring when protégés are assigned soon after being commissioned.
- In thinking about how to foster a better protégé-mentor relationship, a few considerations have emerged. Distance has been repeatedly mentioned as a factor which should be considered in pairing officers with mentors. Another important factor has been the perseverance of mentors in establishing contact with the protégés; this has distinguished the relationships of some of the pairs. We have seen examples of mentors who have reached out to protégés on multiple times, initially without success, but who did not give up if they did not receive a response to emails or telephone calls.
- Mentoring should be for a one year commitment. Currently, the guidelines state six months; now it is clear that this is an insufficient time for participants to establish rapport and build a relationship. We will encourage mentoring on an informal basis after the one year commitment ends.
- Currently, there are no measurable expectations on how regular the protégé and mentor contact should be. Such an expectation can help to foster a stronger relationship.
- Mentors are better suited to initiate the first few contacts. For many newly called to active duty officers, there is a great deal of information that needs to be absorbed in addition to managing a heavy workload and settling into a new environment. A welcoming call or email from a senior officer can go a long way in building a foundation for a healthy relationship to assist the officer to effectively navigate their way through the Corps.
- Program monitoring should occur at 6 and 12 months. Currently, we only have a 6 month monitoring survey. By following up at least two times, we can raise the level of accountability.
- Letters of thanks should be issued to mentors once monitoring questionnaires are received.
- One way to increase the dental category's awareness of mentoring would be to give out an award annually to the most outstanding mentor. While some mentors have limited interaction with their protégés, others devote a significant amount of their time and energy, providing guidance on career and professional goals. The purpose of the annual award would not only be to recognize mentors' support of protégés but also to raise the importance of mentoring and encourage it. The award winners would be selected annually through a process involving both the Mentoring and Awards work groups.
- Currently, only officers at O-5 and above with eight years of experience are eligible to serve as mentors. Junior officers at O-4 and senior officers at O-5 and above with less than eight years of PHS service should also be eligible to serve as mentors, on a case by case basis. Some of these individuals could serve as excellent mentors. Major criteria for selection of junior officers as mentors will be their broad experience in PHS activities including serving on DePAC.
- The work of the Mentoring Work group should be evenly spread amongst work group members to provide optimal opportunities for a greater sense of balanced work loads and shared ownership. Chairpersons have historically shouldered the coordination work even as they are responsible for guiding the work of the Workgroup. By assigning major responsibilities to workgroup

members, more members will be involved in the work and feel a greater sense of ownership, ultimately experiencing a greater potential for growth and leadership development.

Recommendations for Improving Mentoring Program

Most of the following recommendations will be implemented by the Mentoring Workgroup, while a few in *italics* will need to be approved by DePAC Executive Committee. All recommendations will ultimately require DePAC approval and incorporation into the DePAC Bylaws. Below are our recommendations:

- Mentoring assignments should be for a one year commitment.
- Protégé and mentor should connect with via email/phone at least two times per month.
- Mentors are expected to initiate the first few contacts with the protégé.
- Program monitoring should be at 6 and 12 months and should have information regarding how often the mentoring pair has communicated.
- Letters of thanks to be issued to mentors once monitoring questionnaire is received.
- *An annual award will be given to recognize a “Mentor of the Year”. Protégé feedback will be sought and coordination with the Awards Work group will be critical.*
- *Select junior officers at O-4 and senior officers at O-5 and above with less than eight years of PHS service should be eligible to serve as mentors, on a case by case basis.*
- Distribute the workload of the Mentoring Workgroup equitably, to involve more work group members.