United States
Public Health Service
Honor Awards:
The Basics of Award Write-ups

Last updated: September 2016
Objectives

This presentation provides officers the tools to:

1. Understand the importance of Public Health Service (PHS) honor awards
2. Write awards
Overview of Presentation

• Importance of Awards
• Types of Honor Awards – Individual and Unit
• Writing Awards
• Awards and Career Planning
• Summary
• Resources
Importance

Awards are important for many reasons:

• Recognition by the United States (US) for your hard work
• Demonstrate your leadership capabilities, as well as highlight other important essential abilities
• Career progression - awards are tied directly to the promotion process ([Category Benchmarks - general link](#))

*Awards are worth the time and effort!*
Types of Awards

• Honor Awards
  – Individual and Unit Honor Awards
  – General criteria: achievement- and performance-based

• Service Awards
  – Set criteria: granted in recognition of a specific type of service or activity, or for service during a specific time period
  – Do not go through Agency awards boards

• Campaign Medals
• Training Awards
• Regular Corps Ribbon
• Badges and Insignia
Individual Honor Awards

• Six awards for which officers may be nominated
  – PHS Citation (CIT)
  – Achievement Medal (AM)
  – Commendation Medal (CM)
  – Outstanding Service Medal (OSM)*
  – Meritorious Service Medal (MSM)*
  – Distinguished Service Medal (DSM)*

• Two additional awards for which there is no nomination process (decision to confer is at Surgeon General’s discretion):
  – Surgeon General’s Medallion (SGM)
  – Surgeon General’s Exemplary Service Medal (SGESM)

• No order in which an officer must receive these awards

*DSM, MSM, and OSM may be also awarded “with valor,” for recognizing acts of courage and bravery.
Criteria for Individual Honor Awards

**PHS Citation (CIT)**
- Recognizes a single, noteworthy achievement
- Achievement typically conducted over a short period of time

**Achievement Medal (AM)**
- Recognizes sustained above-average accomplishment and/or superior performance
- Achievement typically conducted over a relatively short period of time

**Commendation Medal (CM)**
- Recognizes:
  - Sustained high quality achievements
  - Application of unique skill/creative imagination
  - Noteworthy technical and professional contributions significant to a limited area
- Agency or State level impact (usually)
Criteria for Individual Honor Awards

Outstanding Service Medal (OSM)
• Recognizes:
  − Continuous outstanding leadership in carrying out PHS mission
  − Performance of single accomplishment that had a major effect on public health
  − Performance of a heroic act resulting in preservation of life or health
• National level impact
• Typical time frame: 2-4 years

Meritorious Service Medal (MSM)
• Recognizes:
  − Meritorious service of a single, particularly important achievement
  − Career notable for significant accomplishments
  − Unusually high quality and initiative in leadership
• Typical time frame: Several years; this is usually a “career wrap” or “end of career” award

Distinguished Service Medal (DSM)
• Recognizes exceedingly high level of achievement
• Often multi-national impact
• Typical time frame: Several years, but can vary
Criteria for Unit Honor Awards

Outstanding Unit Commendation (OUC)
• Recognizes exceptional service, often of national or international significance, by a designated organizational unit

Unit Commendation (UC)
• Recognizes an outstanding accomplishment by a designated organizational unit
Approval of Awards

- Your Operating Division (i.e., FDA, CDC) has the delegated authority to approve the OSM, CM, AM, CIT, and UC.
  - In some cases, authority to approve the AM and CIT has been further delegated to Bureau, Center, or Area level*
- The DSM, MSM, and OUC are approved by the Surgeon General after review and recommendation by the PHS Commissioned Corps Awards Board.
- All awards must be signed off by staff in the Division of Commissioned Corps Personnel and Readiness

*Please check with your Agency to determine the appropriate Approving Authority for these awards.
Commissioned Officers’ Awards Program (COAP)

• COAP information: https://dcp.psc.gov/CCMIS/COAP/COAP_nominations_m.aspx

• Awards requirements
  – Time frame: **13-month window** following the end of the accomplishment to submit the award
  – Formatting requirements for award submissions can vary by Agency/Awards Board. For example, number of copies, signatures on forms, and narrative format
  – Components
    • PHS 6342-1 (Unit) or PHS 6342-2 (Individual)
    • Two-page narrative
    • Award history
PHS 6342

- PHS 6342-1 (Unit) or PHS 6342-2 (Individual)  
  (https://dcp.psc.gov/ccmis/forms/FORMS_awards_m.aspx)

- Considerations for PHS 6342
  - Be **specific** when describing your achievement ("Cited For" section of PHS 6342)
  - Citation is limited to 180 characters and **MUST MATCH** narrative citation verbatim
  - Awards history: may be found on Direct Access or in the officer’s electronic Personal Folder (eOPF)
Writing the Award: Effort

• Officers should always be involved in the narrative write-up
  – They know what they did and why it was important!
• Listen to Awards Board Coordinator
  – They know what will pass and what will not
• Plan on writing/editing several iterations
• Spell check AND grammar check
The Narrative

• Most important part of the award
  – Describes what you’ve done and WHY IT MATTERS

• Anyone who reads it should understand what you’ve done
  – Your audience may be very diverse in background
  – Clear, concise writing is critical
General Format of Narrative

Follow your Agency’s formatting standards; however, generally:

• Format
  – Narrative **cannot** exceed two single-spaced pages
  – All margins 1”

• Font
  – Preferred style is Times New Roman 12 point
    • Comparable font that would provide no less than 12 point and no more than 12 characters per inch can be used
Narrative Sections*

• Citation/Accomplishment
  – Describes what you’ve been awarded for
  – Citation and time period covered must match the information on the PHS 6342

• Background
  – Provides pertinent background on the issue and any prior or mitigating circumstances
  – Identify nominee’s regulatory duties and how the accomplishments are outside expectations of the position
  – Described the public health importance of the issue
  – Descriptive of why action was taken

• Body/Intervention
  – Includes a specific description of accomplishments/impacts
  – Section should clarify how achievement is over/above what is normally expected from officer/unit

• Conclusion/Outcome
  – Summary paragraph, reiterating the accomplishment and impact (i.e., why you are highly deserving of the award)

*The heading of these sections can vary by agency. Please refer to your Agency Awards Board for specific guidance.
Tips on Writing Style

• Clear, concise writing
  – Long sentences are hard to follow (limit sentences to 1-2 lines long)
  – Bullets versus paragraph format (Agency-/Awards Board-specific)

• Include specific dates and time periods
  – Helps to define the time frame for the described achievement

• Provide specific qualitative/quantitative data
  – Use statistics, examples and other tangible data (e.g., saved resources, money, personnel)
  – Helps readers understand the scale of effort and demonstrate impact of achievement

• Avoid jargon (e.g., collaboration, consensus) and praise language (e.g., enthusiastically, energetically)
What is “Award-worthy”?

Accomplishment/citation = things that were done

• Must be more than just doing your normal duty
• Accomplishment must have “impact”
• Overlap with previous awards
  – Officers may not receive multiple awards for the same accomplishments
  – Officers MAY be awarded a unit award and then submit an individual award for their leadership if there are additional accomplishments and/or impacts
  – A career wrap-up award may also reference previously awarded work
  – If overlap exists, nomination must clarify basis of prior award and relevance to present nomination
Tips for Describing Accomplishments

• Use first person, active voice to describe accomplishments
  – Include specific role
  – Describe what you actually did (including leadership role)
  – Provide qualitative/quantitative data

• For prolonged/extensive efforts, use phrase “For example, . . .”
Tips for Describing Impact

THE BIG QUESTION – SO WHAT?

• Every sentence should read/have implied:
  – “As a result”
  – “Therefore”
  – “Because of”

• Use numbers
  – How much reduction in morbidity/mortality?
  – How much money saved?
  – How many people trained?
  – How much improvement made?
Common Problems

• Accomplishments are too vague
  – Not clear what you actually did
  – Excessive jargon/praise language

• Impacts are not well described, i.e., not clear why your work was important

• Mixed impacts/accomplishments
  – For example, obtaining funding or publishing is generally an accomplishment, not an impact

• Level of proposed award does not match accomplishments
  – Award may be downgraded/upgraded

• Too technical - remember Award Board members have diverse backgrounds
• Overlap with previous awards

• Untimely award submission: either too early or too late
  – Must submit award within **13 months** following the end of the accomplishment
  – Accomplishment is not yet completed (awards cannot be for an ongoing activity – it must be completed to show impact)

• Nomination forms are filled out incorrectly or have administrative errors

• Citation and time period covered citation does not match PHS 6342 **exactly**
Special Considerations for Unit Awards

• Remember, **Form PHS 6342-1**
  – Separate awards history for each officer
  – Non-PHS officers should be included on award nomination (listed on separate sheet)

• Coordinate with Awards Board Coordinator to determine Agency’s practices/preferences
Awards and Career Planning

• Know your benchmarks
  – Target appropriate award level *before* you go up for promotion
  – Higher level awards require longer periods of time/work

• Know the importance of award level relative to career
  – For example, a CM for an O-3 is great, but a CIT for an O-6 provides minimal impact for the effort it takes to get approved

• Continuity of awards
  – Awards do not need to be received in order of precedence

• Remember, unit awards provide value; get involved in team efforts
Summary

• Honor awards are important to your career!
• Approval process varies by Agency
  – Work with Awards Board Coordinator to determine correct process
• Well-written narrative is very important
• Develop an awards “strategy” as part of your career planning
Important Resources*

- PHS Commissioned Corps Awards, CC511.01–February 2015
  https://dcp.psc.gov/ccmis/ccis/documents/CC511_01.pdf
- Commissioned Officers’ Awards Program
  https://dcp.psc.gov/CCMIS/COAP/COAP_award_criteria_m.aspx
  https://dcp.psc.gov/ccmis/ccis/documents/CC511_01.pdf

* There are other relevant documents on CCMIS website; however, these are the most generally applicable.
Important Resources: 
Agency Nomination Guidance

• CDC Guidance on Writing Nominations
  [link](http://intranet.cdc.gov/od/hcrmo/html/commissionedcorps/award_guidelines.html)

• FDA Awards Nomination Process
  [link](http://inside.fda.gov:9003/EmployeeResources/CommissionedCorps/OfficeOfCommissionedCorpsAffairsOCCA/FDACommisionedCorpsAwardsProgram/default.htm)

• NIH Awards Nomination Process
  [link](http://hr.od.nih.gov/hrguidance/corps/awards/default.htm)