



VHA National Ethics Committee Charter

Authorization

The National Ethics Committee (NEC) is authorized by the Office of the Under Secretary for Health (USH) of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The NEC is a standing subcommittee of the Executive Committee of the National Leadership Board (NLB).

Relationship to Existing Programs

The NEC is a function of the National Center for Ethics in Health Care (NCEHC).

Purpose/Mission

The NEC is responsible for analyzing ethical issues that affect the health and care of veterans. Specifically, the NEC is charged by the USH to produce reports that:

- address health care ethics-related topics that relate to VHA
- clarify and analyze these issues to guide ethical decision making
- provide timely, practical information and/or recommendations
- are relevant to VHA leaders, clinicians, and/or researchers
- meet external peer-review standards for quality
- reflect VHA's commitment to high ethical standards

Topics to be considered by the NEC include:

- issues relating to clinical decisions (clinical ethics)
- issues relating to organizational decisions (organizational ethics)
- issues relating to the conduct of research (research ethics)

Reports are intended to improve the quality of ethical health care practices by:

- heightening awareness of ethical issues
- clarifying ethical standards
- guiding clinical and managerial practices
- serving as an educational resource
- explaining needed policy change

Each report:

- describes an issue and its ethical significance
- explains the issue's background and context
- discusses the issue's relationship to VHA

- identifies current controversies
- summarizes relevant ethical standards and guidelines
- provides ethical analysis of the issues
- presents practical recommendations
- provides scholarly references
- includes an executive summary

Membership

Members of the NEC will be appointed by the Director of the NCEHC with approval from the Executive Committee of the NLB. Members will be appointed for renewable two-year terms. Periodically, the NCEHC Director may issue a call for nominees/applicants to serve on the NEC. Members will include one or more representatives of each of the following groups:

- NLB Executive Committee
- VHA Chief Officers and VACO Program Leaders
- VHA Network and Facility Leaders
- VHA Facility Ethics Committee Leaders
- Physicians
- Nurses
- Other clinicians
- Researchers
- VA General Counsel

The Chair of the NEC will be similarly appointed by the Director of the NCEHC and approved by the NLB Executive Committee. In addition, one or more VSO representatives or other veterans' advocates will be invited to serve as consultant(s) to the NEC.

Staffing

The NEC is staffed by the NCEHC. At the Director's discretion, other VA staff or non-VA consultants may contribute to the work of the NEC.

Meetings

The NEC meets at VA Central Office approximately three times per year. In addition, NEC members may meet by telephone or videoconference at the request of the NCEHC Director or NEC Chair.

Funding

The NEC is funded within the budget of the NCEHC.

Report Development Process

- a. As needed, the NCEHC Director issues a call for proposed topics for consideration by the NEC to the following groups: Chief Officers, VISN Directors, facility Ethics Committee Chairs, and NEC members and consultants.

- b. The Chair considers the topics proposed in response to the call, identifies one or more topics for consideration by the NEC, presents these to NEC members for discussion, and makes recommendations to the NCEHC Director regarding priorities for NEC reports. The NCEHC Director considers these recommendations in light of NCEHC and VHA resources and priorities, and in turn submits topics of future NEC reports for approval by the Executive Committee.
- c. Reports are developed by NCEHC staff with input from stakeholders, content experts, and NEC members.
- d. The Director of the NCEHC establishes guidelines for the content, style, format, and process of developing reports.
- e. Under the leadership of the NEC chair, report drafts are discussed at NEC meetings and considered by the full committee. Members of the NEC evaluate each draft for its overall quality and ethical content, identify any unresolved controversies or other deficiencies that need attention, and make recommendations on how to address and resolve any problems. The Chair works to develop a consensus regarding the disposition of the report. If consensus cannot be reached by the NEC, the disposition of the report is determined in consultation with the Director of the NCEHC.
- f. Possible dispositions of reports are as follows:
 1. Approval
 2. Approval with revision
 3. Disapproval with revision and re-review by the NEC
 4. Disapproval
- g. Following dispositions (1) or (2), reports go to the NCEHC for final editing and formatting. Following disposition (3), NCEHC staff work with the Chair to correct the deficiencies and resubmit the report for approval by the NEC. Following disposition (4), reports are removed from further consideration by the NEC unless reintroduced as a new topic.
- h. The Director of the NCEHC submits final reports to the Executive Committee of the NLB for review and comment prior to distribution.

Distribution of Reports

Reports are distributed (accompanied by an USH Information Letter, if appropriate) to:

- Chief Officers and Key VACO Officials
- VISN Directors and Clinical Managers
- Facility Ethics Committees
- Other relevant offices, depending on the subject matter
- Others upon request

Reports are also posted on the NCEHC Web site. When appropriate, the NCEHC submits reports for publication in peer-reviewed journals.