

ETHICS

Use of Official Status and Official Letterhead for Letters of Recommendation

This is in response to your question about whether a Federal employee may write a letter of recommendation using his or her official title (in the body of the letter and/or the signature block) and using official letterhead for a college letter of recommendation for the daughter of a family friend.

The Executive Branch ethics regulation (5 CFR § 2635.702(b) and Example 1) provides that an Executive Branch employee may write a letter of recommendation for an individual, and may use his or her official title, only if the following three conditions are met:

- (1) The letter has been requested by the individual, or by a company or organization that is considering the individual for some type of position;
- (2) The recommending employee has personal knowledge of the ability or character of the individual; and
- (3) The recommending employee has dealt with the individual in the course of Federal employment, or the employee is recommending the individual for Federal employment.

In writing the letter of recommendation for the relative of a personal friend, it may be acceptable for the employee to refer to his official position in the body of the letter. For instance, the following statement "as a regional director for the Air Force Recruiting Service, I review the applications of hundreds of young adults each month and Ms. Smith—although she has not currently applied for admittance into the Armed Forces—would rank in the top 5% of that pool based on her record of academic achievement and commitment to personal goals" might be appropriate if the statement is objectively credible and is based on the employee's experienced judgment in reviewing the records of young adults and is not motivated by his/her friendship with the requestor's parent.

Presumably, the prospective college student has requested the letter of recommendation (condition # 1) and the employee writing the recommendation has personal knowledge of the student's ability and/or character (condition # 2). Whether or not the third condition is met depends on if that knowledge of the individual came in the course of Federal employment (such as when the individual was performing a Federal internship) or because the individual is seeking Federal employment or education (such as a USAFA appointment or AFROTC scholarship). If neither of these circumstances apply, it would not be appropriate for a Federal employee to use his/her official title or official letterhead for the recommendation. If either or both of these circumstances is met, the Federal employee may use his/her official title and letterhead.

Even if the use of official letterhead or official title is not permitted, using traditional forms of address (i.e., The Honorable) and military ranks is still authorized. See 5 CFR § 2635.702(e).