

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION
(Release No. 34-91506; File No. SR-FINRA-2021-005)

April 8, 2021

Self-Regulatory Organizations; Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, Inc.; Notice of Filing and Immediate Effectiveness of a Proposed Rule Change to Extend the Effective Date of the Temporary Amendments set forth in SR-FINRA-2020-026 and SR-FINRA-2020-043 from April 30, 2021, to June 30, 2021

Pursuant to Section 19(b)(1) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (“Act” or “Exchange Act”)¹ and Rule 19b-4 thereunder,² notice is hereby given that on March 31, 2021, the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, Inc. (“FINRA”) filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission (“SEC” or “Commission”) the proposed rule change as described in Items I and II below, which Items have been prepared by FINRA. FINRA has designated the proposed rule change as constituting a “non-controversial” rule change under paragraph (f)(6) of Rule 19b-4 under the Act,³ which renders the proposal effective upon receipt of this filing by the Commission. The Commission is publishing this notice to solicit comments on the proposed rule change from interested persons.

I. Self-Regulatory Organization’s Statement of the Terms of Substance of the Proposed Rule Change

FINRA is proposing to extend the expiration date of the temporary amendments initially set forth in SR-FINRA-2020-026 and subsequently extended in SR-FINRA-2020-043 (collectively, the “Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings”) from April 30, 2021, to

¹ 15 U.S.C. 78s(b)(1).

² 17 CFR 240.19b-4.

³ 17 CFR 240.19b-4(f)(6).

June 30, 2021. FINRA does not anticipate providing any further extensions to the temporary amendments identified in this proposed rule change beyond June 30, 2021.⁴

The text of the proposed rule change is available on FINRA's website at <http://www.finra.org>, at the principal office of FINRA and at the Commission's Public Reference Room.

II. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement of the Purpose of, and Statutory Basis for, the Proposed Rule Change

In its filing with the Commission, FINRA included statements concerning the purpose of and basis for the proposed rule change and discussed any comments it received on the proposed rule change. The text of these statements may be examined at the places specified in Item IV below. FINRA has prepared summaries, set forth in sections A, B, and C below, of the most significant aspects of such statements.

A. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement of the Purpose of, and Statutory Basis for, the Proposed Rule Change

1. Purpose

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, last year FINRA began providing temporary relief to member firms from FINRA rules and requirements via frequently asked questions ("FAQs") on its website.⁵ Two of these FAQs⁶ provided temporary relief to address disruptions to the administration of FINRA qualification examinations caused by the pandemic

⁴ If due to unforeseen circumstances a further extension is necessary, FINRA will submit a separate rule filing to further extend the temporary amendments.

⁵ See Frequently Asked Questions Related to Regulatory Relief Due to the Coronavirus Pandemic, available at <https://www.finra.org/rules-guidance/key-topics/covid-19/faq>.

⁶ See <https://www.finra.org/rules-guidance/key-topics/covid-19/faq#qe>.

that have significantly limited the ability of individuals to sit for these examinations due to Prometric test center capacity issues.⁷

FINRA published the first FAQ on March 20, 2020, providing that individuals who were designated to function as principals under FINRA Rule 1210.04 prior to February 2, 2020, would be given until May 31, 2020, to pass the appropriate principal qualification examination.⁸

FINRA revised the FAQ to extend the expiration of the temporary relief to pass the appropriate principal qualification examination initially until June 30, 2020, and then until August 31, 2020.

FINRA published the second FAQ on May 15, 2020, providing that individuals who were designated to function as Operations Professionals under FINRA Rule 1220(b)(3)(B) prior to February 2, 2020, would be given until June 30, 2020, to pass the applicable qualification examination.⁹ Thereafter, FINRA revised the FAQ to extend the expiration of the temporary relief to pass the applicable qualification examination until August 31, 2020.

On August 28, 2020, FINRA filed with the Commission a proposed rule change, SR-FINRA-2020-026, to extend the expiration of the temporary relief provided via the two FAQs by adopting: (1) temporary Supplementary Material .12 (Temporary Extension of the Limited

⁷ At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all FINRA qualification examinations were administered at test centers operated by Prometric. Based on the health and welfare concerns resulting from COVID-19, in March 2020 Prometric closed all of its test centers in the United States and Canada and began to slowly reopen some of them at limited capacity in May. Currently, Prometric has resumed testing in many of its United States and Canada test centers, at either full or limited occupancy, based on local and government mandates.

⁸ FINRA Rule 1210.04 (Requirements for Registered Persons Functioning as Principals for a Limited Period) allows a member firm to designate certain individuals to function in a principal capacity for 120 calendar days before having to pass an appropriate principal qualification examination.

⁹ Pursuant to FINRA Rule 1220(b)(3)(B) (Qualifications), a person registering as an Operations Professional may function in that capacity for 120 days before having to pass an applicable qualification examination.

Period for Registered Persons to Function as Principals) under FINRA Rule 1210 (Registration Requirements), and (2) temporary Supplementary Material .07 (Temporary Extension of the Limited Period for Persons to Function as Operations Professionals) under FINRA Rule 1220 (Registration Categories).¹⁰ Pursuant to this rule change, individuals who were designated prior to September 3, 2020, to function as a principal under FINRA Rule 1210.04 or an Operations Professional under FINRA Rule 1220(b)(3)(B) had until December 31, 2020, to pass the appropriate qualification examination. FINRA thereafter filed SR-FINRA-2020-043 to extend the expiration date of the temporary amendments set forth in SR-FINRA-2020-026 from December 31, 2020, to April 30, 2021.¹¹

As mentioned in the Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings, FINRA began providing, and then extended, temporary relief to address the interruptions in the administration of FINRA qualification examinations at Prometric test centers and the limited ability of individuals to sit for the examinations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² FINRA also noted in the Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings that the pandemic could result in firms potentially experiencing significant disruptions to their normal business operations that may be exacerbated by being unable to keep principal or Operations Professional positions filled. Specifically, the limitation of in-person activities and staff absenteeism as a result of the health and welfare concerns stemming from COVID-19 could result in firms having difficulty finding

¹⁰ See Exchange Act Release No. 89732 (September 1, 2020), 85 FR 55535 (September 8, 2020) (Notice of Filing and Immediate Effectiveness of File No. SR-FINRA-2020-026).

¹¹ See Exchange Act Release No. 90617 (December 9, 2020), 85 FR 81258 (December 15, 2020) (Notice of Filing and Immediate Effectiveness of File No. SR-FINRA-2020-043).

¹² Information about the continued impact of COVID-19 on FINRA-administered examinations is available at <https://www.finra.org/rules-guidance/key-topics/covid-19/exams>.

other qualified individuals to transition into those roles or requiring them to reallocate employee time and resources away from other critical responsibilities at the firm.

While there are signs of improvement, the COVID-19 conditions necessitating the temporary relief persist and FINRA has determined that there is a continued need for this temporary relief beyond April 30, 2021. Although Prometric has resumed testing in many of its U.S. test centers, Prometric's safety practices mean that currently not all test centers are open, some of the open test centers are at limited capacity, and some open test centers are delivering only certain examinations that have been deemed essential by the local government.¹³ In addition, while certain states have started to ease COVID-19 restrictions on businesses and social activities, public health officials continue to emphasize the importance for individuals to keep taking numerous steps to protect themselves and help slow the spread of the disease.¹⁴

Although the COVID-19 conditions necessitating the temporary relief persist, FINRA believes that an extension of the relief is necessary only until June 30, 2021, because FINRA recently expanded the availability of online examinations. Prior to this expansion, the ongoing effects of the pandemic made it impracticable for member firms to ensure that the individuals who they had designated to function in a principal or Operations Professional capacity, as set forth in FINRA Rules 1210.04 and 1220(b)(3)(B), could successfully sit for and pass an appropriate qualification examination within the 120-calendar day period required under the rules.¹⁵ Specifically, if the individual wanted to take a qualifying examination, they were

¹³ Information from Prometric about its safety practices and the impact of COVID-19 on its operations is available at <https://www.prometric.com/corona-virus-update>. See also supra note 12.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, How to Protect Yourself & Others, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>.

¹⁵ See supra note 12.

required to accept the health risks associated with taking an in-person examination because those examinations were not available online. On February 24, 2021, however, FINRA adopted an interim accommodation request process to allow candidates to take additional FINRA examinations online, including the General Securities Principal (Series 24) and Operations Professional (Series 99) examinations.¹⁶ Because the qualifying examinations have been made available online only recently, FINRA is concerned that individuals who have been designated to function in a principal or Operations Professional capacity may not have sufficient time to schedule, study for, and take the applicable examination before April 30, 2021, the date the temporary amendments are set to expire. Therefore, FINRA is proposing to extend the expiration date of the temporary amendments set forth in the Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings until June 30, 2021. The proposed rule change would apply only to those individuals who have been designated to function as a principal or Operations Professional prior to March 3, 2021. As noted above, FINRA does not anticipate providing any further extensions to the temporary amendments and any individuals designated to function as a principal or Operations Professional on or after March 3, 2021, will need to successfully pass an appropriate qualification examination within 120 days.¹⁷

FINRA believes that this proposed continued extension of time is tailored to address the needs and constraints on a firm's operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, without significantly compromising critical investor protection. The proposed extension of time will help to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on firms by providing continued flexibility so that

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ FINRA notes that the proposed rule change would impact members that have elected to be treated as capital acquisition brokers ("CABs"), given that the CAB rule set incorporates the impacted FINRA rules by reference.

firms can ensure that principal and Operations Professional positions remain filled. The potential risks from the proposed extension of the 120-day period are mitigated by a firm's continued requirement to supervise the activities of these designated individuals and ensure compliance with federal securities laws and regulations, as well as FINRA rules.

FINRA has filed the proposed rule change for immediate effectiveness and has requested that the SEC waive the requirement that the proposed rule change not become operative for 30 days after the date of the filing, so FINRA can implement the proposed rule change immediately.¹⁸

2. Statutory Basis

FINRA believes that the proposed rule change is consistent with the provisions of Section 15A(b)(6) of the Act,¹⁹ which requires, among other things, that FINRA rules must be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, to promote just and equitable principles of trade, and, in general, to protect investors and the public interest.

The proposed rule change is intended to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on firm operations by further extending the 120-day period certain individuals may function as a principal or Operations Professional without having successfully passed an appropriate qualification examination under FINRA Rules 1210.04 and 1220(b)(3)(B) until June 30, 2021. The proposed rule change does not relieve firms from maintaining, under the circumstances, a reasonably designed system to supervise the activities of their associated persons to achieve compliance with applicable securities laws and regulations, and with applicable FINRA rules

¹⁸ FINRA notes that waiver of the 30-day operative period here is consistent with the Commission's previous waivers of the operative period for the temporary relief provided in the Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings. See supra notes 10 and 11.

¹⁹ 15 U.S.C. 78o-3(b)(6).

that directly serve investor protection. In a time when faced with unique challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, FINRA believes that the proposed rule change is a sensible accommodation that will continue to afford firms the ability to ensure that critical positions are filled and client services maintained, while continuing to serve and promote the protection of investors and the public interest in this unique environment.

B. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Burden on Competition

FINRA does not believe that the temporary proposed rule change will result in any burden on competition that is not necessary or appropriate in furtherance of the purposes of the Act. As set forth in the Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings, the proposed rule change is intended solely to extend temporary relief necessitated by the continued impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and the related health and safety risks of conducting in-person activities. FINRA believes that the proposed rule change is necessary to temporarily rebalance the attendant benefits and costs of the obligations under FINRA Rules 1210 and 1220 in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that would otherwise result if the temporary amendments were to expire on April 30, 2021.

C. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Comments on the Proposed Rule Change Received from Members, Participants, or Others

Written comments were neither solicited nor received.

III. Date of Effectiveness of the Proposed Rule Change and Timing for Commission Action

Because the foregoing proposed rule change does not: (i) significantly affect the protection of investors or the public interest; (ii) impose any significant burden on competition; and (iii) become operative for 30 days from the date on which it was filed, or such shorter time

as the Commission may designate, it has become effective pursuant to Section 19(b)(3)(A) of the Act²⁰ and Rule 19b-4(f)(6) thereunder.²¹

A proposed rule change filed under Rule 19b-4(f)(6) normally does not become operative for 30 days after the date of filing. However, pursuant to Rule 19b-4(f)(6)(iii), the Commission may designate a shorter time if such action is consistent with the protection of investors and the public interest. FINRA has asked the Commission to waive the 30-day operative delay so that the proposed rule change may become operative immediately upon filing. As noted above, FINRA stated that the conditions necessitating the temporary relief continue to exist and the proposed extension of time will help minimize the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on FINRA member firms' operations by allowing them to keep principal and Operations Professional positions filled and minimizing disruptions to client services and other critical responsibilities. Despite signs of improvement, FINRA further stated that the ongoing extenuating circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic make it impractical to ensure that individuals designated to act in these capacities are able to take and pass the appropriate qualification examination during the 120-calendar day period required under the rules.

FINRA observed that, following a nationwide closure of all test centers earlier in the year, some test centers have re-opened, but are operating at limited capacity or are only delivering certain examinations that have been deemed essential by the local government.²²

²⁰ 15 U.S.C. 78s(b)(3)(A).

²¹ 17 CFR 240.19b-4(f)(6). In addition, Rule 19b-4(f)(6)(iii) requires a self-regulatory organization to give the Commission written notice of its intent to file the proposed rule change, along with a brief description and text of the proposed rule change, at least five business days prior to the date of filing of the proposed rule change, or such shorter time as designated by the Commission. FINRA has satisfied this requirement.

²² See supra notes 12 and 13. FINRA states that Prometric has also had to close some reopened test centers due to incidents of COVID-19 cases.

However, on February 24, 2021, FINRA began providing the General Securities Principal (Series 24) and Operations Professional (Series 99) examinations online through an interim accommodation request process.²³ Prior to this change, if individuals wanted to take these qualifying examinations, they were required to accept the health risks associated with taking an in-person examination. Even with the expansion of online qualifications examinations, FINRA stated that extending the expiration date of the relief set forth in the Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings until June 30, 2021 is still needed. FINRA stated that this temporary relief will provide flexibility to allow individuals who have been designated to function in a principal or Operations Professional capacity sufficient time to schedule, study for and take the applicable examination before the temporary relief expires. Notably, FINRA stated that it does not anticipate providing any further extensions to the temporary amendments and that any individuals designated to function as a principal or Operations Professional on or after March 3, 2021 will need to successfully pass an appropriate qualification examination within 120 days.

For these reasons, the Commission believes that waiver of the 30-day operative delay is consistent with the protection of investors and the public interest.²⁴ Accordingly, the

²³ See supra note 12 (including the February 24, 2021 announcement of the interim accommodation process for candidates to take certain examinations, including the General Securities Principal (Series 24) and Operations Professional (Series 99) examinations, online.

²⁴ As noted above by FINRA, this proposal is an extension of temporary relief provided in the Temporary Qualification Examination Relief Filings where FINRA also requested and the Commission granted a waiver of the 30-day operative delay. See SR-FINRA-2020-026, 85 FR at 55538 and SR-FINRA-2020-043, 85 FR at 81260.

Commission hereby waives the 30-day operative delay and designates the proposal operative upon filing.²⁵

At any time within 60 days of the filing of the proposed rule change, the Commission summarily may temporarily suspend such rule change if it appears to the Commission that such action is necessary or appropriate in the public interest, for the protection of investors, or otherwise in furtherance of the purposes of the Act. If the Commission takes such action, the Commission shall institute proceedings to determine whether the proposed rule should be approved or disapproved.

IV. Solicitation of Comments

Interested persons are invited to submit written data, views and arguments concerning the foregoing, including whether the proposed rule change is consistent with the Act. Comments may be submitted by any of the following methods:

Electronic Comments:

- Use the Commission's Internet comment form (<http://www.sec.gov/rules/sro.shtml>); or
- Send an e-mail to rule-comments@sec.gov. Please include File Number SR-FINRA-2021-005 on the subject line.

Paper Comments:

- Send paper comments in triplicate to Secretary, Securities and Exchange Commission, 100 F Street, NE, Washington, DC 20549-1090.

All submissions should refer to File Number SR-FINRA-2021-005. This file number should be included on the subject line if e-mail is used. To help the Commission process and review your

²⁵ For purposes only of waiving the 30-day operative delay, the Commission has considered the proposed rule change's impact on efficiency, competition, and capital formation. See 15 U.S.C. 78c(f).

comments more efficiently, please use only one method. The Commission will post all comments on the Commission's Internet website (<http://www.sec.gov/rules/sro.shtml>). Copies of the submission, all subsequent amendments, all written statements with respect to the proposed rule change that are filed with the Commission, and all written communications relating to the proposed rule change between the Commission and any person, other than those that may be withheld from the public in accordance with the provisions of 5 U.S.C. 552, will be available for website viewing and printing in the Commission's Public Reference Room, 100 F Street, NE, Washington, DC 20549, on official business days between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Copies of such filing also will be available for inspection and copying at the principal office of FINRA. All comments received will be posted without change. Persons submitting comments are cautioned that we do not redact or edit personal identifying information from comment submissions. You should submit only information that you wish to make available publicly. All submissions should refer to File Number SR-FINRA-2021-005 and should be submitted on or before [insert date 21 days from publication in the Federal Register].

For the Commission, by the Division of Trading and Markets, pursuant to delegated authority.²⁶

J. Matthew DeLesDernier
Assistant Secretary

²⁶ 17 CFR 200.30-3(a)(12).