Addiction Professional Credentialing

The Need for National Standards

The addiction professional workforce is represented by more than 100,000 counselors, educators, and other addiction-focused health care professionals. Addiction professionals specialize in prevention, intervention, treatment, recovery support, and education, and work across a wide-variety of settings including outpatient care centers, mental health and substance use disorder facilities, general medicine and surgical hospitals, psychiatric and substance use disorder hospitals, private practice, clinics, as well as prisons, probation agencies, juvenile detention facilities, halfway houses, detoxification centers and more.

Access to quality, effective treatment and recovery services is critical to addressing our nation’s Substance Use Disorder (SUD) crisis. Licensure and credentialing requirements, however, vary greatly from state to state and serve as a barrier to entry, advancement, and retention for this key segment of the workforce. We encourage Congress to work to develop national professional credentialing measures that facilitate understanding and better serve individuals with SUDs.

With advancement of telehealth as an acceptable form of assessment and treatment, it is more important than ever that we have standardized credentials that are able to cross state barriers and offer the support that a mobile society of people in recovery will need to have in their lives.

Support Addiction Workforce

Historically, new members of the addiction profession have been forced to navigate without a distinct roadmap or career ladder to guide their development. In response to this issue, NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals, joined the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and other key stakeholders in 2011 to develop a model scope of practice and career ladder for the addiction workforce. The model outlines reasonable and realistic scopes of practice for each level and provides clear gateways into the profession’s ranks. SAMHSA’s career ladder includes the following categories, in order of most to least rigorous:

- Independent Clinical Substance Use Disorder Counselor/Supervisor;
- Clinical Substance Use Disorder Counselor (Master’s level);
- Substance Use Disorder Counselor (Bachelor’s level);
- Associate Substance Use Disorder Counselor (Associate’s level);
- Substance Use Disorder Technician; and
- Peer Recovery Support Specialist (Peer level).

National Credentials Are Critical

A standard, recognizable set of addiction professional credentials would provide clarity for providers and payers, as well as comfort to individuals seeking quality effective treatment and recovery services for themselves or their loved ones.
While licenses are state-issued authorizations to practice in a specific field, credentials are the standard-bearers for experience and levels of education. Some states require credentials in order to attain a license while others do not grant licenses, and instead rely on various certifications to permit a provider to practice within the state. National credentials would set uniform standards for education, experience, and competency, and could be portable at both state and national levels. These standards of knowledge, competency and attitudes to treat SUDs was supported by the work of SAMHSA and other key stakeholders and published by SAMHSA in the Tap 21 and 21A.

For instance, NAADAC’s National Certification Commission for Addiction Professionals (NCC AP) issues seven different types of national credentials, including three credentials that align with the three main levels of practice in SAMHSA’s scopes of practice for SUD professionals and its newer Peer level:

- Master Addiction Counselor (MAC) for Master’s level;
- National Certified Addiction Counselor Level II (NCAC II) for Bachelor’s level;
- National Certified Addiction Counselor Level I (NCAC I) for Associate’s level; and
- National Certified Recovery Support Specialist (NCRSS) for Peer level.

We urge Congress to work with NAADAC and other stakeholders in the addiction workforce to support national credentials that have been developed to ensure standardized training and education requirements are utilized to educate, train, and credential the next generation of addiction professionals. Enacted together, these elements would create new generations of treatment providers capable of addressing the full range of SUDs in our communities and support individuals, families and communities in the treatment and recovery continuum that can address this current opioid crisis and the next wave of crisis yet to come.

NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals, represents the professional interests of more than 100,000 addiction counselors, educators and other addiction-focused health care professionals in the United States, Canada and abroad. For more information, please visit www.naadac.org.