

# Setting a National Standard for the Addiction Profession – Now is the Time

By Cynthia Moreno Tuohy, NCAC II, CDC III, SAP, NAADAC Executive Director

President Bowden’s article in this issue of *Advances in Addiction & Recovery* discusses the importance of licensure and addresses the key terms in the licensure discourse to help better explain the differences between licensure, credentials, and certification. In addition to NAADAC’s efforts to promote state-specific licensing and the standardization of licensing requirements across all 50 states, NAADAC will continue to voice the importance of national credentialing and its benefits to all addiction professionals, third-party payors, community and government stakeholders, and the public at large.

As Dr. Bowden points out, a national credential is not a license and does not automatically translate to a state license. However, national credentials set national standards for education, experience, and competency, and can be used at both the state and national level. NAADAC’s National Certification Commission for Addiction Counselors (NCC AP) issues nine different kinds of national credentials, including three credentials that align with the three main levels of practice in SAMHSA’s scopes of practice for substance use disorder professionals:

- the Master Addiction Counselor (MAC) for Category 3 — the Master’s level;
- the National Certified Addiction Counselor Level II (NCAC II) for Category 2 — the Bachelor’s level; and
- the National Certified Addiction Counselor Level I (NCAC I) for Category 1 — or the Associate’s level.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, NCC AP offers a National Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialist (NCPRSS) national credential for those in Peer Recovery. (For a guide to all NCC AP credentials, please visit [www.naadac.org/typeseligibility](http://www.naadac.org/typeseligibility)).

Each of these national credentials identifies its holder as having a certain level of education, experience, and competency that is standardized and uniform, regardless of which state or country the credential holder resides in. National credentials and standards remove the following questions from the public and payor discourse: What acronym do we use for addiction counselors that identifies them to the medical professionals, school and community stakeholders and the public? How do we know if they are educated or not and at what levels of education? What standards of experience do they meet? What levels of care are they able/allowed to treat? Are they, in fact, a discipline onto themselves? Can I expect to find the same level of education, experience and standards in the state I live now and where I may live in the future? Managed Care Organizations (MCOs) and other payors do not need to wonder what this credential means in terms of education, experience, and competency from state to state. With over 56 acronyms (last time I counted), our profession is nothing short of confusing to the payors we hope to attract. And our competitors use this lack of clarity as a *detractor* when they speak about unprofessionalism in the substance use disorder field. National credentials

allow for the identification of clear, standardized education, experience, and competency requirements necessary for substance use disorder counselors to receive the recognition and reimbursements they deserve.

As the addiction profession works to build our place in the healthcare mainstream, it is vital that MCOs, Medicaid, and other payors understand that proper and competent treatment of persons with substance use disorders requires specific education and training in substance use disorders. Thus, it is necessary to adopt national credentials in order for these national payors to see addiction counselors as legitimate providers of care that qualify as healthcare providers.

NAADAC believes that tiered licensing and credentialing grants a full continuum of care for service providers that wish to capture whatever segments of the treatment and recovery support services continuum in their provider services. We also believe these same levels translate to tiered licensing levels so that reimbursement is open to anyone holding these credentials.

NAADAC and the NCC AP continue to work towards greater credibility and standardized payor status for addiction professionals through use of its national credentials to allow for consistent reimbursement by payors. NAADAC is working with payors who want to feel informed and secure in the standardized of credentials for addiction professionals. This is why Optum recently accepted the NCC AP’s MAC and Peer Recovery Support Specialist credentials nationally. And, NAADAC is working to carry that same message and gain that same recognition and payment reimbursement status with other MCOs and government payors. Now is the time for national recognition by payors for those serving in the addiction profession. With NCC AP opening up its credentials to any person who has a state credential that matches any of the NCC AP’s levels of national credentials, it is easier now, more than ever, to obtain a national credential and use it for your benefit.

National credentials and standards also help addiction professionals address a variety of other issues inherent in the addiction profession. Addiction professionals have suffered low salaries and benefits for decades and will continue to struggle if we cannot achieve a standardized scope of practice and level of recognition for the services that we provide. In building the vision of the addiction profession within the medical healthcare system and working towards the integration and recognition of substance use disorders as a specialty, national credentials and their standardized education, experience, and competency requirements provide a clear, uniform guide for payors, stakeholders, and the public to understand our worth and the value of our work. Very few wonder what a “MSW” performs in terms of services, or scope of practice or the level of education they have achieved. Not everyone knows the exact nature of a MSW’s experience; however, there is general trust as to what those

credentials mean. Now is the time to create that same level of trust when stakeholders and the public refer to substance use disorder professionals.

Substance use disorder professionals have also struggled with the lack of transportability of their credentials from state to state, which ultimately affects and attributes to the national workforce shortage. National credentials (able to use for licensure or certification or both in any state) would allow for easy transportability across state lines because all levels of education, experience, and competency would be uniform across all states. No longer would a substance use disorder professional be told when they move from one state after achieving credentialing or licensing in that state (and 20 plus years of experience) that they have to start over with earning credentials in their new state. Now is the time to honor the education and experience that substance use disorder professionals

achieve no matter what state they have practiced in or level of credential they have achieved.

We have come a long way on our journey through the past 50 years to gain credibility, raise awareness of the addiction profession, and create public policy that pays for substance use disorders treatment and research and creates opportunities for more students to specialize in a substance use disorders career; however, we are not quite there yet! We have not created “household credentials” for our profession that are easily recognized by payors and the public, alike. Now is the time to move our discipline forward to create the visibility and credibility that will move our profession past the questions of “who are they, what do they do, what standards do they meet, and why should we pay them for services?”

With over 11 million new persons over the age of 12 with substance use and mental health disorders now eligible for healthcare, now is the

time to build a stronger, more viable, and recognized workforce and NAADAC is here to help achieve that as a reality!

Many blessings on Your journey!



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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2011). *Scopes of Practice & Career Ladder for Substance Use Disorder Counseling*. Pp. 4–6.

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