

My Big Concern for the Addiction Counseling Profession (Part II)

By Kirk Bowden, PhD, MAC, NCC, LPC, NAADAC President

A primary role of states' behavioral health regulatory/licensing boards is protection of the public. I am fearful that in most states these boards do not adequately protect the public in respect to addiction counseling. At this time, most states do not require behavioral health professionals to obtain any addiction-specific education and experience before granting them authority to independently provide addiction counseling services.

How is that protecting the public? They clearly aren't! Especially in light of the fact that addiction and substance use disorder counseling is widely considered one of the most challenging areas of behavioral health counseling. Members of the public seeking recovery and in need of a skilled addiction counselor for themselves or for a family member should be outraged.

In Spring 2015 issue of *Advances in Addiction and Recovery*, I discussed my frustration over this issue and pointed out that in most states Clinical Psychologists, Clinical Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs), Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs), and Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHCs) are not required to obtain any addiction counseling-specific education, training, or supervised work experience prior to practicing addiction counseling independently. Holding one of the above listed behavioral health licenses in most states inherently includes authority to provide addiction counseling. Because of my high level of frustration surrounding this topic I know I sounded a little preachy; however, please keep in mind that I don't believe this topic can be repeated or discussed too much.

I also have related concerns and frustration with third party reimbursement under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). While I understand that the dust has not totally settled on the ins-and-outs of the ACA, it currently appears that the regulation and oversight of insurance companies and other third party reimbursement payers falls under the jurisdiction of individual states. Though insurance companies and other third party reimbursement payers have some authority in establishing their own rules and requirements for direct reimbursement, it's likely that in most cases the requirements will follow states licensing rules and require a master's degree or higher and a license in a behavioral field and at the independent level.

It appears that many, if not most of the third party reimbursement payers will reimburse for addiction counseling provided by independently licensed behavioral health professionals — even if the professional has no education, training or work experience in addiction counseling. Keep in mind that many states do not currently offer an addiction counseling license or an addiction counseling license at a master's or higher degree level. Therefore, addiction counselors in those states may be required to obtain an independent license in a different behavioral health profession to be qualified to receive direct payment from a third party reimbursement

provider for addiction counseling services. There is a very real possibility that many licensed and experienced master level addictions counselors whose states have certification instead of licensing will be unable to receive direct reimbursement from third party providers for their service; unless the counselor has a license in another behavior health profession.

I asked you, as an addiction counseling professional, to conduct a web search and find the website of the regulatory agency in your state that licenses the various behavioral health professionals. Study it carefully. Normally, psychologists have a regulatory board that separates them from the other behavioral health professions. Often social workers and MFTs and LPCs are regulated by a single state board. However, regulatory boards vary from state to state. It shouldn't be hard finding the regulatory board or boards in your state. Read the statutes and rules for each of the behavioral health professions. It is likely that you will find that your state doesn't require addiction-specific education or experience to practice addiction counseling independently.

Many of you, NAADAC members like myself, are licensed in one or more of the other behavioral professions. As professionals, we understand the importance of "doing no harm" and "only practicing within the scope of training and experience." The public needs to be protected. The public needs counselors that are truly knowledgeable in addiction treatment and recovery. We need to work for the protection of the public. We need to get actively involved in writing and calling our states' behavioral health licensing/regulatory boards. Most importantly, we need to work with and lobby our state legislators to make the needed regulatory changes in behavioral health licensing laws. Members of the public seeking recovery that are in need of a skilled addiction counselor for themselves or for a family member have the right to know that their counselor has had addiction specific training and experience.

If you would like to share your thoughts and experience on this issue or share how you feel this issue is affecting you in your state, please email me at kirkbowdenphd@gmail.com.



In addition to serving as NAADAC's President, Kirk Bowden, PhD, MAC, NCC, LPC, serves on the Editorial Advisory Committee for Advances in Addiction & Recovery. While serving in many capacities for NAADAC through the years, Bowden also serves as Chair of the Addiction and Substance Use Disorder Program at Rio Salado College, consultant and subject matter expert for Ottawa University, a past-president of the International Coalition for Addiction Studies Education (INCASE), and as a steering committee member for SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), Partners for Recovery, and the Higher Education

Accreditation and Competencies expert panel for SAMHSA/CSAT. Bowden was recognized by the Arizona Association for Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors as Advocate of the Year for 2010, and by the American Counseling Association for the Counselor Educator Advocacy Award in 2013, the Fellow Award in 2014, Outstanding Addiction/ Offender Professional Award in 2015, and most recently the California Association for Alcohol/Drug Educators' Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015.