

# Addiction Counseling Credential Standardization and Portability Problem

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

The lack of addiction counseling credential standardization and portability is an issue that our profession needs to address now! Addiction counselor credential requirements vary greatly from state to state. About half of the states offer counselor certification and the other half requires addiction counselor licensing. Most states' credentialing boards are government entities. Some states' addiction counseling credentialing is handled by public or private corporations.

Academic requirements for addiction counselor credentialing also varies greatly from state to state. Some states only require a GED or a high school diploma and 250 clock hours of online or in-person seminar training to be credentialed. On the other extreme, some states require a master's or higher degree in a behavioral health field with very specific addiction counseling university course work. Requirements for internships/practicums and/or supervised work experience hours also vary greatly from state to state — often by hundreds of hours.

I have often witnessed the credential portability problem first hand. I served on my state's licensing board, the Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners, for more than a decade. In that time, I frequently witnessed extreme frustration by addiction counselors' credentialed in their previous state of residence being denied a license by our regulatory board. Unfortunately, this issue is not a problem specific to Arizona. This same counselor frustration happens across the nation in credentialing and regulatory board meetings every month. Why? Because there is a lack of educational and credential standardization in our profession which creates this portability problem.

Having a credential from another state and years of experience as an addiction counselor doesn't always translate into meeting the very specific regulations of a new state. Keep in mind that regulatory board members cannot and do not randomly reject applications. Applications are rejected because the applicant is missing one or more of a state's specific credentialing requirements.

If an addiction counseling applicant does not meet a state's requirements, then board members do not normally have the authority to make an exception and grant the applicant a license. This is the case even when board members personally believe the applicant is a qualified candidate. Licensing board members are mandated by law to enforce the regulatory rules and statutes of their state as they are written. Often even veteran addiction counselors may need to secure additional university course work and/or supervision hours when they seek to obtain a license in a



new state of residence.

As addiction counseling matures as a profession, it is important that our profession works to incorporate standardized educational and licensing requirements in every state. Not only will this standardization provide greater portability, it will also strengthen our identity as a profession. To be viewed as a profession by the public I believe requires that we start working now to obtain standardization of addiction counselor educational and licensing requirements in every state.



*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.*