



Interested in a VA career?

The American Counseling Association Government Affairs team has partnered with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to increase the number of licensed professional mental health counselors (LPMHCs) employed by the VA. Working together with Stacey Pollack, national director for program policy implementation in the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in the VA Central Office, we have focused on informing local VA officials about the value that LPMHCs can bring to their staffs and on helping LPMHCs find job openings at the VA. Dr. Pollack presented, along with two of her LPMHC colleagues, at the ACA 2019 Conference in New Orleans and has offered to have VA employees attend ACA state branch meetings to explain the hiring process. We appreciate them taking the time to compile this month's Advocacy Update column.



The Veterans Health Administration is the largest employer of mental health providers in the United States, offering comprehensive health care to our nation's veterans at 172 medical centers and 1,069 outpatient sites throughout the country. In 2010, the VA was authorized to hire LPMHCs as a discipline of specialty mental health providers after Congress recognized these counselors as a specific occupational category of mental health specialists in the Veterans Benefits, Health Care, and Information Technology Act of 2006 (Public Law 109-461).

In the past nine years, the VA has made steady progress in integrating LPMHCs into its workforce and currently has LPMHCs hired at VA

facilities throughout the country. Although the VA recognizes that many state licensing boards use different acronyms or abbreviations to refer to counselors, as a national federal agency, the VA uses LPMHC to encompass all counselors.

Thus far in 2019, the number of counselors in the VA has continued to grow as LPMHCs (and other disciplines) from both inside and outside of the system educate and advocate concerning the benefits that LPMHCs can bring to the VA's mental health programs and to our nation's veterans. According to Jennifer Wood, the acting deputy chief of staff and the associate chief of staff for mental health at VA Texas Valley Coastal Bend, "The mission of caring for our nation's heroes necessitates that we as an organization leverage highly qualified professionals to deliver the caliber of care our veterans deserve. Incorporating LPMHCs into our cadre of specialists has served to strengthen our ability to deliver high-quality care, improve access to services, and enrich the interdisciplinary and whole-health approach to health care."

The VA and organizations such as ACA have done much work in the past to inform counselors about working in the VA. To further educate ACA members about what types of positions LPMHCs can hold in the VA, Ann Canastra, Carrie Myers and I presented at the ACA 2019 Conference in New Orleans. We spent a lot of time answering questions about



(From left) Carrie Myers, Ann Canastra and Stacey Pollack presented at the ACA 2019 Conference in New Orleans on the types of positions that LPMHCs can hold within the VA.

the qualifications required for counselors to be hired by the VA and provided information about VA LPMHC training programs. The VA also had a recruiter present in the expo hall throughout the ACA Conference. The recruiter was approached by hundreds of LPMHCs who wanted to gain information on hiring in the VA. The VA's participation at the conference was a great step forward in terms of strengthening the partnership between the VA and ACA as the counseling profession continues to increase in numbers throughout the VA system.

One of the main questions attendees asked at the conference was, "What do I need to do to qualify to work at the VA?" If you are interested in working for the VA as an LPMHC, the easiest route is to hold a full, current and unrestricted license to practice independently. If you do not have a license to practice independently, you may still be eligible for hire as long as another LPMHC

who can provide you with clinical supervision toward licensure is already employed at the facility. The VA provides this supervision free of charge until full licensure status is achieved and the counselor can function independently.

It is important to note that all LPMHCs hired within the VA must hold a master's or doctoral degree in clinical mental health counseling, clinical rehabilitation counseling, or a related field from a program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). It is also important to understand that because the VA is a federal agency and has supremacy, it can hire individuals licensed in a different state from where the person is planning on working as long as their state license allows them to diagnose and provide treatment. To look for opportunities within the VA, interested counselors should go to USAjobs.gov and complete a search for "LPMHC" positions.

As of this past April, the number of LPMHCs employed in VA facilities had risen to approximately 350. This number will continue to grow as LPMHCs who are already employed in the VA advocate for sites to post mental health positions across a range of disciplines. Currently, approximately 40% of VA medical centers have hired LPMHCs; these medical centers, as well as other VA facilities, continue to open opportunities for LPMHCs to apply for positions. Although many sites still have hired only one or two LPMHCs, the discipline has quite a presence at two Texas facilities, with VA Central Texas currently having 31 LPMHCs onboard and VA Texas Valley Coastal Bend having hired 21 LPMHCs. It is great to see how these facilities have embraced LPMHCs and hired them in a range of positions, both as front-line clinicians and in leadership positions.

For those curious about salaries, the salary of an LPMHC at the full performance level (GS-11) in the VA ranges from \$53,062-\$68,983. The pay in many locations may be higher based on locality pay (refer to opm.gov for locality pay). For those interested in administrative positions, LPMHCs may be promoted beyond the GS-11 level to a GS-12, GS-13 or GS-14.



LPMHCs in the VA Central Texas (Temple) system include (top row, from left) Joey Ellis, Donna Rakidzich, Mark Awdykowyz, LaMencia Hill, Amber McGinley and Johnathan Elliott, and (bottom row, from left) David Carter, Benjamin Saxe, Antoinette Collier, Christopher Jackson, Rhonda Burnell, Joshua Taube, James Beall and Stacy Parker.

In addition to hiring mental health staff, the VA provides mental health training to more than 6,400 individuals annually. Currently, there are nine funded LPMHC training sites at the following VA facilities: Asheville, North Carolina; Bay Pines, Florida; Canandaigua, New York; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Cleveland, Ohio; Omaha, Nebraska; Spokane, Washington; Syracuse, New York; and Tampa, Florida. To train in the VA, students must come from a CACREP-accredited program because the VA hopes to retain/hire many of these students.

The VA is currently working to expand its number of LPMHC training programs. Each training program must have at least two LPMHCs at the site to provide appropriate supervision to students. Many programs have didactic and group supervision rotations, and students can train in programs where LPMHCs are employed.

LPMHCs are currently employed in a variety of VA mental health programs, including health care for homeless veterans, general mental health clinics, primary care mental health integration clinics, substance abuse programs, employment programs, posttraumatic stress disorder clinics, inpatient mental health, intensive mental health case management, mental health residential programs, and psychosocial rehabilitation and recovery centers. LPMHCs are also employed as local recovery coordinators and suicide prevention coordinators and at readjustment counseling centers (often

known as Vet Centers). LPMHCs within the VA are able to provide a valuable component of team-based care that complements the skills of other mental health professions. Once employed by the VA, LPMHCs often are eligible to participate in a variety of trainings, including training in the delivery of evidence-based therapies.

The possibilities for LPMHCs in the VA continue to grow as more and more mental health services are being provided to our veterans. VA mental health leadership continues to educate hiring officials on the pros of recruiting and retaining LPMHCs, which are one of the six core mental health professions in the VA.

Ann Canastra, a local recovery coordinator and an LPMHC at the Syracuse VA says, "The landscape is changing, and the LPMHC profession is growing in the VA. Sometimes it's a slow ship to turn, but I've witnessed the turn for the past 14 years, and I'm proud to be an LPMHC lead serving in the VA." ♦

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