
Understanding the Continuum of Behavioral Health Professionals Working in Substance Use and Addiction Services in the United States

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Background

Addiction counselors (AC) are poised to address the demand for substance use and other behavioral health services, yet there is considerable variability in how this workforce is enumerated and understood. This study summarized how AC (both non-graduate and graduate level) are defined based on state credentialing requirements, education and training criteria, and Medicaid reimbursement.

Methods

Practice Acts, licensing body credentialing rules, and Medicaid state plan, fee schedules, and provider manuals were systematically extracted for AC specific state policies. Extracted data and findings were synthesized to compare findings for non-graduate and graduate-level AC to observe state variation.

Findings

States widely vary in the titles, credentials, and payment of graduate and non-graduate level ACs. There are 160 non-graduate-level AC credentials offered in the U.S. Seventeen states (33%) offer at least one credential for those with an associate's degree and 30 states (59%) offer at least one type of AC credential for those with a bachelor's degree. There are 68 graduate-level AC credentials offered across 42 states. Of these, the majority (93%) require passing a certification exam. States with multiple credentials were more likely to offer a laddering of credentials signifying career progression within the AC workforce.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This state analysis highlights the wide variability of definitions, degree and training requirements, and scope of practice within the addiction counselor workforce. Clarifying credentialing pathways for ACs is necessary as states work to increase the addiction workforce. Policymakers could assess the relationship between Medicaid reimbursement for the AC workforce and availability of non-graduate level AC credentials to increase the size of the addiction workforce.