



## **Report of the American Mental Health Counselors Association at AASCB Annual Business Meeting to State Licensure Board Representatives**

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### **ADVOCACY INITIATIVES ON BEHALF OF MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS**

#### **The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act**

President Trump signed in October a major VA mental health and counseling bill.

The bill is the most significant new legislation for the counseling profession in over a decade and a tremendous advancement for mental health counselors working for the federal government, and particularly the Department of Veterans Affairs.

This historic legislation directs the U.S. Office of Personnel Management to create the first ever federal government classification for mental health counselors, referred to as an Occupational Series. The Series will allow counselors to work in federal government agencies under the title of mental health counselor instead of generic Series that apply to many professions. Social workers and psychologists have had their own Occupational Series for decades and it is past time counselors have the same level of recognition. Creation of an Occupational Series for mental health counselors has been a top federal priority for national counseling organizations for many years and is a hard won success.

The legislation -- [S. 785, the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019](#) -- also takes several steps to increase the hiring, training, and advancement of mental health counselors within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The bill requires the Comptroller General of the United States to

prepare a study on staffing levels of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists. The study will identify “impediments to carry out the education, training, and hiring of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists”, as well as a “description of the objectives, goals, and timing of the Department with respect to increasing the representation of such counselors and therapists.” The bill also creates scholarships for counselors interested in working for the VA Readjustment Counseling Program.

### **House of Representatives Committee Passes Counselor Medicare Legislation**

In September, the House Energy and Commerce Committee approved H.R. 945 – Medicare Mental Health Access Improvement Act – in an historic vote supporting Medicare coverage for the counseling profession. While this legislation has passed both the House and Senate twice over the years, never before has the bill been voted on as a standalone measure rather than part of a broader package. The legislation would allow mental health counselors to receive fee-for-service reimbursement for treating Medicare beneficiaries with mental health conditions. The Committee reported the bill to the full House by voice vote.

The future of HR 945 in this Congress is difficult to forecast. There are limited legislative workdays left this session, although there is expected to be a post-election lame duck session that may provide additional opportunities for passage of the bill.

### **COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES WITH MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATIONS & STAKEHOLDERS**

AMHCA has been pursuing several collaborative projects over the last several months with several mental health organizations such as the :

- **American Psychiatric Association**
- **Association of Counselor Educators and Supervisors**
- **Mental Health Academy (MHAc)**
- **Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness (ABHW)**
- **Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP)**
- **Chi Sigma Iota (CSI)**
- **American School Counselor Association (ASCA)**
- **NAADAC**

- **International Association for Counseling (IAC)**
- **Mental Health America (MHA)**
- **National Council for Behavioral Health**

Working with several organizations, we have tried to elevate clinical mental health counselor specialty practice in counselor education and expand the influence of CMHCs in inter-disciplinary training venues through.

- Joint Webinars - Professional Development
- Continuum of Care Projects
- Sharing Content
- Shared Advocacy

Specifically, we have held the following co-sponsored events and initiated projects with the:

- **Association for Behavioral Health & Wellness (ABHW)** -- Webinar on “The Vital Role that Clinical Mental Health Counselors Play in Improving Behavioral Health Outcomes for Health Plan Insureds”
- **Tele-health Certification Institute** -- Co-Sponsored Tele-Mental Health Preparedness Conference, that covered “Legal, Ethical, & Technical Aspects of Tele-mental Health.” *Topics included crisis/ disaster response, complex trauma, and tele-substance abuse treatment.*
- **CACREP** – Created Memorandum of Understanding where CACREP & AMHCA will form a collaborative effort for the benefits of our organizations and members for the purpose of achieving the various aims & objectives relating to “Shared Respect and Elevation of Respective Standards and Informing Our Respective Organizations”, data sharing and knowledge dissemination.
- **ASCA** – Webinar on “Identifying the Unique Role of School Counselors and Mental Health Counselors in Addressing Students’ Mental Health Needs.”
- **NAADAC** –To kick off our collaboration, we have co-sponsored a major webinar in April on “Psychological First Aid during COVID 19: Tools for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Counselors.”
- **Mental Health Academy** – AMHCA co-sponsored a major international summit on “Suicide Management” in August where 20,000 attendees participated.

## COVID-19 RESOURCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

**AMHCA has created several Covid-19 information resources for mental health counselors on our website including:**

- Medical Information About the Coronavirus
- Tele-Mental Health Initiatives
- Continuing Education Opportunities
- Advocacy Initiatives
  - Communications to Policymakers and Stakeholders
- New AMHCA Resources
- AMHCA COVID-19 Special Newsletters

## AMHCA LEADERSHIP ON RACIAL INJUSTICE AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

AMHCA is moving forward on several initiatives aimed at combatting racism in our communities and how clinical mental health counselors can play an active role including:

- Creation of the AMHCA Diversity, Equity and Inclusion TF to serve as advisors to the AMHCA Board, members and staff to ensure that resources appropriately address systemic oppression, anti-racism and inclusivity.
- AMHCA Racism and Social Justice theme issue (Fall 2020) of the *AMHCA Advocate* magazine, with articles addressing implicit bias, race-based trauma, social justice on race conversations.
- Special issue of on Social Justice and the Role of Clinical Mental Health Counselors in the *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* (scheduled for early 2021).
- Free AMHCA Webinars in 2020.
- AMHCA Facebook Live Events.
- Updated Cultural Competence and Social Justice Specialist (or like name) to be included in credentialing initiative of the AMHCA Credentialing Certification Board.

- AMHCA's work will extend well beyond the clinical mental health counseling profession to encompass other BH organizations and groups addressing racism and social injustice. To that end, we will continue to collaborate with the organizations we are collaborating highlighted in this report.

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