

Celebrating 40 Years of AMHCA By Asking: How Do CMHCs Differ?

While in Montreal in April at the American Counseling Association Conference, I was able to interact with many AMHCA members and clinical mental health counselors, as well as the leaders of ACA and other divisions. The sense of belonging one has from being around so many other professional counselors, counseling students, counselor educators—and even vendors in the exhibit hall who know what counselors do—is a wonderful experience.

Being around so many others in the counseling field was both exhausting and energizing. However, across my interactions with such counseling diversity, the uniqueness of our division of clinical mental health counselors was also apparent in both obvious and subtle ways. In fact, in recent interactions with AMHCA members, I discovered that some were unaware or confused about the use of the term “clinical mental health” as our preferred term to describe our profession.

CMHCs Are Similar to Some Other Types of Counselors

Clinical mental health counselors are professional counselors trained at the master’s level, although some of us obtain doctoral degrees, too. We are licensed in our state of practice by a variety of titles at the highest clinical level. Because of this wide variety of license titles, AMHCA uses the term “clinical mental health counselor” as a descriptive term to include all licensed individuals who practice in a clinical health care environment.

Like other counselors, such as school and career counselors, we are trained to use helping skills to build an appropriate professional relationship, to address the needs of the whole person from a wellness perspective, and to focus as much as possible on clients’ empowerment within their cultural context. Furthermore, in addition to having specific training and focus on diagnosis and treatment planning, we often work with acute and

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Editor’s note: As part of AMHCA’s celebration of its first 40th years, AMHCA’s president reflects on why “similar” doesn’t mean “the same” when it comes to CMHCs, and explains how they differ from other types of mental health professionals.

chronic clients in clinical managed care environments and utilize both brief and long-term models of care and treatment plans.

It’s important for us to identify by both the title of our license within our state, and also as part of a profession of clinical mental health counselors, using inclusive language understood by legislators and federal programs, such as TRICARE, Medicaid, and the VA to describe *the highest level of licensed counselors who*

independently diagnose and treat behavioral health issues. (Hopefully “clinical mental health counselors” will soon become the term for licensed counselors under Medicare.)

What Make CMHCs Distinct From Other Mental Health Professionals?

Although all professional counselors share the same philosophies, training, and even licenses within a specific state, we don’t all practice with the same issues, diagnoses, or treatments. CMHCs are also in quite different behavioral health and managed care settings—ones that require unique knowledge, skills, and behaviors—than many of our counseling colleagues. We are similar, but not the same, as all professional counselors.

Not only is AMHCA advocating for the unique needs of clinical mental health counselors, but we also continue to develop materials, such as the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics, and to offer forums and trainings unique to our highly skilled variety of counselors.

I encourage you to embrace the term “clinical mental health counselor” when engaging in interprofessional dialogue and in your advocacy with legislators and rule-makers, and to simultaneously embrace the similarities with our other professional counseling colleagues while celebrating our uniqueness.

(I also encourage you to experience belonging at the AMHCA Annual Conference in New Orleans in July! See the special section in this issue on pages 16–22.)