

By **AUDREY PARENTE**

STAFF WRITER

Mental health expert Norman E. Hoffman of Ormond Beach got tired of running the gauntlet of challenges to his credentials every time he was a court witness. He decided to do something about it.

Hoffman, who also is a jazz musician, organized the National Board of Forensic Evaluators, to establish a nationally recognized credential for mental health evaluators.

Unlike TV shows that unravel court dramas with ease, solutions are not so easy in real life. Courts rely on expert testimony, gathered often tediously over time.

Forensic experts are called to help analyze evidence and evaluate people. Testimony from mental health counselors is needed in cases ranging from child custody and adoption to personal injury and crime, according to the American Counseling Association.

"There are no hard numbers, but it's a growing area," said David Kaplan, chief professional officer for the American Counseling Association, headquartered in Alexandria, Va., with 43,000 members in the United States and 50 countries.

Until recently, licensed counselors were on their own to establish credibility as expert witnesses, Kaplan said. But Hoffman's new organization provides education and credentials for mental health evaluators.

"Counselors are more and more accepted as professionals, and the (National Board of Forensic Evaluators') certification is a very solid credential that is endorsed by the ACA," Kaplan said. He explained that behind the credential "is excellent training in gathering information, doing examinations, presenting information and giving courtroom testimony in an unbiased manner."

Hoffman, a licensed mental health counselor for 42 years, saw the need for a credentials board a few years ago.

"I have been doing these (mental health) evaluations since the 1970s — since I was the Mental Health Center director of outpatient services in Nanticoke, Pa.," said Hoffman.

Hoffman spent two years as a traveling jazz musician after he graduated from high school, then earned bachelor's and master's degrees in music and doctorates in education and pastoral psychology.

He worked in marriage and family counseling, and also with hypnosis. He also became a cer-



HOFFMAN

Department of Children & Families Batterer's Intervention Program.

"I would evaluate both sides (of a case) and make recom-

mendations. I was doing one or two a week," Hoffman said. "But when I got out into the private sector, I had to prove myself every time, and they asked for my credentials. I had to go through it in court over and over again."

In 2003, he decided to create a standard and establish an advisory board to assist in training and certification that courts could rely upon.

"We set up rigorous standards that nobody would ever deny and developed a process, a written exam and set up an advisory board from all over the country and Canada, including licensed psychiatrists and psychologists on the board," Hoffman said.

Doctors and lawyers also are on the board. The Web site is www.nbfe.net.

Mark Hamilton, executive director of the American Mental Health Counselors, said his organization offers programs and materials for thousands of members in 30 chapters across the United States.

"This (National Board of Forensic Evaluators) program is new for us," Hamilton said.

"Our members are called into court involving their clients and cases to give testimony, and this program guides them through the maze of the law," he said. "It gives them expertise on how to be effective in the courtroom."

Hoffman said the program has accepted 150 licensed mental health professionals as candidates.

To date, 13 credentials have been issued. The credential must be renewed every two years.

When Hoffman isn't assessing clients or training other professionals, he's playing jazz on his keyboard. He joins a trio of area musicians who perform the last Thursday each month at Mario's Restaurant, 521 S. Yonge St., Ormond Beach.

Dr. Norman Hoffman

Norm Hoffman, a mental health expert who also plays jazz in Ormond Beach, organized a group of forensic evaluators.

Counselor starts group to train, evaluate experts