

# Equipping counselors to become forensic mental health evaluators

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At some point in your counseling career, you will be faced with the possibility of being subpoenaed to court. Just the thought of being subpoenaed to court creates a sense of tension and uncertainty for most counselors and mental health professionals. The reason for this reaction is related to the inexperience most counselors and mental health professionals have related to the court system and communicating the context of counseling work into the "legal" framework of the law.

Most counselors and mental health professionals enter into their field of study in college without considering taking a forensic-related course. Typically, forensic-related course work is found in programs that prepare students for a career in law enforcement — otherwise known as a degree in criminal justice. Interestingly, most criminal justice degree programs have either a core course or elective course in psychology, but counseling programs do not extend elective program courses in forensic counseling. That's because counselor and mental health training programs do not typically embrace the identity of a forensic evaluator.

Oddly, after students graduate from college with their degrees related to counseling or mental health, they find work with institutions that bombard them with required employee training programs. These programs focus on the legal issues related to confidentiality, harassment, discrimination, indications for when to seclude and restrain clients, documentation and the parameters of counseling related to how specific insurance companies want to see family sessions scheduled. The reality is that most counselors are not prepared to navigate through the legal system or communicate the legal jargon, and they are not

equipped to prepare testimony to the court when subpoenaed or asked to present as a witness.

Forensic evaluations have long fallen under the domain of psychiatrists and psychologists, and credentialing bodies have catered to these professionals in providing the necessary training and certification. Mental health counselors interested in pursuing a forensic psychology career are at a distinct disadvantage when compared with psychologists and psychiatrists. To become a forensic psychiatrist, one must first graduate from medical school, perform an internship, be a board certified psychiatrist and meet other closely related regulations that are specific to psychiatry. To become a forensic psychologist, typically one must first graduate from a doctoral program approved by the American Psychological Association, complete a post-doctoral fellowship in forensic psychology and then complete the regulations that are designated criteria specific to psychology. Typically, counselors and other related mental health professionals do not see themselves pursuing a medical or doctoral psychology degree just to be credentialed as a forensic evaluator. This would not be practical.

As a result, more than 200,000 licensed mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists and licensed clinical social workers in the United States have been virtually excluded from this interesting and potentially lucrative aspect of the mental health field. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, there are about 96,000 mental health counselors, 26,258 clinically trained psychiatrists, 97,290 social workers and 47,111 marriage and family therapists practicing in the United States. Of the 88,500 licensed clinical psychologists, only 224 are certified as forensic psychologists in the United States, according

to information retrieved from the American Board of Forensic Psychology.

After recognizing that a vast number of qualified mental health professions did not have a nationally approved and recognized forensic credentialing process, the National Board of Forensic Evaluators formed a partnership with the American Counseling Association and the American Mental Health Counselors Association. This partnership demonstrates an effort to provide a credible and professionally recognized forensic training and credentialing process for licensed counselors and other licensed mental health professionals. NBFE was officially established in 2003 and originated from a specialty certification training program developed by licensed mental health professionals, physicians and practicing family attorneys.

To obtain certification through NBFE, the following criteria (which are also available on the NBFE website at [www.nbfe.net](http://www.nbfe.net)) must be met:

- Minimum of a state license to practice independent mental health counseling, including licensed professional counselors, licensed clinical social workers or licensed clinical psychologists. If licensing is not required by your state, the candidate must be a National Board certified counselor with a national certified counseling credential.
- Three years of post-licensure experience.
- Minimum of 40 hours of substantiated forensic documentation in one or more of the following areas: classes, workshops, seminars, supervision and published professional works that focus on psychological assessment, sexual offenders, domestic violence, expert witness, ethical issues, family law, introduction to the essentials of forensic evaluation, child custody assessment,

personal injury, malingering, competency to stand trial, civil commitment and juvenile justice. Experience in providing expert testimony, depositions, divorce and family mediation will be considered if a verifiable court case number and court reference number can be produced.

- Three professional references who can validate the candidate's ethical and pertinent clinical skills and abilities.
- Successful completion of a written examination administered by NBFE.
- A practice sample review and oral examination presented to the advisory board. This will be used to assess the knowledge and skill of the candidate wishing to qualify as a forensic psychological evaluator.

The NBFE credentialing program provides the licensed counselor with the additional competencies required to serve in the capacity of a forensic evaluator. Most counselors will be surprised to learn how much of their counseling work is related to forensic evaluation. The following are some examples of forensic counseling evaluations: mental status examinations, child custody evaluations, temporary detainment orders, seclusion and restraint, fit-for-duty assessments, child and senior adult abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault and victim support.

Other needs for forensic counselor evaluators can be found in the relationship between law enforcement agencies and forensic mental health professionals. This role includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Evaluative services, which include pre-employment screening, fitness-for-duty evaluations and evaluations for specialty assignments such as SWAT teams, school resource officers and K-9 patrols

- Clinical services in which the mental health professional counsels officers following a shooting or after other traumatic experiences
- Operational consultations, which include criminal profiling, hostage negotiation and providing insight for investigating cold cases
- Organizational consultation and development, which include training and evaluating the effectiveness of programs within the department. This may also include work in public policy, such as assisting in the design of correctional facilities and prisons. More generally, forensic work covers territory in the traditional options of criminal justice (i.e., academic training, law enforcement and corrections).

In summary, counselors will be expected to develop critical competencies related to forensic evaluation in their clinical practice. Often counselors are not aware of a credentialing and/or continuing education opportunity specific to forensic evaluation because the identity of the forensic evaluator has been largely associated with psychologists and psychiatrists. The NBFE credentialing program provides an opportunity for counselors and other related mental health professionals to develop and enhance their expanding knowledge, ability and skills in forensic evaluation.

For more information, contact Norman E. Hoffman, president of the National Board of Forensic Evaluators, at 595 W. Granada Blvd., Suite H, Ormond Beach, FL 32174. You may also call 386.677.3995 or e-mail [forensic@nbfe.net](mailto:forensic@nbfe.net).

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