



New CACREP Standards frame counselors' skills in disaster response

In the wake of the California wildfires, members of the counseling profession returned with residents to survey the piles of ashes where homes had once stood. Counselors offered shovels, rakes, water, gloves and, perhaps most important, a compassionate presence. A counselor helped a woman riddled with guilt because her home was still standing to realize that it could provide a place for neighbors to support one another, share lunch or even just use the bathroom.

Was the presence of counselors in the midst of the wildfire devastation an unusual situation — one unlikely to be experienced by most counseling professionals? Or was it an indication of emerging expectations on the profession — a reflection of the growing need for counselors to be prepared to provide emergency mental health assistance to any community following a natural or manmade disaster?

Skills in the provision of disaster mental health services were not on the agenda in 2004 when the board of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs established a Standards Revision Committee (SRC) to undertake development of standards that would define the counseling profession's knowledge base, skill sets and identity for eight years, reaching to July 2016. The CACREP Board charged the SRC with developing standards that would strengthen the identity of the counseling profession as well as prepare students to meet the current and future needs of consumers. SRC members committed themselves to a standards revision process that included the distribution of two drafts, presentations at numerous conferences and the review of hundreds of feedback forms. They met frequently to consider the potential impact of each draft standard on the resources of institutions, the objectives of program

specialty areas and the time and financial obligations of students. The SRC planned to deliver a final draft for CACREP Board approval in June 2007.

Then a complication presented itself in the form of the federal government. In July 2006, CACREP received an unexpected call from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) located in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). ASPR serves as the HHS secretary's principal advisory staff on the protection of the civilian population during times of bioterrorism and other public health emergencies. It was ASPR's task, assigned by the Office of the Vice President, to find a way of sustaining consistency and collaboration in emergency preparedness education across all health care disciplines, including mental health. Previous attempts, in the form of federal grants to a few major universities, had resulted in disparate outcomes with no staying power. Frustrated, some government officials were on the verge of creating curriculum requirements and imposing them on all programs that prepared health care workers. The ASPR staff, recognizing that such government heavy-handedness likely would heighten tensions between the federal government and higher education, sought another solution.

In collaboration with Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, ASPR developed public health accreditation guidelines consistent with the National Response Framework. ASPR sought to achieve consistency and uniformity in preparedness education by encouraging educators from each health care discipline to follow these guidelines in developing disaster preparedness standards specific to their professions.

ASPR invited CACREP to participate in its effort to hardwire consistent emergency preparedness standards

into mental health care training and encouraged CACREP to apply for a grant that would support the development and promulgation of draft emergency preparedness competencies. CACREP paused. Was it appropriate for the government to impose its presence in this way? Did the issue of emergency preparedness merit delaying the final revision of the CACREP Standards? CACREP staff and Board members discussed the pros and cons of working with ASPR. The final decision to accept the grant reflected CACREP's vision statement that commits the organization to "developing standards and procedures that reflect the needs of a dynamic, diverse and complex society."

Grant negotiations went smoothly. CACREP respected the appropriateness of the federal government's role in establishing nationwide consistency in emergency preparedness education. In return, ASPR respected the autonomy of CACREP's protocol in promulgating draft standards. It was clear to both parties that CACREP would develop and disseminate but not promote the draft language, nor would CACREP commit to the inclusion of any emergency preparedness competencies in the final draft of its standards; feedback from the counseling community would determine the fate of the promulgated competencies.

Research, interviews with government agencies and input from counselors who had been seasoned by multiple disaster deployments guided development of the draft standards. Experienced counselors stated emphatically that being "willing and able" was not enough; they emphasized that although many of the skills counselors possess would underpin their efforts as responders, additional knowledge and skills were required. To be of service, they said, counselors must understand the chain of command and communication mechanisms of

the interagency response team. In disaster settings, counselors must be intentional in strengthening individual and community resilience. In addition, counselors must be skillful in utilizing assessment, diagnosis and treatment strategies that are unique to emergencies and very different from clinical skills that are appropriate in an office setting. Experienced counselors also stressed the importance of employing self-care strategies to avoid compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary traumatization.

CACREP received feedback on the draft standards through multiple venues. At regional and national conferences, every audience included constituents who were eager to relay their experiences as disaster mental health providers. Professors also related their students' interest in classes that addressed counselors' roles as responders. Members of every counseling specialty area voiced support for preparedness competencies in their program area standards. At the 2007 conference of the American Association of State Counseling Boards, Charles Figley, president and founder of the

Green Cross Academy of Traumatology, praised the draft standards, publicly awarding CACREP an A plus for taking a proactive approach to the escalating frequency and magnitude of disasters.

As feedback supporting the draft competencies mounted, so did the number of local, regional and global catastrophes. Deployed counselors assisted families displaced by flash floods in north Texas and Maine and by devastating tornadoes in Florida, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Georgia. They comforted families who lost loved ones when a major bridge carrying rush-hour traffic collapsed in Minneapolis. They provided pro bono services to students attending Northern Illinois University and Virginia Tech, respectively, in the months following campus shootings. To this day, counselors are offering services to the poorest and most vulnerable families along the Gulf Coast.

In July 2008, the CACREP Board voted on the final version of the standards. Emergency preparedness competencies were included in both the core curriculum and program

specialty area standards. The new standards will go into effect July 1, 2009. As institutions seek first-time or renewed CACREP accreditation, their applications will address their efforts to meet the new emergency preparedness standards. In this way, over time, CACREP-accredited counseling programs will graduate students who have integrated the knowledge and skills of emergency response into their professional identities. They will be prepared to serve on interdisciplinary response teams, including, according to Figley, deployment with the Green Cross Assistance Program in the United States and throughout the world. ♦

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