



Human Services with an Emphasis in Forensic Behavioral Health: The Role of Advanced Education in Enhancing Care for Clients

By Jerrod Brown and Janina Cich

Human Services with an emphasis in Forensic Behavioral Health education provides concentrated curriculum on the key concepts, skills, and topics necessary for human service professionals to effectively work with criminal justice-involved individuals enduring mental illness and other related concerns. In an effort to reduce the wide-ranging impacts of mental illness and prevent future criminal behavior for this population, human services students who are interested in becoming forensic behavioral health practitioners typically will provide these clients with a diverse array of services including screening, intervention, case management, and prevention efforts. This work often necessitates understanding the nature of human service systems by interfacing with other forensic behavioral health practitioners and professionals, mental health care providers, social workers, criminal justice officials, educators, government agencies, nonprofit groups, and family members. Human service forensic behavioral health practitioners, despite being unlicensed and often without advanced education and training in the area, serve as an integral hub in multidisciplinary teams working to address a client's mental health issues and ultimately reduce the risk of future criminal behavior. These human service providers should gain insight into identifying, selecting, and evaluating interventions, strategies, and treatment-rehabilitation models that can best serve their clients through the completion of advance graduate-level education.

Advanced education in the field of human services focusing on forensic behavioral health offers a significant opportunity to improve outcomes for criminal justice-involved clients with mental illness. Central to this pathway forward is imparting a better understanding of mental illness and criminal behavior. By

promoting efforts in competent problem solving analysis and providing appropriate assistance, referral, advocacy, and intervention to diverse populations, human service professionals will consequently aid in improving their clients' overall quality of life. A growing body of research indicates that the likelihood of criminal behavior can only be reduced by addressing mental illness in conjunction with criminogenic risk factors like pro-criminal attitudes, antisocial peers, and substance use than mental illness symptoms themselves. By gaining a greater understanding of the complex needs of clients, human service forensic behavioral health practitioners can ensure that interventions, supports, and services are best utilized in a manner to promote enhanced outcomes for their clients.

To better prepare practitioners to work alongside criminal justice-involved clients with mental illness in a non-licensed therapeutic capacity, advanced education programs in the area of human services with an emphasis in forensic behavioral health should cover at least six key areas of content:

1. Students will become intimately familiar with serious mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia and mood disorders), behavioral disorders (e.g., attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder), developmental and neurobehavioral disorders (e.g., autism and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder), personality disorders (e.g., antisocial personality disorder and borderline personality disorder), trauma (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder), and co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders.
2. Students will understand the conditions involved with neurocognitive disorders (e.g., Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome), brain-based injuries and conditions (i.e., traumatic brain injury and dementia), and the associated symptoms such as memory problems (i.e., suggestibility and confabulation).
3. Students will be exposed to identifying the role of different institutions ranging from forensic and veteran hospitals to criminal courts and corrections agencies and determine appropriate assistance, referral, advocacy and direct interventions relative to this populations' dynamic needs.
4. Students will learn about the challenges diverse groups of offenders (e.g., culture, age, gender, and offense type) face during re-entry and on community supervision along with the ethical and legal challenges of providing services to these groups. Students will also identify problems and implement a systematic plan for use with individual clients or organizations.
5. Students will develop an understanding of forensic risk assessment tools, the basics-involving competency to stand trial, and other legal decision-making abilities. Moreover, students will enhance their report writing skills, and acquire knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of a human services professional when called upon to testify in court.
6. Students will be exposed to evidence-based practices in the screening, intervention, case management, and preventative measures of clients in these settings. Students will also learn about the importance of becoming trauma-informed when providing such services to criminal justice-involved populations who have a history of mental illness.

An advanced education in human services with an emphasis in forensic behavioral health will better equip practitioners to work with criminal justice-involved clients who experience mental health and other related challenges. For example, such an education is beneficial in mental health, alcohol and drug treatment facilities, particularly for detoxification and psychiatric rehabilitation workers and unlicensed counselors. Similarly, this education could be valuable for those working with children and adolescents such as child welfare and protection workers, children's therapeutic support services, and juvenile justice specialists.

Along similar lines, advanced education in this area better prepares staff in group homes, adult foster care, half-way houses, and elder-care facilities to more efficiently serve overall quality of life of these diverse clients. Outside of treatment and care settings, advanced education in human services with an emphasis in forensic behavioral health should be beneficial in correctional settings. This includes authorities such as corrections officers, probation, and parole officers, caseworkers, correctional treatment specialists, and release planners. Last but not least, additional education in this area is beneficial for advocates working in the areas of domestic abuse, crisis intervention, brain injuries, homelessness, suicide prevention, and at-risk youths.

As summarized in this article, advanced education in human services with an emphasis in forensic behavioral health could be valuable for practitioners across diverse settings. This education will better equip practitioners with the screening, intervention, case management, and preventative skills to serve this challenging population. Such an approach is imperative to improve short- and long-term outcomes for criminal justice-involved clients who experience mental illness.

Biographies

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Janina Cich, M.A., is a retired law enforcement officer with two decades of criminal justice experience. She is an adjunct criminal justice and forensic behavioral health professor and frequent lecturer. Janina conducts Crisis Intervention Training for law enforcement and mental health practitioners focusing on awareness, assessment, intervention, de-escalation techniques, and prevention approaches for mental health populations in the criminal justice systems. She currently serves as the Chief Operating Officer of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS). She has co-authored several forensic mental health articles, serves on the peer review panel of Forensic Scholars Today (FST), and is Associate Editor of the Journal of Special Populations (JSP).