



Behavioral Health Support Specialist Clinical Training Program Updates Governor Inslee Signs SSB 5189 to Establish BHSS in Washington

Authored by Dr. Bill O'Connell, Associate Professor and Director | May 17, 2023

Acknowledgement

On behalf of the University of Washington Behavioral Health Support Specialist (BHSS) Clinical Training Program, I wish to thank Senators Trudeau, Wagoner, Conway, Dhingra, and Wilson for sponsoring Senate Bill (SB) 5189 to establish a behavioral health support specialist in our State. I also thank Representative Callan and colleagues for sponsoring companion House Bill (HB) 1348 in the House and supporting Substitute Senate Bill (SSB 5189) during the legislative hearings. I am grateful for the unanimous support of both the Washington Senate and House to pass this important legislation related to workforce development. I want to thank Governor Inslee for signing SSB 5189 into law. Finally, I want to acknowledge the generous philanthropic gift from Ballmer Group which has helped activate and sustain the BHSS workforce development project.

Rationale for a BHSS

Increasing access to evidence-based interventions for common behavioral health conditions across settings (e.g., specialty mental health, integrated care, crisis services, community centers, etc.) will help alleviate suffering and help prevent mild to moderate behavioral health conditions from becoming severe. As proof of concept, the UW BHSS project team looked to England's program called *Talking Therapies for Depression and Anxiety* (formerly *Improving Access to Psychological Therapies*) which has demonstrated improvement in behavioral health outcomes through training and employment of a bachelor-level practitioner. With the support of community partner feedback, the UW BHSS Clinical Training Program has evolved into a unique education program to prepare a provider type specific to workforce needs in Washington State.

Rationale for a New Credential

A legislative initiative to create a new credential has been an important part of the success of this workforce project. Prior to passage of SSB 5189, bachelor-level provider types who offered evidence-based intervention services under supervision could not be reimbursed across employment settings for these services through the existing state Medicaid plan. SSB 5189 ensures that a BHSS can be employed in settings where the scope of practice is needed and that the cost of these services may be recovered by employers through state Medicaid and possibly third-party insurance.

Scope of Practice

Per SSB 5189, the BHSS may provide brief, evidence-based behavioral health interventions under supervision. The current curriculum prepares a BHSS to work with adults. Curriculum for working with adolescents and children will be forthcoming once UW has secured funding for subject matter experts to develop curriculum specific to this population. In the meantime, it is expected that a BHSS will work within their competency area like all licensed behavioral health provider types. Employers and supervisors ought to assess the competency of the BHSS to work with adolescents and children based on education and supervised training.

Current Stage of BHSS Curriculum Development

Using a backward design framework, our team has developed a comprehensive list of competencies and learning objectives to help distinguish the BHSS from other provider types and establish the BHSS as an important link in the behavioral health professions career ladder leading to graduate degrees. We are developing a clinical training program implementation guide for educational partners to map the BHSS curriculum to their existing four-year degree programs and an instructor's guide to support integration of BHSS-specific curriculum into existing or new courses. We will be describing the practicum experience in collaboration with our educational and practicum partners in a handbook or manual. We are also developing curriculum for brief evidence-based intervention strategies that will be essential for all future BHSSs.

Time, Duration, and Distribution of Content for an Approved BHSS Educational Program

All persons applying to become a BHSS in Washington will need to complete an approved bachelor or post-baccalaureate program. A bachelor's program is usually four years in duration in Washington colleges and universities with some exceptions for advanced placement. Education programs will maintain autonomy in how BHSS learning objectives and courses are dispersed in the degree program. UW will provide recommendations for when learning objectives ought to be introduced, reinforced, and assessed as proficient. Generally, core course work will start by the third year of a bachelor's program in psychology or social work and conclude in the fourth year. Distribution of content may look different in comprehensive behavioral healthcare programs or a future bachelor's program combined with a registered apprenticeship.

Location of BHSS Programs

The primary role of the UW Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences is to serve as a catalyst to statewide implementation of the BHSS curriculum. In keeping with the legislative language in SSB 5189, the UW team will collaborate with the Department of Health (DOH) and consult with community partners to develop guidelines for approving educational programs. Once this work begins, the DOH will communicate the final recommendations to the public regarding guidelines.

Our intent from the beginning of this project was to identify educational partners in federally designated behavioral health workforce shortage regions of the state. We are pleased to be partnering with the following institutions of higher education in Washington:

- Centralia College Bachelor of Applied Science in Behavioral Healthcare
- Eastern Washington University Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts in Psychology Program
- Lake Washington Institute of Technology Bachelor of Applied Science in Behavioral Healthcare
- Spokane Falls Community College Bachelor of Applied Science in Integrated Behavioral Health
- University of Washington Tacoma Bachelor of Arts in Social Welfare

Eastern Washington University, Washington State University and UW Tacoma School of Social Work are collaborating on curricular development. Other Washington universities and colleges, both public and private, have expressed interest in adopting the BHSS clinical training program. We look forward to future partnerships with these educational institutions.

Additionally, we look forward to continued collaboration with the SEIU Training Fund to create an alternate pathway for a BHSS by combining a registered apprenticeship with a bachelor's degree or post baccalaureate certificate.

Future Employment of a BHSS

A BHSS may be employed in any setting where behavioral health services are offered and there is a qualified professional to supervise the BHSS. Behavioral Health Support Specialist is the name of the clinical training program and credential. Employment titles may vary (e.g., care manager, counselor assistant, clinical service provider, etc.). The BHSS is distinct from other bachelor-level provider types based on specific education, competency assessment, and state examination. It is expected that BHSS intervention services for common behavioral health conditions will be reimbursed per recommendations of the Health Care Authority and the Insurance Commissioner. A BHSS is not a substitute for a master's level provider type and employers ought to ensure that a stepped care model is in place to appropriately address the needs of patients or clients.

Future Credentialing of a BHSS

The DOH will issue a future BHSS credential. The credential will be issued after a student meets all the requirements including, but not limited to a bachelor's degree from an approved program that includes a practicum and a completed jurisprudence exam. The continuing education requirements to maintain the credential will be twenty hours every two years. Specifics will be outlined by the DOH. The credential is scheduled to be available January 1, 2025.

University of Washington Project Team

Our project team consists of UW subject matter experts and invited faculty from Eastern Washington University, Washington State University, and other Washington higher education institutions to provide consultation on curricular development. Subject matter experts or SMEs have proven scholarship and/or extensive experience in education and training in areas such as cultural responsiveness, team-based care, screening and assessment, brief evidence-based interventions for common behavioral health conditions, and ethical issues for a bachelor-level provider type.

Conclusion

Questions will likely emerge regarding the preparation and employment of the BHSS. Our team is open to questions and will provide the best response based on available information. Email: bhsswa@uw.edu

On behalf of Dr. Anna Ratzliff and the BHSS Project Team, we look forward to the work over the next twenty months as our team collaborates with education, government and community partners to help prepare the first graduates eligible for credentialing in 2025.

Sincerely,

Bill O'Connell, EdD
Associate Professor
Director, BHSS Clinical Training Program
Email: woconn@uw.edu or bhsswa@uw.edu

Anna Ratzliff, MD, PhD
Professor
Director, Integrated Care Training Program
Principal Investigator, Ballmer Group Gift

Juliann Salisbury, MSW
Manager, BHSS Clinical Training Program
Email: bhsswa@uw.edu