

WHAT ARE PSYCHIATRIC TECHNICIANS?

Overview

Licensed Psychiatric Technicians are in the forefront of care and treatment of Californians with mental illness or intellectual impairment. These specialized mental health professionals have been a unique component of the state's healthcare system since the 1950s. Psychiatric Technicians are active members of interdisciplinary teams and an integral part of the quality assurance process.

The Psychiatric Technician is a nursing category parallel to Licensed Vocational Nurse (California's term for Licensed Practical Nurse). Psychiatric Technician skills focus on mental illnesses and intellectual impairment, while Licensed Vocational Nurses have an emphasis on medical-surgical, maternity and pediatric nursing.

As multi-talented mental health professionals with a broad range of skills and expertise, Psychiatric Technicians are key players in the many and varied aspects of California's system of treating those with mental illness or intellectual impairment. It is a profession that attracts those who truly want to help improve the quality of life for some of the most vulnerable individuals in today's society.

Continuing Education

To help keep licensed Psychiatric Technicians current with recent advances in their field, they must complete 30 hours of continuing education courses every two years in order to renew their licenses.

State licensure

California Psychiatric Technicians are licensed by the Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians (BVNPT), which is a part of the state Department of Consumer Affairs. The Board maintains an enforcement function to safeguard the consumer's right to skilled, competent treatment.

To supplement to the state licensing process, the California Association of Psychiatric Technicians maintains the Psychiatric Technician Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.

Salaries

Because of their focused training, Psychiatric Technicians are among the most cost-effective mental health and developmental care providers.

The targeted training and moderate salaries of Psychiatric Technicians make them a particularly cost-effective resource as an option to Registered Nurses, Social Workers and other higher-paid licensed professionals.

History

The Psychiatric Technician profession has its roots in the old job of hospital "attendant." The profession came into its own in the 1950's as advancements were made in treatment of the mentally ill and mentally retarded in both the private and public sectors. In order to provide a system to assure competence in practice, the state began "certifying" Psychiatric Technicians in 1959. Ten years later, the Psychiatric Technician Law was enacted, elevating the profession to full licensure like that required for other health care disciplines.

Psychiatric Technician Skills

- Basic nursing
- Communication skills
- Medication administration
- Documentation

- Patient assessment
- Therapeutic activities
- Treatment plan development
- Addictive disorders
- Treatment plan implementation
- Group process
- Treatment evaluation
- Patient / family education
- Case management
- Geriatric care

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Practice settings

Psychiatric Technicians are specially trained in two areas that have a tremendous unmet need -- treatment programs for the mentally ill and intellectually impaired client. As of June 2008, there were approximately 14,000 licensed Psychiatric Technicians in California. They are employed in facilities operated by private providers, hospital districts, counties, cities or the state. Psychiatric Technicians are well positioned to move into new settings as they develop. Following are settings in which they now work:

- Residential treatment programs
- Psychiatric treatment facilities
- Acute psychiatric units
- Institutes for mental illness
- Psychiatric emergency teams
- State developmental centers
- Long-term care facilities
- Substance abuse programs
- Home health care
- State hospitals
- State prisons
- Youth facilities
- Intermediate care facilities
- Psychiatric health facilities
- County jails
- Social rehabilitation facilities
- Adult residential facilities
- Secured geriatric facilities
- Day treatment programs
- Outpatient mental health clinics
- Psychiatric assessment centers
- Psychiatric crisis units
- Mobile psychiatric emergency teams
- Special school programs
- Residential care homes
- Partial hospitalization programs

Treating Developmental Disabilities

Clients with developmental disabilities comprise one of the two categories of individuals receiving treatment from Psychiatric Technicians. There are more than 100,000 Californians in this category, including those with severe mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, severe behavior disorders, birth defects from abuse of alcohol or drugs during pregnancy, and brain injuries from near-drowning. Psychiatric Technicians provide considerable basic nursing care, and also implement the "individual habilitation plans" for teaching clients to function at their maximum potential.

Changes in the DD System

California's system for serving the developmentally disabled is undergoing change. There is a nationwide trend away from institutional care and into community-based care in the "least restrictive environment." These are much smaller settings, including group homes, foster homes and even individuals residing in "supported living" arrangements in their own apartments and homes. As California expands this new system for the developmentally disabled, there will be new avenues of opportunity for Psychiatric Technicians in the continuum of care for the developmentally disabled.

Treating Mental Illness

The other category of individuals treated by Psychiatric Technicians are those with serious mental illnesses. They are treated in programs run by private facilities, by cities and counties, and by the state. In state programs for the mentally ill, Psychiatric Technicians work in the five state hospitals. About half of the state hospital patients are in the "forensic" category, meaning they are admitted through the criminal justice system. The other state hospital patients are "LPS" patients committed by counties under the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act because they pose a serious, immediate danger to themselves or others.

The Mental Health 'Realignment'

In 1991, California's mental health "realignment" law shifted the responsibility for funding and decision-making from the state to the 58 individual counties. The counties now decide where and how to treat their mentally ill, and state hospital placement is only one option. Counties also use alternative treatment programs in community-based settings.

In the community mental health system, Psychiatric Technicians are already used in county hospitals, in community outreach programs and in psychiatric emergency response teams. They are being used to help fill the pressing need for mental health services for the poor, the homeless and the elderly. Wherever mental health treatment is provided, Psychiatric Technicians are important members of the care-giving team.

The State Prison System

A major area of expansion for Psychiatric Technicians is the compelling need to provide treatment to thousands of state prison inmates with serious mental illnesses and developmental disabilities. The Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) estimates that 10 to 15 percent of adult inmates suffer from serious mental illness. Among youthful offenders incarcerated in CDCR facilities, estimates are up to 20 percent have serious mental illnesses.

Over the years, there have been settlements of lawsuits attacking the state's failure to provide adequate care and treatment for mentally ill inmates. As a result, CDCR's predecessors -- the California Department of Corrections and the California Youth Authority -- began expanding their mental health programs. As part of this process, Psychiatric Technicians were hired in adult prisons starting in 1991 and in juvenile facilities beginning in 2002.

Psychiatric Technicians function in various aspects of these challenging programs, including crisis intervention, mental health screening, patient assessment, implementing treatment programs, supervising suicide risks, administering medications, maintaining medical records, and quality assurance. Another function involves parole programs that prepare inmates for productive lives after release.

For Further Information

Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians (BVNPT)
2535 Capitol Oaks Drive, Suite 205
Sacramento, CA 95833
(916) 263-7830
FAX (916) 263-7859

Information available on educational requirements, license examinations, license renewals and fees, continuing education and licensing enforcement.

California Association of Psychiatric Technicians (CAPT)

1220 S St., Suite 100

Sacramento, CA 95811 USA

(916) 329-9140

1-(800) 677-CAPT

FAX (916) 329-9145

Information available on professional matters, job-related issues in state government employment, legislation concerning Psych Techs and continuing education.

Credits

Written by Keith Hearn, CAPT Consultant

Consulting Committee:

- Alisa Haffner
- Linda Pinkerton
- Phyllis Parod
- Dorothy Ball
- Pat LaMountain
- Richard Culbert
- Jeanne E. Higgins