

SCOPE OF PRACTICE — PSYCHOLOGISTS

AAFP Position

The AAFP recognizes the important role psychologists play in assessing and managing behavioral and mental health. Although psychologists are specially trained to diagnose and counsel those with emotional, behavioral, and mental health disorders, the prescription of drugs must be left in the hands of medically trained physicians. The AAFP opposes legislation that allows clinical psychologists the authority to prescribe treatment for patients with mental health disorders. Psychologists with patients who require prescribed treatment should coordinate care through collaborative partnerships with primary care physicians who have the proper training and authority to prescribe drugs. As mental health issues continue to dominate the national conversation, the Academy is dedicated to protecting the mental and physical health of our patients and pushing back against misguided legislation that threatens patient safety and wellbeing. The AAFP [supports](#) behavioral health integration in primary care, including the collaborative care model.

Education and Training

Clinical psychologists provide health care to individuals and families by diagnosing and treating mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Clinical psychologists seek doctoral degrees in psychology and either receive a PhD or PsyD, both of which require five to seven years of graduate-level education, followed by an additional three-year residency before licensure through their state board of psychology. Because psychology doctoral programs do not typically mandate coursework in psychopharmacology and psychologists lack the medical knowledge and training afforded to those who attended medical school, they do not have the proper training to administer prescription drugs.

Family physicians are well-equipped to provide mental health services and are one of the primary sources for mental health care in the United States. Roughly two-thirds of primary care physicians cannot connect their patients with outpatient mental health services due to the lack of those services in their area. Family physicians receive clinical training in mental and behavioral health, including four years of medical school and, at minimum, three years of specialized internship, and residency. Because family physicians, psychiatrists, and other physicians are medical doctors, they have the medical training and authority to prescribe medications and treatment for mental health disorders.

Scope of Practice and Licensure Requirements

Psychologists are licensed in all fifty states and DC to perform assessments, psychotherapy, and crisis intervention services.¹ For licensure, psychologists must meet certain education, practice, and continuing education requirements, which [vary by state](#). All states typically require psychologists to earn a doctoral degree in psychology and must pass the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards' Examination for Professional Practice of Psychology (EPPP).² Practice requirements range between 1,500-4,000 hours with an average of 2,001 hours.³ Varying levels of supervision are required for these practice hours depending on the state. For licensure renewal,

¹ University of Michigan School of Public Health Behavioral Health Workforce Center. (2017). "National Assessment of scopes of practice for the behavioral health workforce." Web.

² American Psychological Association. (2004). "What you need to know to get licensed: Experts offer a lesson on how to become a licensed psychologist." Web.

³ University of Michigan School of Public Health Behavioral Health Workforce Center. (2017). "National Assessment of scopes of practice for the behavioral health workforce." Web.

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continuing education hour [requirements](#) range between 10-60 hours over the course of either one or two years. Required content for continuing education varies by state with 33 [states](#) (AK, AZ, DE, FL, GA, IA, ID, IL, IN, KS, KY, LA, MD, MI, MS, NC, ND, NJ, NH, NM, NV, OH, OK, OR, PA, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WA, WI, WV) having specific content designations. Of these 33 states, all states except New Jersey require continuing education in ethics. An increase in telehealth use led to the introduction of [PSYPACT](#) in 2015, an interstate agreement that allows psychologists to practice telepsychology or offer temporary, in-person services across state lines without the need for additional state licensures. Currently, 25 [states](#) (AL, AR, AZ, CO, DE, GA, IL, KS, KY, MD, ME, MN, MO, NC, NE, NH, NV, OH, OK, PA, TN, TX, UT, VA, WV) and DC have enacted PSYPACT.

Psychiatrist Shortage

Nearly one in five people in the U.S. have a mental health condition, and the disease burden of mental health and substance use disorders was higher than any other condition in 2015.⁴ Unfortunately, the U.S. suffers from a dramatic shortage of psychiatrists and other mental health clinicians, leading states to expand the scope of practice for psychologists as a remedy. In fact, prescribing psychologists will not alleviate the shortage of psychiatrists in underserved areas because they are generally located in the same location as physicians and psychiatrists.⁵ Supporting collaborative care programs between psychiatrists, primary care physicians, and other mental health providers as well as supporting telepsychiatry are more effective solutions to address the psychiatrist shortage.⁶

Psychologists Prescriptive Authority

To address the increasing numbers of mental health problems in health professional shortage areas, 25 states (AK, AZ, CA, CT, FL, GA, HI, ME, MO, MS, MT, NB, ND, NH, NJ, NY, OH, OK, OR, TN, TX, VT, WI, WY, WV) have considered legislation at various times to grant psychologists prescribing authority, despite their lack of medical training and experience. In most states, clinical psychologists do not have the authority to prescribe medication for the treatment of mental health disorders. To address growing mental health concerns in health professional shortage areas, five states (ID, IL, IA, LA, NM) have laws allowing psychologists with advanced specialized training to prescribe medications to their patients. To obtain prescribing authority in collaboration with a primary care provider, clinical psychologists must complete post-doctorate training in clinical psychopharmacology, a supervised practicum in clinical assessment, and they must pass a national examination allowing psychologists to prescribe medications to their patients.⁷

In [Iowa](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Idaho](#), psychologists are supervised by a physician or designated primary care provider for two years under a conditional prescription certificate. The scope of prescribing authority in each state varies. In [Illinois](#), prescribing psychologists are not allowed to prescribe to patients under 17 or older than 65, pregnant patients, or patients with a serious medical condition and are prohibited from prescribing benzodiazepines, narcotics, or any Schedule II controlled substances.

Behavioral Health Integration

The Academy supports integrating mental health services into primary care settings and primary and preventive care into traditional mental health settings to treat patients holistically. In an integrated setting, mental health care professionals can reach more patients than in specialty mental health care practice. The Collaborative Care Model, supported by the AAFP and the American Psychiatric Association, is centered in a team-based approach, in which care teams led by primary care physicians and 'care managers,' along with consulting mental health care professionals, deliver evidence-based, clinical goal-oriented patient-centered care.

Updated: September 2021

⁴ Association of American Medical Colleges. (2018). "Addressing the escalating psychiatrist shortage." Web.

⁵ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (2010). "Scope of Practice: Psychologist Prescribing." Web.

⁶ Association of American Medical Colleges. (2018). "Addressing the escalating psychiatrist shortage." Web.

⁷ American Psychological Association. (2014). "About Prescribing Psychologists." Web.