

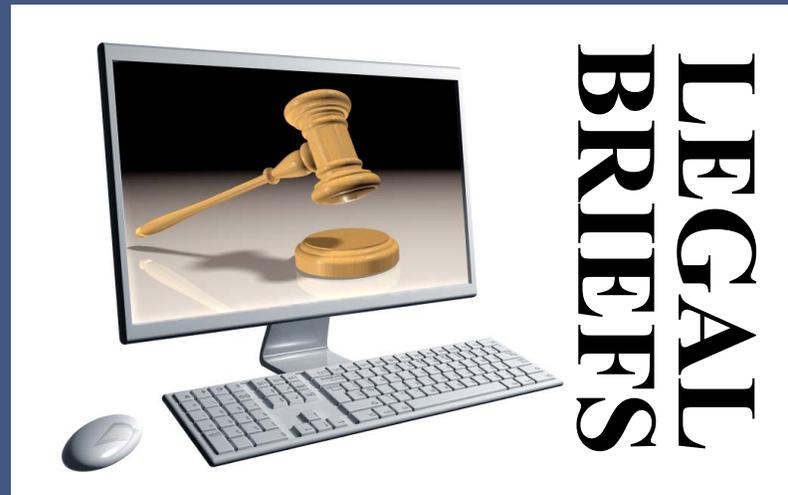
The Internet-license Connection

You're a marriage and family therapist intern working under supervision. You roll your chair up to your computer and log onto the Internet to conduct some online counseling sessions. Does this "telemedicine" time count towards the experience you need to obtain your license as a counselor?

What if you're already licensed as a counselor, and you're taking an online education course to brush up on your skills? Do those hours count toward license renewal? With online counseling and education programs booming, you need to know the answers so you can meet the legal requirements for licensure.

RANGE OF REGULATIONS

When it comes to obtaining your license, some state laws either don't address the issue of accepting online hours or use vague terminology. For example, if you live in Virginia, state regulations require you to have "direct client contact" for 240 of the 600 hours of intern experience to become a marriage and family therapist. But, the regulation doesn't define whether that contact must be face-to-face in an office setting or if online counseling with a video camera is acceptable. Other states may allow online counseling hours.



Licensing boards may be reluctant to accept online counseling experience because of concern that candidates for licensure would submit all online hours to meet the requirement. Would that truly be in the best interest of the public? States need to clarify what's acceptable—and what's not. Keep in mind that you still need to obtain informed consent even when the counseling is online.

A new set of issues arises when the therapist is licensed in one state and provides online counseling to a client in another state. Therapist state boards may take a page from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing's interstate compact, which provides for mutual recognition of licensure in different states. The Federation of State Medical Boards developed a model so

that physicians can go through an abbreviated licensure process to practice in other states. Several states have also adopted this model.

SOME CLARIFICATION IN CALIFORNIA?

California may have helped clarify the muddy waters of online counseling and licensure. As of January 2008, applicants for a marriage and family therapist license can receive credit for "providing personal psychotherapy services via telemedicine." The California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists and the (California) Board of Behavioral Sciences supported the change. Online counseling time is limited to 125 hours to avoid a situation where a licensure candidate obtains all of his or her client contact hours online.

LOG ON FOR CE

The license situation is clearer when it comes to continuing education requirements. Some states don't specify how many hours of education credit may be earned online. In other states, you may be limited to a certain percentage of online courses you can take in order to meet licensure requirements. It's important to keep current on the requirements. For example, a proposed change to the regulations in California would increase the number of self-study courses allowed (most of which are taken online) from one-third to one-half. Don't forget to check for any specific topics for which you are required to obtain credit so you can receive your license renewal. Ohio, for example, requires 3 hours of ethics training as part of the 30 hours of continuing education credit that marriage and family therapists must earn every 2 years.

PROTECT YOURSELF

Your state association is one of the best places to find more information related to licensure and online counseling. By taking the time to become informed about this new form of obtaining hours, you can protect yourself from liability in the future.



Reprinted with permission from Healthcare Providers Service Organization (HPSO); 159 E. County Line Road, Hatboro, PA 19040 1-800-982-9491 HPSO Risk Advisor 2011-2012.