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Press Release

For Immediate Release:
July 15, 2020

For Further Information Contact:
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Office of The Attorney General (http://www.nj.gov/oag/)
Gurbir S. Grewal, *Attorney General*

Division of Consumer Affairs (http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/)
Paul R. Rodríguez, *Acting Director*

NJ Cares (https://www.nj.gov/oag/law/)
Sharon M. Joyce, *Director*

AG Grewal, Division of Consumer Affairs Announce Actions to Expand Access to Mental Health, Substance Abuse Services During COVID-19 Pandemic

Measures Aimed at Expanding New Jersey's Mental Health Workforce and Improving Access to Substance Abuse Treatment and Counseling

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Administrative Order - Emergency Licensure of Mental Health Graduates and Extension of Permits for Psychologists (/COVID19/Documents/DCA-AO-2020-12_DCA-W-2020-11.pdf)

Administrative Order - Emergency Temporary Certification of Alcohol and Drug Counselors (/COVID19/Documents/DCA-AO-2020-13_DCA-W-2020-12.pdf)

Newark - Attorney General Gurbir S. Grewal and the Division of Consumer Affairs today announced new measures to promote access to mental health and substance use disorder services and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a new program to make it easier for recent graduates of social work and counseling programs to start practicing.

In a series of recent actions, the Division took steps to expand New Jersey's mental health workforce and access to treatment by:

- creating a program to grant temporary emergency licenses to individuals who recently graduated with a master's degree or doctorate in social work or counseling but who have not yet been able to take and pass their licensing exams due to the COVID-19 emergency;
- granting psychologists practicing under supervision a 1-year extension of their permits, allowing them to continue to practice;
- creating a new pathway for alcohol and drug counselor-interns to provide telehealth and telemedicine services by obtaining a temporary certification; and
- permanently granting advanced practical nurses more autonomy to treat individuals with substance use disorders through maintenance and detoxification treatment.

The emergency programs announced today are just the latest temporary licensure and certification programs launched by the Division to strengthen New Jersey's healthcare workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to facilitate recent graduates' entry into the work force despite their inability to take licensing examinations due to the pandemic. Prior programs focused on increasing the number of doctors, nurses, respiratory care specialists and other medical professionals needed to fight the COVID-19 virus.

"The COVID-19 pandemic not only threatens our physical health but also increases risks to mental health," said Attorney General Grewal. "The actions announced today will help ensure that New Jersey has a robust mental health and addiction workforce capable of delivering the services that our residents need during these difficult times."

While it is too early to measure the pandemic's full impact on the public's mental health and rates of substance abuse, recent surveys conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Census Bureau found that the percentage of New Jersey respondents who reported (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm) experiencing symptoms of anxiety disorder or depressive disorder within the previous week ranged from 31.1% to 39.6% during a period from April through June.

“The mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the profound impact it has had on so many of us, including our healthcare workforce, could far outlast the virus itself, so addressing this crisis within a crisis is paramount to the well-being of every New Jerseyan,” said Paul R. Rodríguez, Acting Director of the Division of Consumer Affairs. “Responding to the mental health harm done by the COVID-19 crisis is every bit as important as protecting physical health, and we thank all healthcare professionals for their service during this difficult time.”

“No one is immune to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and despair during the COVID-19 crisis, but for individuals already struggling with mental health or substance use disorders, the impact can be devastating,” said Sharon Joyce, Director of the Office of the New Jersey Coordinator for Addiction Responses and Enforcement Strategies (“NJ CARES”). “It is critical that this vulnerable population continue to have access to the therapeutic and addiction recovery services that serve as lifelines to so many.”

Expanding the Mental Health Workforce During the COVID-19 Emergency

Emergency Graduate Licensure of Mental Health Professionals

The Division has established a new program to grant emergency graduate licenses to individuals who have recently graduated with a master’s degree or doctorate in social work from any educational program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, or graduated with a master’s degree or doctorate in counseling from any regionally accredited institution of higher education, or any institution accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The program initially will be open to individuals who graduated on or after December 1, 2019.

By creating the emergency graduate licensure program, the Division is creating a pathway for recent graduates to begin practicing as licensed social workers and licensed associate counselors, on a temporary basis, without taking and passing their licensing examinations and satisfying certain other licensure requirements. Many recent graduates have been unable to schedule their examinations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused testing locations to close and/or cut back on their schedules.

Holders of graduate licenses must be supervised by appropriate New Jersey-licensed professionals and will be authorized to provide a full array of mental health services within their scope of practice, including through telehealth.

Because the Division received approximately 1,900 initial applications for social work licenses last year, the emergency graduate licensure program is expected to allow a large number of recent graduates to start practicing their chosen profession.

Eligible individuals can apply for a temporary emergency graduate license by visiting the Division’s website. (https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/COVID19/Pages/Emergency-Graduate-Licensure-Program-for-Mental-Health-Professionals.aspx) Additional information is available here (https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/COVID19/Documents/FAQ-Emergency-Graduate-Licensure-Program-for-Mental-Health-Professionals.pdf).

Extension of Permits Issued to Psychologist Trainees

The Division also has extended by one year the expiration of permits issued to certain psychologist trainees. These permits allow trainees to practice under supervision while attaining the experience necessary to qualify for licensure. The permits typically last for three years, but as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, some permit holders may be unable to acquire the practical experience necessary to qualify for licensure within that period. The Division’s action will allow these individuals to continue to practice as trainees for an additional period, to facilitate their eventual licensure.

Removing Barriers to Professionals Providing Treatment for Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Participating in the State's Response to the COVID-19 Emergency

Temporary Certification of Alcohol and Drug Counselor-Interns

A new program will grant temporary certifications to alcohol and drug counselor-interns, to allow them to provide much-needed telehealth or telemedicine services during the pandemic, and help them accumulate supervised work experience required for attaining full certification.

The temporary certification program is open to interns who have completed a minimum of 150 hours of core content education, accumulated 300 hours of supervised work experience, and attended a minimum of 15 self-help group meetings.

Applicants must have a plan of supervision approved by the Alcohol and Drug Counselor Committee of the New Jersey State Board of Marriage and Family Therapy and must practice under the supervision of a qualified clinical supervisor in compliance with the approved plan.

Prior to the temporary certification program announced today, these interns would not be allowed to provide alcohol and drug counseling services through telehealth or telemedicine under the State's telemedicine laws and regulations.

Alcohol and drug counselor-interns can apply for a temporary certification by visiting the Division's website (https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/COVID19/Pages/Temporary-Certification-of-Alcohol-and-Drug-Counselor-Interns.aspx). Additional information is available here. (https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/COVID19/Documents/FAQ-Temporary-Certification-of-Alcohol-and-Drug-Counselor-Interns.pdf)

Permanently Granting Advanced Practical Nurses ("APNs") Greater Autonomy in Treating Substance Abuse Disorders

A new rule (https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/Adoptions/nurado_07062020.pdf) issued by the State Board of Nursing allows APNs who meet requirements for dispensing narcotic drugs for maintenance treatment or detoxification treatment to do so even if their collaborating physicians are not qualified to dispense the drugs, as long as the joint protocol between the APN and the collaborating physician includes the physician's written approval for the dispensing of such drugs. The rule, adopted on July 7, 2020, removes a previous requirement that both APNs and their collaborating physicians be qualified to dispense narcotic drugs for maintenance treatment or detoxification treatment.

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The mission of the Division of Consumer Affairs, within the Department of Law and Public Safety, is to protect the public from fraud, deceit, misrepresentation and professional misconduct in the sale of goods and services in New Jersey through education, advocacy, regulation and enforcement. The Division pursues its mission through its 51 professional and occupational boards that oversee 720,000 licensees in the state, its Regulated Business section that oversees 60,000 NJ registered businesses, as well as through its Office of Consumer Protection, Bureau of Securities, Charities Registration section, Office of Weights and Measures, and Legalized Games of Chance section.

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Last Modified: *7/15/2020 11:03 AM*

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