



## Government Affairs and Public Policy

advocacy@counseling.org

# American Counseling Association Government Affairs and Public Policy Agenda 2021

The American Counseling Association's policy agenda outlines critical priorities for promoting the counseling profession and furthering the ACA mission through state and federal advocacy.

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### 2021 Federal Priorities

**Medicare Reimbursement for Licensed Professional Counselors:** Medicare is the primary insurance provider for approximately 60 million Americans, including adults age 65 and over and individuals living with disabilities. By 2030, the number of beneficiaries is expected to surpass 80 million. These individuals cannot currently use Medicare to receive services from LPCs, which limits their access to mental health services, especially in rural communities. To secure Medicare reimbursement for LPCs, the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team will:

- Gain more co-sponsors for the Mental Health Access Improvement Act, bipartisan legislation in the House and Senate, which would improve access to mental health services by permitting licensed professional counselors (LPCs) to be reimbursed by Medicare.
- Engage the White House administration on the importance of Medicare inclusion for licensed professional counselors and how it would increase access to care to those in need, especially in rural areas of the country.
- Engage licensed professional counselors in congressional meetings and conversations around modernizing Medicare and providing a behavioral health-care pathway for millions of Americans.
- Advocate in tandem with the Mental Health Access Coalition on behalf of LPCs.
- Create a coordinated engagement strategy to shed light on the flawed Medicare system and the lack of access to behavioral health services for those critically in need of them.

**School-Based Mental Health Services:** ACA is in support of programs that make students safer at school, improve school climate and improve access to mental and behavioral health services at school. The Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) Grant under Title IV-A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a flexible block that is designed to ensure that districts have access to programs that foster safe and healthy students, provide students with a well-rounded education and increase the effective use of technology in our nation's schools.

To continue to increase investments in school-based mental health services and school counseling programs, the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team will:

- Educate a wider array of Members of Congress, particularly those not on the education and funding committees, about the importance of and value of Title IV-A, with a focus on how the increased funding and flexibility is benefiting districts.
- Engage Department of Education representatives and urge them to make resources available to states and school districts to increase student-support services to meet recommended ratios of students to school counselors (250 students per counselor or 250:1).
- Advocate in tandem with the Title IV-A Coalition through targeted communication efforts and an effective legislative push.

**Veterans Affairs:** The increased hiring of LPMHCs within the Department of Veterans Affairs will reduce wait times for veterans seeking behavioral health services, as well as provide more career opportunities for licensed professional mental health counselors.

To continue the push for more LPMHC jobs in the Department of Veterans Affairs, the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team will:

- Work with the congressional Veterans Affairs Committees and the Department of Veterans Affairs to increase access to behavioral health services provided by rehab counselors and LPMHCs to veterans.
- Provide Veterans Administration (VA) officials with a platform at the 2021 ACA Virtual Conference Experience to address attendee questions and concerns regarding career pathways within the VA.
- Educate Members of Congress and their staff on LPMHC education and training as it relates to treating veterans.

**Racial Injustice:** The American Counseling Association denounces any form of violence or racial inequality. To continue to increase racial equity through federal advocacy, the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team will:

- Meet with congressional leaders to advance racial equity legislation that will incorporate the expertise of licensed professional counselors, and school counselor expertise in proposed congressional legislation
- Urge ACA membership to become engaged and advocate for the passage of legislation that will promote racial equity.
- ACA will continue to monitor mental health and counseling policy at the Federal level that may further promote racial justice and remove barriers to communities of color.

**COVID-19:** The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many people greatly, by exacerbating mental health issues. In order to help those affected as well as increase access to care, the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team will:

- Advocate for the extension of tele-behavioral health provisions beyond the Public Health Emergency (PHE)
- Advocate for the inclusion of the Mental Health Access Improvement Act into a larger COVID-19 relief legislative vehicle.
- Monitor legislation for support of small businesses, education, paycheck protection and grant opportunities.

**Career Counseling:** To continue to increase investments in college and career counseling programs, the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team will:

- Champion improving the workforce by supporting federal legislation that provides more funding for college and career counseling programs.
  - Push for Congress to prioritize critical new investments in career counseling to help students make informed choices, such as the Counseling for Career Choice Act.
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## 2021 State Priorities

### **Building a State-Based Policy Framework to Support the Counseling Profession in Career Growth and Practice Specific to the Needs of the Communities Served:**

ACA's Government Affairs and Public Policy team aims to support states and territories in designing and implementing state-level policy approaches dedicated to bettering the counseling profession through a continuum of localized strategy, programs and guidance. We are partnering with our members and branches to provide policy options and advocacy engagement from a multistate and national perspective. The goal is to bring states into greater alignment with each other in order to strengthen our counseling network and leverage our collective power. The 2021 state policy agenda must be adaptive to the needs of the COVID-19 crisis.

The American Counseling Association encourages states to focus on key issue areas for advancing policy in 2021. These priority areas include:

**Interstate Compact for Licensure:** An independent drafting process, which included a public comment period for all fifty states and five territories, facilitated by the Council of State Governments' National Council for Interstate Compacts (NCIC), was completed in 2020.

- In 2021, we are partnering with NCIC, members, states and branches on phase two of the Counseling Compact collaboration in order to introduce the compact to state legislatures. The compact provides language for states to engage in robust tele-behavioral health practice across state lines. This is important for meeting the needs of the COVID-19 crisis.

**Racial Justice:** The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted an urgent need for action within the healing professions to promote racial justice. We are encouraging states to incorporate racial justice initiatives into formal state policy agendas for the coming year.

- To accomplish this goal, we are asking states to work with local and state governments in declaring Racism a Public Health Crisis; to encourage Mayors to join a Mayoral Pledge of Action; and we are encouraging states to utilize data and guidance provided to craft tangible action plans for racial justice within the public health space and their respective communities.
- ACA will continue to monitor counseling policy that may further promote racial justice in 2021, particularly legislation that removes barriers to practice and promotes services in underserved communities impacted by COVID-19.

**Conversion-Therapy Bans:** ACA will support states in their efforts to align local practices with ACA's ethical code and current best practices. We will monitor bans of the discredited method referred to as conversion or reparative therapy throughout the U.S. and provide strategic resources to advance state goals for these bans.

**Ensuring Ethical Standards Meet Current Best Practices:** ACA is committed to promoting consistent ethical standards within the counseling profession and will foster relationships with boards, branches and members as necessary to ensure this remains a priority.

**Ensuring Educational Standards Meet Current Best Practices:** ACA will encourage states to move toward greater alignment through outreach, monitoring regulatory board activity, promoting regulatory board representation in key states and providing ACA members with resources to advocate.

In 2021, we will work with state legislatures and state agencies tasked with implementation of enacted legislation to ensure guidance is inclusive of counselors and states are issued the supports necessary for providing critical mental health services. We will actively support states as they advocate for a stronger mental health infrastructure and enhance counseling awareness for policy making.

To accomplish this, we will work with our national ACA network and allies to advance legislative priorities, to monitor key policy making issues and to ensure members receive the tools necessary for effective advocacy. Such policies include but are not limited to:

- COVID-19 Supports: tele-behavioral health, appropriations for small businesses, and grant opportunities.
- Encouraging local funding and appropriations for enhanced school-based counseling efforts.
- Expanding local supports for community-based mental health programs for violence prevention.
- Expanding student loan repayment programs specific to the counseling profession.
- Expanding insurance coverage for mental health providers.
- Supporting drug-use-disorder treatment programs.

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### Grassroots Engagement\*

As advocates, we are responsible for ensuring that Members of Congress, State Legislators and Regulatory Agencies are educated on the counseling profession. It is the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team's duty to advocate alongside its members, as well as prepare our advocates and supporters to participate in legislative advocacy activities to successfully advance ACA's legislative agenda. In 2021, ACA will continue enriching the understanding of ACA's advocates and supporters on the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy department's role with:

- **Tools and Resources:** Provide our members support with their legislative engagement by providing information on ACA's federal and state policies and ensuring advocates and supporters have the appropriate tools and resources successfully advance ACA's legislative priorities. This toolkit focuses on legislative advocacy and prepares you to effectively meet with your elected representatives and licensing and regulatory board members to advocate and lobby for their support of your cause on federal, state, and local levels
- **Increasing Engagement:** In 2020, ACA welcomed 7,708 new advocates. In 2021, we will continue to sustain ACA's advocacy base by increasing new advocates by 10%.
- **Advocacy Power Hour:** This program allows advocates to engage with the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team, stay updated on ACA's advocacy efforts, and provide essential training to meet the current needs of any advocacy campaign.
- **Counselor Stories:** We will continue collecting counseling stories to publish and share with policymakers to stay at the forefront of legislators' agendas and provide detailed awareness of the needs of the representatives' constituency as it pertains to the counseling profession and counseling services.