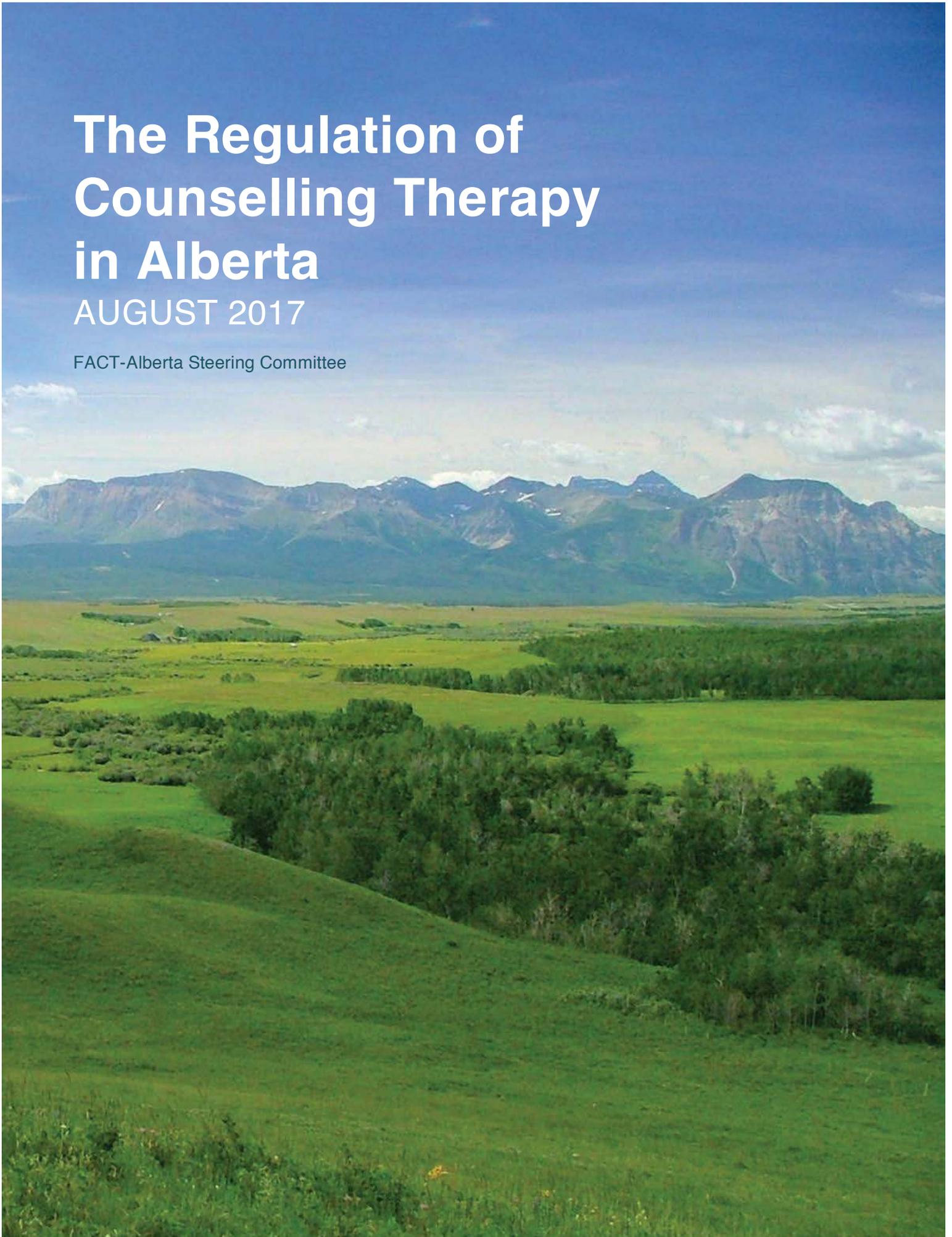


The Regulation of Counselling Therapy in Alberta

AUGUST 2017

FACT-Alberta Steering Committee



Introduction

The Federation of Associations of Counselling Therapists in Alberta (FACT-Alberta) has submitted an application to the Ministry of Health to request the regulation the profession of Counselling Therapy under the *Health Professions Act of Alberta*.

FACT-Alberta members consist of the following associations:

- AAMFT – Alberta Association of Marriage and Family Therapists
- AASC – Alberta Association for Spiritual Care
- ACCT – Association of Co-operative Counselling Therapists
- APTA – Alberta Play Therapy Association
- CATA – Canadian Art Therapy Association
- CCPA – Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association
- CPCA – Canadian Professional Counsellors Association
- CDAA – Career Development Association of Alberta
- CYCAA - Child and Youth Care Association of Alberta
- IEATA - International Expressive Arts Therapy Association
- MTAA – Music Therapy Association for Alberta
- NADTA – North American Drama Therapy Association
- PACCP – Professional Association of Christian Counsellors and Psychotherapists

Collectively this group of associations represents approximately 3,500 practitioners and 200 years of knowledge and expertise in the area of Counselling Therapy. It is estimated that there are more than 5,000 unregulated mental health and addictions practitioners in Alberta.

Due to the fact that membership in an association is voluntary, there are no processes to regulate the educational/continuing competency standards and requirements for practicing in this field. If a person practicing in this field is not a voluntary member of an association, there is no means to investigate formal complaints or administer correction or discipline for those who engage in incompetent, unethical, or impaired practice; placing the public and consumer at considerable risk.

Some provinces in Canada mitigated this risk by regulating the practice of Counselling Therapy. This profession is currently regulated in Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Other provinces are also in discussion with government to proceed with regulation.

On April 19, 2017, FACT-AB was granted a meeting with Minister Brandy Payne, Associate Minister of Health for Alberta, regarding regulation of the profession. The Minister expressed appreciation for the environment in which counsellors work and recognized the benefits of regulating the profession to increase accountability, facilitate health system integration and enhance addiction and mental health services to Albertans. The Minister granted support to her department staff to

further explore the application and has asked staff to continue to work with FACT-AB towards regulation.

What does a Counselling Therapist do?

The overall goal of a Counselling Therapist is to provide an opportunity for people to live a more satisfying life, with the resources and resilience needed to meet life's challenges. Therapeutic relationships with clients vary according to individual needs, but may seek to address developmental issues, reduce distressing symptoms, increase capacity for decision-making, provide support and coping strategies within a crisis, work through feelings of inner conflict, improve relationships with others, assist in career development, or nurture personal growth, self-esteem and self-awareness. Counselling Therapists emphasize the overall mental health and wellness of clients, and understand their specific challenges and disorders, as well as their strengths, within this context.

The profession of Counselling Therapy is different from all other professions, as Counselling Therapists provide services for a full range of clients, regardless of the cause of their maladaptive behaviour. The work is done within the client's context, as the Counselling Therapist provides psychosocial interventions that promote the optimal development, functioning and growth of the client. This is done by focusing on the strengths of the client across social, economic, cognitive, spiritual, cultural, and behavioural domains. In addition to

"talk therapy" interventions, some Counselling Therapists may have certification in the use of creative arts therapies (music, art, drama), play therapy, guided imagery, or spiritual care and counselling. Growth is accomplished using the most appropriate treatment modality to achieve competency, health and wellness.

Why Regulate THIS Profession?

The goal of regulation is to reduce the risk of harm to the public while maximizing the well-being of the client. Provincial or territorial governments grant professional self-regulation to a profession as a privilege which requires the profession to act in the public interest. A key objective is for the profession to set standards of practice and codes of ethics.

Risk of harm to the public is possible when an unregulated professional practices a complex profession.

Consider the following scenario:

An untrained/unregulated person calling themselves a "therapist" counsels a client who is palliative and is considering MAiD (Medical Aid in Dying). With MAiD being a relatively new option, and talked about in the media, the client feels a lot of pressure to understand their choices and is worried about being a burden to their family. They seek the counsel of someone they believe is a professional for support and direction. Unfortunately, the therapist's bias and personal beliefs on the topic is obvious in the discussions. The client, who is unsure and vulnerable, feels pressure to adopt the viewpoint of the therapist. In this case, the

untrained “therapist” is putting the client at risk, in a very real life and death situation.

A regulated practitioner would have a code of ethics, a professional practice code, and training in clinical skills that would allow them to counsel clients in difficult decisions, without the therapists’ personal bias and views obscuring or interfering with the process. Regulated practitioners receive training in counselling skills and methods in order to provide appropriate and ethical counsel to clients. They are also trained to make the appropriate referrals to physicians and other members of the interdisciplinary team, as is directly relevant to the case described above.

Risk of Harm to the public can be categorized into the following areas:

- Breach of a fiduciary duty or lack of a professional boundary between the Counselling Therapist and the client, leading to dual relationships, abuse or exploitation of the client
- Breach of client privacy or confidentiality, by revealing personal information without client consent;
- Various forms of professional incompetency, such as a lack of training in a particular technique, or failing to meet commonly accepted standards of clinical practice; and
- Poor business practices, including sub-standard record keeping and questionable billing practices.

Almost all of the acts or omissions that can be assigned to one of these four categories are likely to result in emotional or psychological harm to clients. In some cases, emotional or psychological harm may also manifest itself in

physical ailments. While there is no aspect of the provision of Counselling Therapy that is physically invasive or could clearly and directly result in physical harm, the fact that the damage is hidden is a significant risk factor.

Alberta's approach to psychosocial interventions, in that they are restricted not based on the intervention, but the severity of the condition being addressed, means there may be an even higher potential for risk than in some other provinces. The scope of practice for unregulated professionals is broader and more vulnerable populations are being served, because the bar for restricted activity is so much higher in Alberta. Thus, there is a significant potential for harm and need for regulation.

The Difference Regulation Will Make in Alberta

In a regulated landscape, Counselling Therapists would work as part of **more integrated primary health care teams**. In primary care settings, such as Primary Care Networks, physician offices, and outpatient mental health and addiction centers, Counselling Therapists would work alongside nurses and psychologists, providing immediate access to mental health services to patients experiencing distress, as well as the education and tools to assist them in their own preventative and enhancing mental wellness practices.

In a regulated landscape, we would see Counselling Therapists who offer services in

hospitals and treatment centers, such as marriage and family therapy, spiritual care, music therapy, and play therapy, more integrated within the interdisciplinary team. Patients would benefit from the **increase in information sharing and coordination of care, that makes for a more holistic and less fragmented experience of health care.**

As Counselling Therapists, mental health and addiction professionals would work to the top of their scope of practice, to ensure **patients receive the right care, at the right time, and from the right person.** The cost savings from triaging people's needs appropriately and utilizing a wider range of services would be significant.

Counselling Therapists in the community would also better serve the needs of these patients, as more collaborative professional relationships would now be possible. **Health care professionals who refer patients for regulated counselling could be confident that the person that they are referring to would provide safe and effective care.**

Albertans would have greater access to affordable, effective counselling services that meet their unique needs. Mental health surveys would no longer tell the old story, where Albertans primary complaint is poor access to counselling services. Barriers would be lifted for those people whose lack of employment benefits and financial resources have prohibited them from receiving counselling services. For example, individuals who have benefits that cover counselling, could stretch them further, as Counselling Therapists become accepted as options in their insurance plans.

Increased access to counselling services would also mean that when a more acute health condition develops, **appropriate referrals can happen sooner** - when diagnosis and early intervention from a Psychologist or Psychiatrist could make the most difference. **Access to these types of longer-term professional relationships, where a person can come to be known for their strengths and resilience, as well as their illness, might also reduce stigma and lead people to seek help sooner.**

Providing individuals more autonomy and choice in their mental health care would improve outcomes. Albertans would have greater choice in identifying a therapist and modality of treatment that works for them, without having to worry about whether or not their therapist is competent to provide the services. Research indicates that finding the right "fit" for the professional and the methods of treatment results in more positive outcomes.

Rural Albertans would have greater access to counselling services in their own community, either in-person or via video counselling, that meets the standards of best practice for secure use of technology. **Competent counselling professionals would be more identifiable and easier to access from a distance, with the title of Counselling Therapist now signifying a reliable standard.**

Regulation may also **increase the overall number of mental health and addictions providers in Alberta.** Students would be attracted to standardized education and training programs that equip them with the entry-to-practice competencies of the profession, and provide them with the security of a meaningful career as a Counselling Therapist in Alberta. Practitioners across Canada would be enticed

to work in a province where mental health and addictions is a valuable and integrated part of primary health care. The Alberta model of regulation, based on entry-to-practice competencies - would allow for practitioners to pursue a breadth of specialties, while identifying as part of a larger, connected web of mental health and addiction professionals.

Not only would a regulated landscape result in more mental health and addictions providers in Alberta - it could result in **a more stable and mature workforce to meet the increasingly complex mental health needs of Alberta's growing population.** Regulation would result in more opportunities that make the work of a Counselling Therapist in Alberta more meaningful and sustainable in the long term - including continuing education and supervision programs that nurture the professional development of Counselling Therapists well beyond entry-to-practice competencies.

Employers in Alberta would also benefit from the regulation of Counselling Therapists. They could provide wider options to employees in terms of safe and effective mental health and addictions services. While Counselling Therapists have long been involved with Employee Assistance Programs, employers could now also choose benefits plans that include the services of Counselling Therapists in the community, when employees find it to be a better fit for them. This would enable them to offer a wider range and increased amount of counselling services. Without asking employers to spend more, Alberta would have a healthier, more productive workforce.

Employers of Counselling Therapists in every context, including agencies, hospitals, and

treatment centers, would be better supported in determining who is qualified to provide safe and competent mental health and addiction services. They would not be responsible for providing specific standards of practice and ethical guidelines, knowing that Counselling Therapists - regardless of their area of specialty - would be accountable to a larger, regulated body, which would also appropriately address breaches.

Treatment facilities in Alberta would also benefit from the regulation of Counselling Therapists. Professionals regulated as Counselling Therapists and working in treatment facilities, such as Addiction Counsellors and Child and Youth Workers, would comply with the regulations of their college. Facilities and agencies seeking to hire Counselling Therapists would need to ensure that policies and procedures align with the standards of practice and codes of ethics of the College. **This would have a positive impact on Albertans receiving care in mental health facilities.**

“Valuing Mental Health”

The “Valuing Mental Health” Report of the Alberta Mental Health Review Committee 2015 made several recommendations that align with the goals of regulating the profession of Counselling Therapy in Alberta. In particular, they recommend changes that shift the system:

- From one that views individuals, families and caregivers as passive recipients of services to one that is person-centred and works with individuals, families and

caregivers to choose a course of treatment that works for them;

- From one focused on episodic illness and injury, to one that is focused on promotion of good mental health, early intervention, and treatment of mental illness as a chronic disease;
- From one in which providers deliver services in isolation, to one that employs more multidisciplinary teams; and
- From one that is fragmented to one that is coordinated and integrated, with flexibility in access, timely sharing of treatment plans, and accountability for evidence-based programs and collaboration

The regulation of Counselling Therapy in Alberta also helps to address all four of the priorities identified by the Mental Health Review Board, namely

- a more “integrated service delivery system for addiction and mental health”,
- “achieving a person-centred system for addiction and mental health”
- “a greater focus on screening, prevention, early intervention, and continuity of care, to reduce distress, suffering and health care costs”, and
- “better access, quality, and efficiency in addiction and mental health services”

** from the “Valuing Mental Health” Report of the Alberta Mental Health Review Committee 2015*

Cost of Regulation

The financial cost to the government for the substantial improvements in mental health and addictions services in Alberta that would result from regulation of this profession are negligible.

Some human and financial resources would be needed to bring about legislation. However, the regulation of Counselling Therapists would not result in any additional financial obligations to the Ministry of Health. Once formed and operating, the College of Counselling Therapists of Alberta will be cost neutral to government. The College will be self-sufficient and will be funded by the fees of its members.

In addition to the potential cost savings to individual Albertans and employers, the Government of Alberta can realize considerable savings. The government would no longer shoulder the burden of responding to complaints about unprofessional, unethical, and ineffective services. Increased preventative care and early intervention can also dramatically reduce the cost of acute mental health and addiction services in Alberta, not to mention the cost savings from treating the myriad of physical illnesses caused by stress and poor mental health.

In Summary

Counselling Therapists are a vital part of primary healthcare in Alberta. The work of Counselling Therapists is increasingly complex. As a part of ensuring the highest possible quality of care and support to clients, a strong program of standardized competencies is required. **Regulation of the profession will increase the safety of clients, the Government and Counselling Therapists.**

Regulating this profession will result in:

- Standardization of Counselling Therapy in Alberta, with a title that is easily recognizable to the public for access to safe and effective care;
- A wider range of quality, cost effective counselling services available to Albertans;
- A regulated body for the public to report incompetent, unethical or impaired practices, with the comfort of knowing that any issues of concern will be investigated and resolved; and
- Assisting the Alberta Government to achieve the recommendations in the “Valuing Mental Health” Report of the Alberta Mental Health Review Committee 2015.

Regulation will help to achieve a more integrated, safe, accessible and coordinated primary mental health care system. We believe this is the shared vision of Counselling Therapists, the Alberta Government, and the Alberta Mental Health and Review Committee. Through regulation, we can provide Albertans with the safe and effective counselling resources they need to face life's challenges and live more satisfying lives.

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