



The Lay Counselor Academy Evaluation

Executive Summary

The California Health Care Foundation (CHCF) commissioned Prism Partners Group to evaluate the Lay Counselor Academy (LCA), a program aimed at addressing California's behavioral health workforce gaps by upskilling CHWs, case managers, legal aids, first responders, and other health and social care workers to provide mental health counseling.



Evaluation Methods

Data was collected over two years, drawing from qualitative and quantitative sources across every LCA cohort. Evaluators gathered feedback from LCA graduates to assess their experiences and outcomes, and conducted interviews from organizational leaders that sent staff to the LCA, providing insight into its effectiveness in real-world settings.

What Did The Evaluation Find?



1. Participants in the LCA report significantly increased confidence in engaging in evidence-based mental health counseling techniques and strategies.

Participants in the LCA averaged a **35-point increase** in confidence in core counseling techniques such as open-ended questions, reflective listening, affirming strengths and cognitive-behavioral approaches. Participants express similar confidence increases in helping people with addiction, depression, anxiety, and past trauma. **Notably, the evaluation found this growth in confidence is sustained not only immediately after the program but also many months later.**



2. Organizational leaders who have had employees complete the LCA find it incredibly valuable.

Leaders reported that staff who complete the LCA are more confident working with clients and more comfortable working in therapeutic environments. Many supervisors shared that their staff has fewer questions about managing their work with clients and appear to enjoy their jobs more after attending the LCA.

"I'm absolutely convinced that it's all about what we call 'the relationship' in therapy, the common factors...LCA is the best, the most sophisticated, highest quality thing I've come across...it's better than anything I've done, and I'm actually thinking about making all our residents here do the course...it's that good."

- Behavioral Health System Administrator

"It's made their job much more endearing and much more meaningful."

- Director of Behavioral Health, FQHC

"They felt so much more ready and able to serve their patient's needs..."

- Psychiatrist, FQHC

".....even the first day was a game changer for them... they felt like they were already interacting with their patients in a different way..." - Director, Complex Care, FQHC



3. A wide range of health and social care professionals are engaging in the LCA, and a diverse set of organizations are integrating it into their workforce development strategies.

The majority of LCA participants are CHWs, case managers, substance use disorder staff, and peer specialists. Other participants include paramedics and other first responders, faith Leaders, legal aid professionals, program staff at community-based organizations, and school personnel.



4. Many organizations are utilizing LCA-trained staff to help address behavioral health workforce gaps.

The LCA has provided a way for organizations to increase the capacity of their staff so that the organization can provide more timely access to mental health counseling. With more staff skilled in counseling strategies and techniques, several organizations noted that LCA participants can provide care to patients between therapy appointments or when waiting for their first appointment. At one FQHC, case managers who participated in the LCA now provide support to a small, lower-acuity caseload, allowing licensed clinicians to treat clients who need more intense care. At another organization, LCA-trained case managers provide CBT and other trauma-informed strategies to augment psychiatric care.



5. LCA graduates report increased job satisfaction and reduced burnout.

75% of participants said their job satisfaction increased after the LCA, indicating that the program enhances their skills and professional fulfillment.

"I learned effective communication skills that have empowered me to engage in more meaningful interactions with clients, creating a positive impact in their lives at the time of their visit."

- LCA Participant

Organizational leaders observe LCA participants having an increased ability to effectively manage boundaries with patient care after taking the course.

"[I]t helped them understand how to manage their own responses... this was transformative training for them...how do you navigate this relationship in which someone's telling you something that's really painful for you to hear, but you need to be able to support them, but you need to take care of yourself...the Lay Counselor Academy gave them this sort of foundation for doing that."

- Director, Complex Care, FQHC



6. The LCA is advancing equity in the mental health workforce: LCA participants represent a more diverse demographic than the current mental health workforce.

41% of participants identify as Latino, 17% as Asian American/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, 9% as multiracial, and 8% as Black. **63% of participants in the LCA speak at least one language other than English.** LCA participants **reflect the communities they serve**, bringing critical **linguistic and cultural concordance** to their mental health counseling work.

In addition, the LCA design includes a deliberate commitment to equity in its curriculum. The approaches taught in the LCA help providers mitigate their own implicit biases and practice anti-racist counseling. Participants averaged a 24-point increase in awareness and mitigation of their own biases.

"I am mindful of my own bias, putting those aside and staying open-minded to hear out the client without judgment..."

- LCA Participant.

"... LCA is steeped in equity; it's a culturally responsive approach. ...I don't think we've done a good job in behavioral and mental health, understanding cultural humility and responsiveness...And the LCA stands by that in a way that I rarely see."

- Mental Health Program Manager

Conclusion

Organizational leaders and LCA participants highly value this course; it enhances the experience for individuals providing mental health services and the capacity of organizations to provide these services. The LCA is a practical, equity-centered strategy for increasing the skills of non-licensed and licensed behavioral health workers and those in related fields to provide effective mental health counseling. It holds promise as an intervention for reducing suffering in our communities by increasing access to quality, cultural, and language-congruent mental health care.