

Chapter 246-XXX WAC, Behavioral Health Support Specialist

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General

246-XXX-010 Definitions

The definitions in RCW 18.227.010 and in this section apply throughout this chapter unless the context clearly states otherwise:

- (1) “Behavioral health” is a term that encompasses mental health, substance use, and co-occurring disorders.
- (2) “Behavioral health support specialist” or “BHSS” means a person certified to deliver brief, evidence-based interventions with a scope of practice that includes behavioral health under the supervision of a Washington state credentialed provider who has the ability to assess, diagnose, and treat identifiable mental and behavioral health conditions as part of their scope of practice. A behavioral health support specialist does not have within their scope of practice the ability to make diagnoses, but does track and monitor treatment response and outcomes using measurement-based care.

- (3) “Brief, evidence-based intervention” means strategies focused on the reduction of symptom severity within a time frame congruent with the needs of the individual, provider, and treatment setting.
- (4) “Client” means a recipient of behavioral health services. This term may be used interchangeably with “patient.”
- (5) “Clinical supervisor” means a provider who meets the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-410 and provides oversight, supervision, and consultation to a certified BHSS working within their scope of practice.
- (6) “Department” means the Department of Health.
- (7) “Measurement-based care” means monitoring and measuring patient symptoms to evaluate how a patient responds to treatment and systematically adjusting treatment based on patient needs.
- (8) “Practicum” means supervised experience that meets the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-200, completed for the purpose of becoming a certified BHSS. A practicum may be completed as part of a bachelor’s degree, post-baccalaureate education, or registered apprenticeship program and may be referenced in documentation as a practicum, internship, on-the-job training, or other similar term. Within this chapter, the terms “practicum” and “supervised experience” are used interchangeably.
- (9) “Practicum supervisor” means a provider that meets the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-215, who provides oversight to a student completing a practicum.
- (10) “Registered apprenticeship” means an apprenticeship program approved by the Washington State Apprenticeship and Training Council according to chapter 49.04 RCW.
- (11) “Student” means an individual working toward completing BHSS education and practicum requirements, whether part of a bachelor’s degree program, post-baccalaureate education, or registered apprenticeship program.

246-XXX-020 Administrative procedures and requirements

- (1) The department uses procedural rules contained in chapter 246-10 WAC, including subsequent amendments under chapter 246-10 WAC.
- (2) The department enforces requirements for credentialed health care providers contained in chapter 246-12 WAC, including subsequent amendments under chapter 246-12 WAC.

246-XXX-025 Behavioral Health Support Specialist application requirements

- (1) An applicant for a behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) certificate shall submit to the department:
 - (a) An application on forms provided by the department;
 - (b) Official transcripts to verify completion of a bachelor’s degree;
 - (c) Documentation to verify completion of an approved BHSS educational program and practicum under section (3) or (4) of this section; and
 - (d) The fee required under WAC 246-XXX-990.
- (2) Before issuance of a BHSS certificate, an applicant shall take and pass the jurisprudence examination under WAC 246-XXX-300.
- (3) An applicant who completes BHSS education and experience requirements through approved college or post-baccalaureate coursework and practicum must submit:
 - (a) Official transcripts verifying completion of education requirements under WAC 246-XXX-100; and
 - (b) Documentation on forms provided by the department of any supervised experience completed under WAC 246-XXX-200. If an applicant completed supervised experience through multiple practicums or at multiple practicum sites, documentation should be submitted for each.

(4) An applicant who completes BHSS education and experience requirements through an approved and registered BHSS apprenticeship must submit an apprenticeship certificate of completion.

Education

246-XXX-100 BHSS required education

- (1) To be eligible for certification as a behavioral health support specialist (BHSS), an applicant must complete a bachelor degree.
- (2) An applicant must also complete a BHSS educational program approved by the department, which must be included as part of a:
 - (a) bachelor degree program;
 - (b) post-baccalaureate BHSS continuing education program, or
 - (c) registered apprenticeship program.
- (3) To qualify for BHSS certification, an applicant must complete at least the following amount of instruction in a behavioral health curriculum:
 - (a) 60 quarter college credits;
 - (b) 30 semester college credits; or
 - (c) 600 hours of apprenticeship related/supplemental instruction.

246-XXX-110 BHSS competencies and clinical skills

Consistent with University of Washington Behavioral Health Support Specialist Clinical Training Program guidelines, behavioral health support specialist competencies and clinical skills include, but are not limited to:

- (1) Health equity, including:
 - (a) Recognizing the impact of health disparities on patient engagement; and
 - (b) Practicing use of inclusive communication that supports healthcare equity;
- (2) The helping relationship, including:
 - (a) Developing a supportive and effective working alliance with patients and their support networks;
 - (b) Engaging patients to enhance participation in care;
 - (c) Facilitating group psychoeducation; and
 - (d) Utilizing a trauma-informed care framework in all aspects of helping relationships;
- (3) Cultural responsiveness, including:
 - (a) Develop knowledge of patient's identity(ies);
 - (b) Provide services responsive to patient's identity(ies);
 - (c) Practice cultural humility in relationships; and
 - (d) Strive to address own biases in work with patients.
- (4) Team-based care and collaboration, including:
 - (a) Integrating professional identity and scope of practice within a healthcare team;
 - (b) Practicing interprofessional communication; and
 - (c) Contributing to teams and teamwork;
- (5) Screening and assessment, including:
 - (a) Utilizing appropriate standardized screening tools to identify common behavioral health conditions;
 - (b) Conducting a suicide risk assessment and providing appropriate intervention under supervision;
 - (c) Conducting a patient-centered biopsychosocial assessment; and

- (d) Using measurement-based care to support stepped care approaches and adjusting the type and intensity of services to the needs of the patient;
- (6) Care planning and care coordination, including:
 - (a) Contributing to the development of a whole health care plan and stay well plan with the patient, the patient’s support network, and healthcare team members;
 - (b) Maintaining a registry to systematically track patient treatment response to interventions;
 - (c) Ensuring the flow and exchange of information among patients, patients’ support networks, and linked providers;
 - (d) Facilitating external referrals to social and community-based services (housing assistance, food banks, vocational rehabilitation, substance use disorder treatment, etc.);
 - (e) Demonstrating accurate documentation of services provided and summaries of contact with linked providers in the patient record; and
 - (f) Recognizing the interaction between behavioral health conditions, chronic health conditions, and their associated symptoms;
- (7) Intervention, including:
 - (a) Integrating motivational interviewing strategies into practice;
 - (b) Providing psychoeducation to patients and their support network about behavioral health conditions and treatment options consistent with recommendations from the healthcare team;
 - (c) Employing distress tolerance strategies including problem-solving and relaxation techniques to reduce the impact of acute stress on patient mental and behavioral health;
 - (d) Applying brief, evidence-based treatment for common mental health presentations including depression, based on behavioral activation principles;
 - (e) Applying brief, evidence-based treatment for common mental health presentations including anxiety, based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) principles;
 - (f) Using harm reduction strategies for substance use concerns including the delivery of screening, brief intervention and referral to treatment (SBIRT); and
 - (g) Demonstrating a clear understanding of the evidence base for brief treatment that focuses on symptom reduction; and
- (8) Law and ethics, including:
 - (a) Identifying and applying federal and state laws to practice;
 - (b) Integrating foundations of interprofessional ethics into practice;
 - (c) Utilizing supervision and consultation to guide practice; and
 - (d) Engaging in ongoing reflective practice.

Experience Requirements

246-XXX-200 Supervised experience requirements

- (1) To be eligible for certification as a behavioral health support specialist (BHSS), a student shall complete a BHSS practicum or BHSS apprenticeship on-the-job training that:
 - (a) provides practical instruction that reinforces BHSS competencies and clinical skills listed in WAC 246-XXX-110;
 - (b) allows the student to participate in a clinical environment, observe providers treating clients, and provide direct client care under supervision; and
 - (c) is supervised by a practicum supervisor, consistent with WAC 246-XXX-210 and WAC 246-XXX-215.
- (2) A clinical environment is a practice setting where a student is supervised by a provider eligible under WAC 246-XXX-215. A clinical environment is not limited to a traditional clinic setting and may include

outreach, co-response, crisis response, or other settings in which a clinical provider is providing behavioral health services.

(3) The minimum amount of practicum or on-the-job experience for a BHSS credential is at least 240 hours, completed over a period of at least 6 months.

246-XXX-210 Practicum supervision requirements

(1) All supervised experience required for behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) certification must be completed under a practicum supervisor as defined in WAC 246-XXX-215.

(2) Before the practicum begins or within the first month of the practicum, the student must meet with the supervisor to:

- (a) develop a written plan for developing clinical skills, including graduated participation in facilitating clinical encounters;
- (b) set goals and expectations for the duration of the practicum;
- (c) establish a schedule for supervision; and
- (d) identify an alternate supervisor, if possible, in case the primary supervisor is unavailable.

(3) A practicum supervisor must provide supervision regularly, with at least monthly individual supervision.

(4) The practicum supervisor must attest, on forms provided by the department, that the student has:

- (a) completed at least 240 practicum hours;
- (b) completed at least 6 hours of individual supervision;
- (c) completed at least 60 hours of direct client contact, including co-delivery of services with a supervisor or other certified or licensed behavioral health provider; and
- (d) demonstrated at least one clinical skill in each competency listed in WAC 246-XXX-110.

WAC 246-XXX-215 BHSS practicum supervisor requirements.

(1) A behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) practicum supervisor must be licensed in the state of Washington, with no restrictions, as one of the following provider types:

- (a) Independent clinical social worker or associate license under chapter 18.225 RCW;
- (b) Marriage and family therapist or associate license under chapter 18.225 RCW;
- (c) Mental health counselor or associate license under chapter 18.225 RCW;
- (d) Psychiatric Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner under chapter 18.79 RCW; or
- (e) Psychologist or associate license under chapter 18.83 RCW; or
- (f) Other provider listed in WAC 246-XXX-410 who is competent to assess, diagnose, and treat behavioral health conditions and support a student BHSS appropriately.

(2) A practicum supervisor is not a blood or legal relative, significant other, cohabitant of the student, or someone who has acted as the student's primary behavioral health counselor in the past two years.

(3) A practicum supervisor or if unavailable, an alternative designated provider, must review and sign all prospective BHSS student clinical practicum documentation. Any alternative designated provider signing on behalf of the practicum supervisor must also meet the supervisor requirements of this section.

(4) A practicum supervisor is responsible for all clients assigned to the prospective BHSS student they supervise.

Examination

246-XXX-300 Examination requirements

A behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) must take and pass a jurisprudence examination administered by the department that covers professional judgment, knowledge of state laws, and ethics pertaining to the BHSS profession.

Professional Requirements for Certified Behavioral Health Support Specialist

246-XXX-400 Professional standards for certified BHSS

- (1) A behavioral health support specialist (BHSS):
 - (a) delivers brief, evidence-based interventions to treat individuals with behavioral health conditions, including mental health or substance use disorders, consistent with subsection (3) of this section;
 - (b) tracks and monitors treatment response and outcomes using measurement-based care. Interventions should be adjusted based on patient response to find the most effective treatment;
 - (c) regularly confers with their clinical supervisor, who has the ability to assess, diagnose, and treat mental and behavioral health conditions;
 - (d) may provide care for a behavioral health crisis or condition which is impacting the client's quality of life; and
 - (e) refers a client to alternate health care or other resources when the client's needs exceed the BHSS's scope of practice or competence.
- (2) A BHSS may not make diagnoses, but may provide symptom-based treatment within their scope of practice. Treatment may be based on the diagnosis of another provider or occur prior to diagnosis, based on screening and assessment.
- (3) Brief, evidence-based interventions are strategies focused on the reduction of symptom severity within a time frame congruent with the needs of the individual, provider, and treatment setting.
 - (a) The strategies are often informed by principles associated with cognitive behavioral, problem-solving, strategic, or solution-focused psychotherapies.
 - (b) If the duration of treatment involving a single intervention exceeds six months, a new intervention ought to be considered or a referral to a setting and provider with a scope of practice matching the complexity of patient problems. The duration of treatment based on a single intervention should not exceed three years.
- (4) If the need for treatment exceeds timeframes established in subsection (3), the BHSS must confer with their supervisor to determine whether referral to another provider is appropriate.

246-XXX-405 Ethical standards

- (1) The definitions and prohibitions on sexual misconduct described in chapter 246-16 WAC, including subsequent amendments under chapter 246-16 WAC, apply to behavioral health support specialists (BHSS), except WAC 246-16-100 (4) and (5).
- (2) A BHSS shall never engage, or attempt to engage in:
 - (a) the activities listed in WAC 246-16-100 (1) and (2) with a former client or former key party; or
 - (b) a relationship that could be perceived to create a conflict of interest or imbalance of power.
- (3) A BHSS shall follow all federal and state laws and regulations about privacy, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and Part 2 of Title 42 of the Code of Federal Regulations. If a BHSS encounters two different standards regarding client privacy, they shall follow the standard that offers the greatest protection to the client.
- (4) When providing care or treatment to a client, a BHSS shall limit self-disclosure to maintain a professional, neutral environment, in order to keep treatment sessions focused on client needs.

246-XXX-410 Clinical supervisors

- (1) To supervise a certified behavioral health support specialist, a provider must hold one of the following Washington state credentials:
 - (a) Advanced social worker or associate license under chapter 18.225 RCW;
 - (b) Independent clinical social worker or associate license under chapter 18.225 RCW;
 - (c) Marriage and family therapist or associate license under chapter 18.225 RCW;
 - (d) Mental health counselor or associate license under chapter 18.225 RCW;
 - (e) Osteopathic physician license under chapter 18.57 RCW;
 - (f) Physician licensed under chapter 18.71 RCW;
 - (g) Physician assistant license under chapter 18.71A RCW;
 - (h) Psychiatric Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner license under chapter 18.79 RCW; or
 - (i) Psychologist or associate license under chapter 18.83 RCW.
- (2) Other providers may also be eligible to provide BHSS supervision if they:
 - (a) Hold a Washington state credential issued by another agency; and
 - (b) Have the ability to assess, diagnose, and treat identifiable mental and behavioral health conditions as part of their scope of practice.
- (3) A clinical supervisor is responsible for:
 - (a) Supervising a BHSS's practice and treatment of clients and ensuring they do not exceed their scope of practice;
 - (b) Providing a level of supervision appropriate for the BHSS's training, education, and experience;
 - (c) Ensuring quality of care for all clients assigned to the BHSS they supervise;
 - (d) Providing competent supervision based on the supervisor's own level of training, education, and experience; and
 - (e) Ensuring that additional professional behavioral health consultation is available to the BHSS if necessary, based on the supervisor's level of behavioral health knowledge.

WAC 246-XXX-420 Required client disclosure information

- (1) A behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) must provide disclosure information to each client prior to the delivery of services. Disclosure information may be printed in a format of the provider's choosing or in a general format used by a state approved treatment facility.
- (2) The following information must be printed on all disclosure statements provided to counseling clients in language that can be easily understood by the client:
 - (a) Name of firm, agency, business, or other practice location.
 - (b) Employment address, telephone number, and email address.
 - (c) Name, credential, and credential number.
 - (d) Clinical supervisor's name, credential, and credential number.
 - (e) Clinical supervisor's employment address, telephone number, and email address, if different from the BHSS's.
 - (f) Billing information, including:
 - (i) Client's cost per each counseling session;
 - (ii) Billing practices, including any advance payments and refunds.
 - (g) A list of the acts of unprofessional conduct in RCW 18.130.180 including the name, address, and contact telephone number within the Department of Health.
- (3) The BHSS and the client must sign and date a statement indicating that the client has been given a copy of the required disclosure information, and the client has read and understands the information

provided. If a client is in acute crisis or is otherwise unable to read, understand, and sign the disclosure statement, it can be completed at a later session.

Continuing Education Requirements

WAC 246-XXX-500 Continuing education requirements

A certified behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) must complete 20 hours of continuing education every two years, either in person or through distance learning, including:

- (1) At least 2 hours of health equity education every 4 years that comply with requirements in WAC 246-12-800 through WAC 246-12-830;
- (2) Completion of at least a 3-hour training on suicide screening and referral listed on the department's model list every 6 years;
- (3) At least 2 hours of ethics every two years; and
- (4) The remaining hours in qualifying continuing education under WAC 246-XXX-510.

WAC 246-XXX-505 Additional training requirements

A certified behavioral health support specialist who provides clinical services through telemedicine as defined in RCW 70.41.020 must complete a one-time telemedicine training that complies with RCW 43.70.495.

WAC 246-XXX-510 Qualifying continuing education and other professional development activities

- (1) Qualifying continuing education (CE) for a behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) must:
 - (a) Be relevant to the profession; and
 - (b) Contribute to the advancement and enhancement of their professional competence.
- (2) Activities primarily designed to increase practice income or office efficiency are not eligible for CE credit.
- (3) Acceptable CE must be approved by an industry-recognized local, state, national, international organization or institution of higher learning under WAC 246-XXX-520.
- (4) Distance learning must require tests of comprehension upon completion to qualify as CE.
- (5) Qualifying activities that count toward CE requirements include programs, courses, seminars, and workshops.
- (6) All documentation must include the dates the continuing education activity took place, the number of hours of CE credit, and, if appropriate, the title of the course, the location of the course, and the name of the instructor. If the activity's relevance to the profession is not apparent based on the title, the BHSS must submit documentation describing the content.
- (7) A BHSS must maintain CE documentation for at least 6 years.

WAC 246-XXX-520 Industry-recognized organizations or institutions of higher learning.

Local, state, national, and international organizations that are recognized in the behavioral health industry and institutions of higher learning include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (1) American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) and Washington Association for Marriage and Family Therapy;
- (2) American Counseling Association and Washington Counseling Association;
- (3) American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) and Washington Mental Health Counselors Association;
- (4) American Psychological Association (APA);
- (5) Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB);

- (6) Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA);
- (7) Collaborative Family Healthcare Association;
- (8) Association for Addiction Professionals (NAADAC) and the Voice for Washington State Addiction Professionals (WAADAC);
- (9) National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Washington chapter;
- (10) National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC);
- (11) Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care;
- (12) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA);
- (13) Washington State Society for Clinical Social Work; and
- (14) Institutions of higher learning that are recognized as accredited Postsecondary Education Institutions by the U.S. Department of Education.

Educational Program Requirements

WAC 246-XXX-800 Standards for education programs

- (1) A behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) educational program must be approved by the department and, if applicable, registered with the Department of Labor & Industries before its graduates are eligible for BHSS certification.
- (2) The minimum amount of instruction required for a BHSS credential is at least:
 - (a) 60 quarter college credits;
 - (b) 30 semester college credits; or
 - (c) 600 hours of apprenticeship related/supplemental instruction.
- (3) Education must include instruction in each of the following competencies and clinical skills, consistent with University of Washington behavioral health support specialist clinical training program guidelines listed in WAC 246-XXX-110.

246-XXX-810 Approval process for education programs

- (1) **Program approval process.** A behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) educational program must be approved by the department and, if applicable, registered with the Department of Labor & Industries before its graduates are eligible for BHSS certification. To apply for approval, a college, university, technical school, apprenticeship program, or other entity must submit on forms provided by the department:
 - (a) documentation of how its curriculum meets the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-100; and
 - (b) attestation by a BHSS education program representative that the education program has confirmed any clinical or counseling environment approved as a practicum site meets the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-200 through WAC 246-XXX-215.
- (2) **Provisional approval.** When an educational program substantially complies with the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-110, the department may provisionally approve the program. Substantial compliance means that, based on the University of Washington's gap analysis tool, the program allows learners to become proficient in 85% of competencies listed in WAC 246-XXX-110, including at a minimum, suicide screening and assessment and depression and anxiety management strategies.
 - (a) During the three-year provisional approval period:
 - (i) the educational program must continue working to achieve full compliance with these requirements; and
 - (ii) graduates from the program during the provisional approval timeframe will be considered eligible for certification as a BHSS.

(b) At the end of the provisional approval timeframe, the educational program must apply for full program approval under (3) of this section. If the program does not fully comply with the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-110, it may apply for an extension if there are extenuating circumstances. Depending on the program’s progress in complying with the requirements, the department may or may not extend the provisional approval status.

(3) **Full approval.** When an educational program complies with the requirements of WAC 246-XXX-110, the department approves the education program. An approved BHSS educational program must:

- (a) reapply for approval every 7 years after initial approval; and
- (b) inform the department of any substantial changes to BHSS curriculum.

(4) **Program audits.** The department may conduct audits to ensure an educational program continues to meet educational standards and, for good cause, may revoke a BHSS educational program’s provisional approval or full approval status. If a program’s approval is revoked, the program’s students for that time period are no longer eligible for certification.

WAC 246-XXX-811 Legacy clause for programs operating prior to 2025

(1) The department recognizes that multiple colleges, universities, and technical colleges began implementing behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) education programs prior to the passage of Substitute Senate Bill 5189 in 2023. In recognition of the educational programs and the achievements of their students, the department may approve BHSS educational programs for academic years prior to **January 1, 2025**. To apply for legacy status and to permit a program’s pre-2025 graduates to apply for certification, the educational program must submit evidence of substantially meeting the standards of this chapter, including:

- (a) the educational requirements of WAC 246-XXX-800, and
- (b) requiring students to complete a 240-hour practicum.

(2) If the program did not require 240-hour practicums during the pre-2025 time period, an individual BHSS applicant may supplement their application with documentation of additional supervised experience to make up the deficit.

Fees

246-XXX-900 Expired credential

If a behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) certification is expired, the individual must meet the requirements of WAC 246-12-040 in order to return to active status.

246-XXX-990 Behavioral Health Support Specialist – Fees and renewal cycle

(1) A behavioral health support specialist (BHSS) certificate must be renewed every year on the provider’s birthday as provided in chapter 246-12 WAC.

(2) The following nonrefundable fees will be charged for a certified BHSS:

Title of Fee	Fee
Application and initial certification	\$285*
Active renewal	\$285*
Active late renewal penalty	\$TBD
Expired certification reissuance	\$TBD
Duplicate certification	\$10.00
Verification of certificate	\$25.00

*Text in yellow particularly needs public feedback – please share thoughts on these or other issues at workshops or via email at BHSS@doh.wa.gov by March 15th, if possible.

*Subject to change

DRAFT