

A Proposal to Establish:
The Community Mental Health Practitioners Training Program
at the Department of Community Mental Health

Academic Year 2025–26



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A mental health crisis is unfolding across Israel, with vulnerable communities set to bear the heaviest burden. The combined impact of October 7th, ongoing conflict, and economic strain has left hundreds of thousands traumatized. Public services are overwhelmed and understaffed, with the most severe shortages expected in Israel's northern communities.

The University of Haifa's **Community Mental Health Practitioners Training Program** will address this urgent need. Over two years, 40 master's students will receive advanced training in evidence-based counseling and participate in supervised fieldwork in community and clinical settings. Working alongside psychologists, they will guide patients in using therapy to navigate daily challenges, helping them cope, recover, and regain stability.

This initiative will strengthen Israel's mental health workforce, reduce waiting lists, and ease the burden on psychologists. It will deliver essential care to the country's most underserved populations and create a scalable, sustainable model for community-based mental health nationwide.



The Challenge

The events of October 7th and the ongoing conflict have left hundreds of thousands of Israelis traumatized. **Rates of PTSD have doubled, while anxiety, depression, and substance abuse continue to rise.** Marginalized communities, particularly in northern and southern Israel, face the greatest psychological and social burden.

Israel's public mental healthcare system is ill-equipped to meet this surge. Therapy wait times exceed 18 months, leading many patients to abandon treatment or turn to costly private care. Even before these crises, the State Comptroller reported systemic weaknesses, including heavy reliance on volunteers and the absence of structured protocols to ensure consistent care. **In 2024, the Comptroller highlighted that the system largely failed to provide adequate treatment for those in need.**

Nowhere is the mental health crisis more acute than in Israel's northern communities, where shortages of psychological services have long been most severe. Limited access to care slows recovery, widens regional disparities, and creates a cycle of untreated trauma with lasting consequences for individuals and communities.

Current academic programs in psychology focus heavily on theory but provide little preparation for practical, in-the-moment patient support. Graduates are often unprepared to deliver intensive, culturally sensitive care or help patients translate therapy into daily coping strategies. This training gap leaves the public system without a workforce capable of meeting growing demand, particularly in underserved regions.



The Opportunity – Translating Interventions into Real-Life Changes

The Department of Community Mental Health, founded in 2005, is a thriving hub dedicated to preparing professionals to serve Israel's community-based mental healthcare system. With demand rising and student enrollment increasing each year, it remains **the only program in Israel focused on improving care at both the individual and community level.**

Building on this foundation, we aim to develop a sustainable program that directly integrates our students into the public mental health system as trained practitioners supporting psychological interventions. Through meaningful fieldwork under the supervision of expert clinicians, students will (a) expand access to urgently needed mental health care—especially in northern and underserved communities—and (b) advance their professional development. This collaboration between academia and clinical practice will strengthen the commitment of both mental health professionals and public organizations to high-quality therapy, improve the effectiveness of ongoing treatments, and reduce waiting times

The specialized program will include:

- » **Academic and field training** with multi-professional mental health staff experienced in providing care to underserved populations
- » **Extensive training** in supporting psychological interventions for prolonged grief, complex trauma, suicidal ideation, displacement, and severe mental illness
- » **Ongoing monitoring of treatment effectiveness** to ensure data-driven, high-quality care

Each Community Mental Health Practitioner will provide supervised care one to two days per week in public mental health settings throughout the academic year, with placements tailored to institutional needs and available supervision.

Strategic Partnerships

Israel's largest health management organizations (HMOs), including Clalit Health Services, have expressed interest in integrating Community Mental Health Practitioners into both ambulatory and inpatient units. We are also in direct contact with several leading institutions in the north, including Rambam Health Care Campus (Haifa), Ma'ale HaCarmel, Mazor, and Ziv (Safed), ensuring that the program reaches the communities most affected by the current mental health crisis.

Training the Next Generation of Mental Health Practitioners

A Two-Year Program at the University of Haifa

Each year, **20 outstanding master's students** from the Department of Community Mental Health at the University of Haifa will be selected for this intensive program. Chosen for their passion and potential to champion this unique initiative, these students will receive advanced training to support marginalized communities where care is most urgently needed.

The program will combine evidence-based counseling, hybrid coursework, and supervised fieldwork, blending rigorous academic training with practical experience. The custom-designed curriculum will include online learning, workshops, and live skills demonstrations, covering interpersonal counseling, motivational interviewing, suicide prevention strategies, cultural competence, and stepped-care delivery.

Fieldwork is central to the program. Students will spend one to two days each week in community or clinical placements chosen for impact and fit. Small, closely supervised caseloads will ensure quality care and meaningful skill development. Weekly group and individual supervision will reinforce reflective practice and integrate classroom learning with hands-on experience.

In addition, students will complete graduate-level courses tailored to their interests including policy, legislation, stigma reduction, cross-cultural counseling, and community integration. Prepared by this intensive program, graduates will develop the clinical expertise, cultural competence, and systemic knowledge needed to apply evidence-based care effectively in community and clinical settings.

Building Bridges Between Academia and the Field

Supervisors and instructors will collaborate closely to ensure placements complement classroom learning and support professional growth. Regular progress reviews and end-of-semester evaluations will create a continuous feedback loop, fostering both student development and high-quality service delivery in the communities they will serve.

Excellence Through Evaluation

To ensure lasting impact, the program will begin with a baseline assessment of skills and expectations, followed by end-of-year evaluations measuring growth, preparedness, and satisfaction. Insights from these assessments will directly inform curriculum and fieldwork adjustments, ensuring that the training evolves to meet the urgent mental health needs across Israel.



What Makes This a Trailblazing Initiative?

The program is unique in two key ways. First, it creates and implements a **new role within Israel's mental health system**: training Community Mental Health Practitioners to support patients as they apply therapeutic skills and achieve measurable improvements in daily life. Rigorous, evidence-based training and supervision will equip practitioners to guide patients effectively through this process of change.

Second, the program prioritizes marginalized populations. **The World Health Organization estimates that 50–80% of low-income individuals do not receive evidence-based care, a finding confirmed by our clinical and empirical experience.** Inadequate public care leads to recurring problems, long waitlists, and many individuals never receiving treatment. Most patients treated in the public sector are under-resourced, and this program is designed from the outset to serve these populations and actively reduce systemic inequities.

Embedding Community Mental Health Practitioners in the public system will make high-quality, accessible mental health care a reality for communities that need it most.

Scalability

The initiative's immediate impact will serve as proof of concept for nationwide adoption. Israeli HMOs, specifically **Clalit Health Services, are already committed to integrating this pilot into their public system.**

Program Outcomes

- 1 Train 40 graduates (20 each year)
- 2 Create a new, visionary role in Israel's mental health sector – Community Mental Health Practitioners
- 3 Inspire and guide other academic institutions, scaling the impact nationally
- 4 Provide a pioneering model of university-HMO collaboration for training and employment
- 5 Launch a multidisciplinary roundtable to bridge science and practice, ensuring excellent and accessible care

Project Leaders

Prof. Dana Tzur Bitan, Dr. Shira Barzilay, and Prof. David Roe are highly esteemed mental health professionals and clinical researchers with extensive experience in training, research, policy, and clinical practice. The faculty bring extensive experience training professionals from under-represented communities, including Arabs and Druze, and their multicultural team ensures culturally sensitive training that reflects Israel's diverse needs. Their combined expertise in Israel's public mental health system underscores the depth and relevance of the program.



Professor Dana Tzur Bitan is the incoming chair of the Department of Community Mental Health at the University of Haifa and a senior clinical psychologist in the emergency room of Shalvata Mental Health Center, affiliated with Clalit Health Services.

Her work focuses on improving care for underprivileged populations in the public mental health system. She has authored numerous papers on therapy for individuals in severe distress, alternatives to psychiatric hospitalization, and strategies to improve public healthcare delivery. Prof. Tzur Bitan leads the Psychotherapy and Psychiatry Research Lab at Shalvata MHC, training professionals in evidence-based therapy for the public sector. She also serves on the editorial boards of several scientific journals and on the board of trustees for the National Institute for Healthcare Policy Research.



Dr. Shira Barzilay is a clinical psychologist, senior lecturer, and leading researcher in youth mental health and suicide prevention at the University of Haifa, where she directs the Suicide Research Laboratory. She also serves as Research Director at the Depression and Self-Harm Clinic at Schneider Children's Medical Center.

Her work develops scalable, evidence-based interventions for high-risk youth and integrates innovative stepped-care models into Israel's public mental health system. Dr. Barzilay is principal investigator on multiple nationally and internationally funded projects, advancing early intervention, digital mental health tools, and policy translation in collaboration with hospitals and global partners.



Professor David Roe is a licensed clinical psychologist and current chair of the Department of Community Mental Health at the University of Haifa. He directs The Centre for Mental Health Research, Practice and Policy and is an affiliated professor at Aalborg University, Denmark.

An internationally recognized scholar, Prof. Roe studies psychosocial recovery from serious mental illness, stigma, patient-reported outcome measures, and evaluation of interventions and services. His research has been funded by NIMH, the Israel Science Foundation, and other major agencies. He has published extensively in journals including *World Psychiatry*, *Lancet Psychiatry*, and *JAMA Psychiatry*, and has served as associate editor for several scientific journals.



2-YEAR BUDGET

ITEM	DETAILS	EXPENSES USD
Academic supervision by senior faculty (a teaching course and accompanying field practicum, 4-credit hours)	40 outstanding students (20 per year), chosen for their passion and potential to champion the initiative	27,000
Clinical Coordinator		57,000
Supervision and Scholarships*	On-site practical supervision at participating institutions, including student scholarships*	325,000
Oversight, Audit and Quality Control		81,000
TOTAL:		\$ 490,000

*Preliminary estimates. Figures may change based on institutional rates imposed by the participating clinical institutions.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

As mental health needs rise across Israel, particularly in underserved communities, the University of Haifa is launching the first-of-its-kind Community Mental Health Practitioners Training Program.

With your partnership, we can create a lasting impact by placing these practitioners directly in public mental health settings, bringing high-quality, culturally sensitive care to the communities that need it most.

» **A gift of \$490,000 over two years (\$245,000 per year)** will support hands-on training and supervision for **40 master's students**, including field placements, academic instruction (4 credit hours) and community-based service delivery.