אוניברסיטת חיפה
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA
جامعة حيفا

Revolutionizing Mental Health Services in Israel's Public Healthcare System

Department of Community Mental Health

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OVERVIEW

Since October 7th, the people of Israel have been living under the constant threat of multi-front war. The brutal attack in the south, the ongoing precision-guided strikes in the North, and the unprecedented war with Iran have taken an unbearable psychological toll on the entire population.

Studies estimate that rates of posttraumatic stress disorder in Israel have doubled in comparison to pre-October 7th levels (Levi-Belz et al., 2024) and that rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse are steadily increasing (Feingold et al., 2024). Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have been displaced (UN Watch, 2024), with many marginalized populations in the north and south being disproportionally affected by traumatic loss, social and functional hardship, and economic burden.

THE CHALLENGE

Israel's public healthcare system is unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with the surge in mental health needs (The State Comptroller of Israel, 2020; Neria et al., 2025; Krivoy et al., 2024). Even before the October 7th attacks, Israel's State Comptroller warned that waiting times for psychological therapy in the public healthcare system are unfathomable, reaching over 18 months (State Comptroller, 2020). Indeed, a 2021 Brookdale Institute survey found that 35% of people in need of care give up on receiving treatment due to the long wait times, and approximately half of them eventually seek costly treatment in the private sector (Laron et al., 2022). This means that half of the those in need of care do not receive it because of extraordinarily long wait times and prohibitive costs. Therefore, these individuals go unattended and untreated. In 2024, Israel's State Comptroller concluded that the public mental health system largely failed to address the needs of traumatized people in Israel, treating only a small fraction of those in need and relying almost entirely on volunteers while lacking a structured protocol to address the burning mental health needs of Israel's population.

The issue of access to mental healthcare is especially acute among low-income, under-served and marginalized populations who cannot afford treatment in the private sector. For these individuals, the lack of available public mental health resources is detrimental, and serves as the leading cause for the structural inequality in mental health services.

In order to provide equal opportunity to effective and high-quality mental healthcare services in Israel, efforts should be made to train designated public-service professionals in focused, evidence-based interventions with an emphasis on marginalized populations who face complex and enduring multi-facet challenges. These groups include individuals from low socioeconomic status, Arabs, Druze, Ultraorthodox, and people living in the periphery of Israel, and especially terror-prone areas in the Northern and Southern borders of Israel.

Professional and Academic Barriers: Current academic degrees, such as psychology and social work, traditionally focus on long-term psychodynamic therapy, preparing graduates for private practice. Given the three warfronts that Israel is contending with at this time, there is an increasing number of people in need of accessible high intensity care, as they cope with trauma, face acute grief, personal and economic losses, displacement, and social functional impairments caused by the ongoing national crisis.

THE OPPORTUNITY – A TRAILBLAZING MA DEGREE

The University proposes a first-of-its-kind Master's program in Public Mental Health Counseling. This two-year program will train and equip up to 100 students a year to deliver evidence-based, and supervised, mental health interventions, while conducting fieldwork with inter-disciplinary staff in the public service. After two years of academic training provided by field and academic experts, these professionals will continue their fieldwork training for two to four years, and will then work in the public healthcare system.

The Master's Program will focus on:

- Evidence-based mental health care
- Interdisciplinary training with multi-professional mental healthcare teams
- Marginalized, under-served, and low-income populations
- Systemic, community-based approaches to mental healthcare
- Extensive training in the treatment of prolonged grief, complex trauma, suicidal ideation, displacement, and severe mental illness
- Ongoing monitoring of treatment effectiveness as basis for data driven excellent care

Each counselor will provide supervised care two days a week in public mental health settings during the two years he or she is enrolled in the master's program. After graduation, counselors will be assigned to a compulsory part time internship to continue training, service delivery in the public sector, and further develop their clinical skills. This novel practitioner model will increase the partnership between academia and the field, strengthen commitment among mental health professionals and public organizations to invest in high-quality counselors who can provide effective care, reduce waiting times, and increase access to HMO-based mental health care.

WHAT MAKES THIS A TRAILBLAZING INITIATIVE?

Our program is unique in its focus on increasing access to effective care for marginalized populations. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that between 50-80% of individuals with low-income do not receive evidence-based care. Our clinical experience matched with academic and empirical knowledge on the state-of-affairs in Israel supports these estimates. Medium-quality care in the public service leads to recurrent psychological problems, which in turn leads to long waiting lists who are already overloaded due to the increasing mental healthcare needs following multiple traumatic events. It also increases risk for more severe problems in adulthood among children and adolescents who do not receive appropriate care. As most individuals treated in the public sector are under sourced, our program is unique in its strategy to target these populations from its inception, while aiming to minimize systemic and persistent inequality gaps. This will gradually allow the state of Israel to provide high quality, managed, and equal public mental healthcare to all individuals in need.

OUTCOMES

1. Up to 100 graduates every year, infusing the public health care system with direly needed mental health counselors—and thereby decreasing wait times
2. The creation of a new and visionary function in Israel's mental health sector – Public Mental Health Counselor
3. Up to 100 new practitioners a year working two days a week in the public mental health services
4. The establishment of a new MA degree curriculum that will inspire and inform other academic institutions thereby scaling desired impact nationally
5. A pioneering and viable example for how universities partner with HMOs for both training and employment purposes
6. Creation of a multidisciplinary roundtable to improve science-practice gaps in public healthcare and provide excellent and equally accessible counseling

SCALABILITY

The establishment and immediate impact of the University's master's degree in public mental health counseling program will serve as a proofing ground for the nationwide dissemination of this degree program and related functions. Israel's HMO system, specifically Clalit Health Services, are already onboard with this pilot and will be integrating the MA students into their mental health services.

ISRAEL'S NORTH – THE AMPLIFIED NEED

Israel's healthcare system stands at a crossroads, facing significant challenges and shortages resulting in a growing gap between mental health needs and access to mental health care. . These challenges are further intensified by Israel's unique demographic and geopolitical circumstances. The war has strained, and continues to strain, Israel's health care system - creating an urgent need to manage immediate wartime injuries while also expanding long-term care facilities for those affected by violence and struggling with mental health needs.

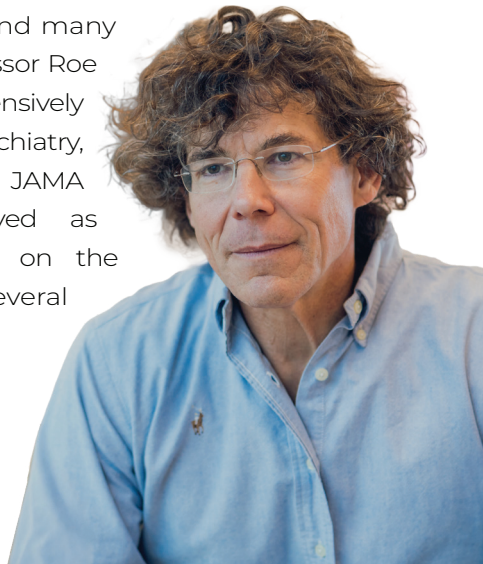
Nowhere is this crisis more apparent than in Israel's north, where medical and psychological care shortages are most acute. Despite strong demand for medical education, limited domestic training options push many aspiring caregivers to study abroad, and many do not return. This exacerbates regional disparities, leaving large segments of the population without adequate healthcare access. Investing in local healthcare education is the most direct way to address this imbalance, ensuring that more mental health counselors are trained in the North and remain in the region to serve the population.

PROJECT LEADERS

Prof. Dana Tzur Bitan and Prof. David Roe are highly esteemed mental health professionals and clinical researchers with extensive experience and academic knowledge in training, education, research, clinical practice, and policy advisement.

Professor Dana Tzur Bitan is the incoming chair of the Department of Community Mental Health in University of Haifa, and a senior clinical psychologist in the emergency room of Shalvata Mental Health Center (MHC), affiliated with the Clalit Health Services. Prof. Tzur Bitan's main academic and clinical focus is on improving mental health care for underprivileged populations treated in the public mental health system. She wrote numerous papers focusing on therapy for individuals with severe distress; effective psychiatric hospitalization alternatives for people treated in public services; and implementation of strategies to improve public healthcare. In recent years she has been leading the 'Psychotherapy and Psychiatry Research Lab', situated in Shalvata MHC, where she trains the next generation of professionals to focus on evidence-based therapy in the public sector. She is a member of the editorial board of several esteemed scientific journals, and currently serves as a member of the board of trustees in the National Institute for Healthcare Policy Research.

Professor David Roe is a licensed clinical psychologist, Professor and current chair of the Department of Community Mental Health, Director of The Centre for Mental Health Research, Practice and Policy at the University of Haifa, Israel and affiliated Professor at Aalborg University, Denmark. He is an internationally leading scholar whose research focuses on the psychosocial processes of recovery from serious mental illness, stigma, Patient Reported Outcome Measures (PROMs) and the evaluation of interventions and services. His research has been funded by several local and international sources, including NIMH, Israeli Science foundation and many other agencies. Professor Roe has published extensively including in World Psychiatry, Lancet Psychiatry and JAMA psychiatry and served as associate editor and on the editorial board of several journals.



The integration of the extensive expertise of Prof. Tzur Bitan and Prof. Roe naturally resonates with the aims of this master's program. Professors Bitan and Roe have extensive experience with Israel's public mental healthcare institutions, and vast experience in establishing successful and ongoing collaborations. The fact that the program will be situated in the Department of Community Mental Health further strengthens the program's goal to focus on community resilience and excellent care for under-privileged populations. The departments' faculty have considerable experience in training and working with professionals from under-represented populations such as Arabs and Druze, and have multi-cultural staff who can address the need to provide culturally sensitive training. The tight connection with the University of Haifa's Medical School will allow for the integration of graduate students in community clinics across the north, so as to provide not only medical, but also mental health care, in cities where such services are currently not operating.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS

Two out of the four health management organizations (HMO's) in Israel (Clalit Health Services, Leumit Health Services) have already expressed their desire to establish a formal partnership, recognizing the great potential in addressing structural inequalities of public mental healthcare services. Furthermore, the National Institute for Healthcare Policy Research highly endorse the program. We are also well connected with the newly established medical school in University of Haifa, which strongly aligns with the goals of our program and is eager to collaborate in forming multi-disciplinary holistic services. We are also strongly supported by the National Institute for Healthcare Policy Research, which works meticulously in recent years to improve mental healthcare in Israel. These endorsements are likely to lead to successful implementation of the program and contribute to the recovery of the public mental healthcare system, leading to equal care to all people in need.

A FUNDING REQUEST FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

To address the profound gap in mental healthcare access, particularly for marginalized communities in Israel , the University of Haifa is launching a first-of-its-kind MA in Public Mental Health Counseling.

We invite you to consider one of the following impactful funding opportunities:

- **A generous gift totaling $1.68 million** ($840,000 per year for two years) will fund both the operation of the program and provide 20 merit-based scholarships of $10,000 per student per year. These will be awarded to students demonstrating academic excellence.

- **A visionary gift totaling $3.6 million** ($1,800,000 per year for two years) will support full program operations and provide 100 scholarships of $10,000 per student per year—covering the entire inaugural cohort of this groundbreaking academic initiative.

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