

# Psychology Externship Program

VA New York Harbor Healthcare System  
Brooklyn Campus

## **POLICIES AND PROCEDURES HANDBOOK**

Jessica Esposito, Ph.D.  
Director of Pre-doctoral Externship

Shalini Sehgal, Psy.D.  
Director of Training and Pre-doctoral Internship

Valerie Abel, Psy.D.  
Section Chief, Psychology

## OVERVIEW

The psychology externship program of the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System's Brooklyn campus provides students with a clinically intense learning experience that includes individual and group psychotherapy as well as seminars and experiential group experiences. Veterans at our facility are coping with a wide variety of difficulties including substance abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder, grief and loss, depression, anxiety, personality disorders, family relationships, anger management, and chronic pain, among other difficulties. Our externship program has been a mutually positive experience for both externs and staff. It encourages professional growth and hopes to provide externs with a training experience that enables them to discover their own style as a clinician. Major extern responsibilities include individual psychotherapy and group psychotherapy. Externs have weekly individual supervision with a clinical psychologist and also participate in a supervision group in which they are supervised on their group psychotherapy experiences. They also participate in an extern process group facilitated by an outside consultant. In addition, externs attend Mental Health department Grand Rounds and have bimonthly didactics/seminars on a variety of topics. The externship year runs from September through May and is two days per week with Friday being a required day for the Brooklyn campus positions. Some clinic assignments require attendance on other days and extend through the summer. Possible clinic area assignments are listed and described below.

We are committed to providing multiculturally competent training to our externs. The veteran population at the Brooklyn VA encompasses a wide range of diversity across all identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, social class, and ability status. Externs will learn about how factors of identity interact with mental health and military culture and culturally appropriate interventions to utilize with our veterans. We strongly encourage and welcome applications from individuals of a variety of backgrounds and identities.

**PLEASE NOTE:** We follow the recommendations set forth by PSYDNYS (Psychology Directors of NYS) and NYNJADOT (New York New Jersey Association of Directors of Training). PSYDNYS and NYNJADOT have developed recommended policies to govern the process of applying to externships and accepting internship offers.

These guidelines stipulate the earliest date that students can submit applications and the earliest date on which an offer can be made to a student. Please see the full details of these guidelines at the link below:

[http://psychpracticum.fdu.edu/index.php/Externship\\_Guidelines](http://psychpracticum.fdu.edu/index.php/Externship_Guidelines)

## ROTATIONS

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Clinic:** Externs in this clinic have an opportunity to work with male and female veterans across the life-span, diagnosed with PTSD and other trauma related mental health issues as the result of combat stressors. Externs will carry a caseload of veterans that they will see for individual therapy as well as facilitate a PTSD group.

**Psychology Outpatient Rotation:** On this rotation we focus on giving the extern wide exposure to and experience with veterans who are having a wide array of difficulties described in the Overview section. This includes combat and non-combat veterans across the life span including those

returning from recent and current conflicts. The extern conducts intakes, meets to decide clinical disposition, and provides individual psychotherapy to this outpatient population. When possible the extern will also co-lead a Vietnam Combat PTSD group psychotherapy session with another extern.

**Military Sexual Trauma (MST):** Externs in this rotation will primarily work with male and female veterans diagnosed with PTSD and other related mental health problems as a result of sexual trauma which took place during military service. The extern conducts intakes and carries a caseload of veterans with MST whom they will see for individual therapy. Externs will also get to participate in the annual MST Clothesline Project, where clinical staff work with survivors who are invited to decorate a T-shirt depicting their recovery process. For the group therapy experience on this rotation, the extern will co-facilitate with an Intern a one-hour dynamically-oriented process group for veterans diagnosed with hepatitis C. Group offers exposure to a broad array of psychological issues related to the diagnosis of hepatitis C, such as adjustment to major medical illness and treatment, maintaining recovery from alcohol/drug abuse, and forming healthy relationships.

**Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC):** Externs assigned to this service have the opportunity to provide a full range of psychological services in a milieu therapy program to veterans who require intensive mental health treatment. There are approximately 40-45 veterans enrolled in the program at any given time who suffer from a wide range of mental health problems, including combat-related PTSD, psychotic disorders, depressive disorders, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, and personality disorders. Many of our veterans also have co-morbid medical problems. They are required to attend PRRC programming Mondays through Fridays from 8:30am-3pm. Externs on this rotation are involved in conducting initial screenings and assessments, working with a caseload of veterans in individual psychotherapy, co-facilitating and leading groups (psychoeducational groups, skills based, and process groups), and possibly working with couples and families. Externs on this rotation will also have the opportunity to work on an interdisciplinary team with psychologists, a social worker, a psychiatric nurse, a music therapist, recreational therapist, and a peer specialist.

**Geropsychology:** As our general population continues to age, the VA is servicing a greater number of older adult veterans with more complex medical and behavior health needs. Geropsychologists are uniquely trained to assess and intervene with older veterans with a variety of issues ranging from cognitive changes, dementia, co-morbid chronic medical illnesses, mental and behavioral health issues, and end-of-life care. Externs will be exposed to a variety of settings in which older adults are seen, including palliative care, hematology/oncology, geriatric primary care, and neuropsychology/memory-disorders clinic. Externs will have the opportunity to learn about assessment and intervention in these settings as well as have exposure to neuropsychological assessment and intervention. Externs will also have the opportunity to be supervised by geropsychology postdoctoral fellows.

## **POLICIES REGULATING THE PSYCHOLOGY EXTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

### **A. STRUCTURE OF EXTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

The Psychology Externship Training Program is structured to provide an integrated and coordinated approach to training. Training is considered a responsibility of every staff member who is included in some function of the program.

1. The Psychology Externship Program is under the administration of the Department of Mental Health, Psychology Section and is administered by the Chief of Psychology and Assistant Chief of Psychology/Training Director. The Psychology Training Committee is composed of Chief of Psychology, Assistant Chief of Psychology/Training Director, supervisors, and staff psychologists.
2. The Training Committee regulates the policies and procedures of the externship program. Individual supervisors are responsible for interviewing and selecting externs. The Training Committee is responsible for reviewing and evaluating externs' progress and certifies successful completion of the externship program.
3. The Training Committee oversees the development and evaluation of clinical and didactic experiences for the externs.
4. Through regularly scheduled meetings, the Training Committee engages in periodic review of the program to ensure that the philosophy, objectives and procedures of the program are adequately addressed.

#### **B. APPLICATION PROCEDURE FOR PSYCHOLOGY EXTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

The Training Committee follows the guidelines set by the Psychology Internship Directors of New York State and New York/New Jersey Association of Directors of Training.

1. Applications are solicited and received by the Externship Coordinator, Jessica Esposito, Ph.D. The externship supervisors review applications, contact applicants directly and interview applicants.
2. The application materials consist of: Curriculum Vitae, a letter of readiness from the applicant's program, two letters of recommendation, and graduate transcripts.
3. A personal interview with a staff psychologist is generally required of each applicant.

#### **C. ADMISSION PROCEDURE**

Applicants are screened based on VA policy. They must be enrolled in an APA approved doctoral program in clinical or counseling psychology and must be a citizen of the United States.

#### **D. TRAINING ASSIGNMENTS**

The program of training is designed to train externs as generalists through immersion in clinical work and careful supervision. Externs are assigned to one clinical area for the duration of the externship training year. Each of these clinical areas may require the extern to be present on specific days.

#### **E. SUPERVISION**

Supervision is viewed as a process of learning about the treatment of patients and oneself in relation to them. Externs and supervisors work closely together. These relationships are a critical element in the training process.

1. Supervision takes a number of forms: regularly scheduled individual sessions, group supervision, didactics and role modeling.

2. At least one hour of individual supervision are provided weekly for each clinical area.
3. Supervisors must have a doctoral degree in psychology from an APA approved institution and have completed an APA approved externship. They must also have State Certification.

## **F. EVALUATIONS**

Evaluation of externs is an ongoing process-taking place in supervision. Supervisors provide verbal evaluation as well as written evaluations as required by the extern's training program.

## **G. DUE PROCESS PROCEDURE**

The due process procedure is established to provide mechanisms for working through issues that may arise during daily working relationships or during supervision.

1. **Extern Issues with Supervisors or Program:** Externs are encouraged to discuss concerns/issues with their supervisors. If issues arise that cannot be satisfactorily resolved in this way, externs should bring their concerns to Assistant Chief of Psychology/Training Director or Externship Coordinator who will work to address the issue. If concerns cannot be resolved at that level, they will be brought to the Training Committee.
2. **Supervisor Issues with Extern Performance:** Supervisors have the responsibility to assess the extern's clinical competency as well as the ethical and professional behavior expected of a psychology professional. When difficulties cannot be worked out through one's daily working relationships or regular supervision, the due process procedure will be followed (Appendix A).

## **H. SCHEDULES**

The training program is scheduled to provide a comprehensive experience that focuses on training requirements while being sensitive to individual needs of externs and program constraints.

1. The training program requires a minimum of 500 hours to be completed within the academic year, September through May.
2. The externship is two days a week with Friday being a required day at the Brooklyn Campus. The standard 8-hour workday being is 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Some clinic assignments/supervisors may require attendance on specific days or on an additional third day. At the start of the workday, externs must email their supervisors to inform them that they have arrived on campus.
3. Externs are allowed 10 days off for vacation or illness. There are 10 Federal holidays that count toward these days off if they should fall on an externship day. This is to ensure that externs are meeting the required 500 hour minimum. Additional leave will be prorated if the externship extends past May. When days are taken off, the extern must notify his/her supervisor in advance and arrange coverage for patients. If an extern is sick, they must notify their supervisor as soon as possible and arrange for patient notification or coverage. Externs and supervisors should keep track of number of days off.

## **I. PSYCHODIAGNOSTIC TESTING**

Testing is not a formal component of the externship, but may be available on a case-by-case basis depending on clinical area and supervisor.

## **J. COMPUTER ACCESS**

Externs are given access to computers which are equipped with software to perform word processing, data analysis, electronic mail systems, Internet access, and the hospital-wide recordkeeping system (CPRS). Externs are expected to utilize the CPRS for all medical record charting and to follow standard procedures regarding maintaining confidentiality of patients' medical records.

## **K. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Confidentiality of client contacts and records must be cautiously maintained.

1. Psychologists follow the procedures of confidentiality as outlined in the American Psychological Association's publication "Ethical Principles of Psychologists."
2. On units where a team approach is employed, matters received in confidence by a psychologist may and must be extended to the other members of the therapeutic team. When this occurs, the confidentiality is equally binding on all members of the team.
3. Confidential material should never be released to individuals or agencies outside the hospital except through those channels legally established by the hospital and then only after obtaining a written release from the patient. All correspondence concerning patients must be approved by the supervising psychologist and released through the Correspondence Office.
4. Temptations to share clinical experiences with colleagues in inappropriate settings (e.g. elevators) should be resisted, even if names are not used.
5. If sessions are to be taped for supervisory purposes, patients are to be so informed and consent granted. A progress note should indicate that the patient has agreed to tape. Tapes must be carefully guarded and locked and must never be taken out of the medical center. Tapes must be erased after being used in the next supervisory session.
6. Discretion, professional judgment and supervisory guidance should all be used in deciding how much detail needs to be put in a patient's chart. In 1996 the US Dept. of Health and Human Services released guidelines (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act—HIPAA) on patient confidentiality and charting. The VA respects and practices these guidelines.

**Appendix A**  
**PSYCHOLOGY EXTERNSHIP PROGRAM**  
**DUE PROCESS PROCEDURE**

**PURPOSE**

To outline the policies regarding trainee evaluation and the grievance and due process procedures to be followed involving psychology externs at the Medical Center.

**EXTERN EVALUATIONS**

1. Staff supervisors should inform externs of their progress and competency during weekly individual supervisory sessions. Supervisors should also give feedback to the Training Director on a regular basis.
2. Formal written and verbal evaluations will be conducted as required by the extern's training program.
3. Supervisors who note a significant performance problem should discuss the problem immediately with the extern and the Training Director.

**REMEDICATION OF DEFICIENCIES IN PERFORMANCE OR CONDUCT**

1. The staff supervisor should first discuss the deficiency with the extern and work with the extern on an individual basis to remediate the problem.
2. If the deficiency is not resolved between the supervisor and the extern within a month, and if the deficiency could jeopardize the successful completion of the externship, the supervisor should inform the Training Director. The supervisor and Training Director will attempt to develop a remediation plan that will be implemented by the supervisor.
3. If the deficiency is viewed by the training committee as potentially serious (i.e., may interfere with the extern's successful completion of the internship) or is not resolved after a month of the implementation of the remediation plan, the Training Director will consult with the extern's university training director.
4. If all actions noted above are taken and the extern has still not resolved the deficiency, the extern may be terminated from the training program.