

Considering a Career in the Substance Abuse Field

The field of substance abuse offers a wide range of employment opportunities for creative, empathetic and hard-working individuals who bring a diversity of life experiences, employment histories and educational qualifications to the job. Some people are attracted to the field because of the many opportunities to engage directly with clients through counselling, outreach/advocacy or education, while others are attracted to the very important work that is done "behind the scenes", such as research, policy development and information management. In all cases, the work is both challenging and rewarding. According to the [2005 Canadian Addiction Workforce Survey](#) (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse), professionals who work in the field report a high level of personal satisfaction with their work.

This resource will be of interest to those who are considering a career in the substance abuse field. It provides information on educational requirements for various types of jobs and suggests how and where to find employment.

► Educational Requirements

The field typically attracts people with varying educational and employment backgrounds, including psychologists, social workers, educators, youth workers, physicians, nurses, pharmacologists and information management specialists. Just as educational backgrounds vary, so too do *levels* of education. It is possible to find employment in the field of substance abuse with a college diploma, undergraduate degree, master's degree or doctorate. While diploma and degree programs specific to substance abuse are not widely available in Canada, some colleges and universities offer certificate or diploma programs of study that specialize in substance abuse. It is also possible to acquire specialized knowledge and skills "on the job", with ongoing professional development being offered by many of the larger service-providing organizations, such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) and the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC).

Opportunities also exist for people with limited formal education, but with relevant life experience as volunteers, support workers or entry-level counsellors in detoxification (withdrawal management), outreach or treatment agencies. In these cases, employees will receive on the job training and may be required to pursue further education or work toward certification (see below).

Currently, the field of substance abuse is not regulated, meaning that professional certification or licensing as a "substance abuse professional" is not required. However, many employers require certification or higher learning as a condition of hiring. Information about professional certification and links to certifying agencies can be accessed from the Canadian Network of Substance Abuse and Allied Professionals website (CNSAAP: [Practitioner Certification](#)). As well, people who are interested in working in programs that specifically target Aboriginal populations can find additional information about certification and related issues on the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation website ([National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation](#)). A complete list of relevant courses, diplomas, certificates and degree programs is maintained by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and can be accessed on the Canadian Network of Substance Abuse and Allied Professionals ([CNSAAP: Education Programs](#)).

► Career Opportunities

In addition to offering a variety of employment opportunities to people with varying backgrounds and qualifications, the field also offers employment opportunities in a variety of settings, including hospitals, residential or outpatient treatment facilities (both public and private), short-term detoxification or withdrawal management programs, outreach and drop-in services, secondary schools, correctional facilities, and private practice. As well, there are employment opportunities in research institutes, libraries and across all levels of government in the area of policy development.

The majority of people employed as substance abuse specialists work directly with clients. As well, service delivery organizations employ managers and directors, many of whom have made the transition from the “front line” to supervisory and administrative responsibilities. In the following section, profiles of positions at varying levels on the front lines and in management are provided, as well as information about working as a specialist in the area of prevention and as a researcher in the field of substance abuse. It is important to bear in mind that this is not an exhaustive representation of the many different employment opportunities the field offers, but rather, an overview of the kind of work that is performed and qualifications required in order to be employed in the areas of service delivery and research.

Careers in Service Delivery

People who are at risk of developing substance use problems or currently experiencing problems related to their substance use can access services across a continuum of care:

- Prevention and education initiatives aimed at supporting young people and adults in making informed choices about alcohol and other drug use;
- Screening for substance abuse and referral to an appropriate level of service;
- Comprehensive assessment of substance use and related factors, such as physical health, mental health, employment status, housing situation, legal problems, financial problems, and family issues;
- Detoxification, also known as withdrawal management;
- Treatment—ranging from outpatient services (daily/weekly) to residential treatment (from 30 days to one year);
- Aftercare services that provide ongoing support to people who have completed a program of treatment;
- Supportive housing;
- Outreach services—needle exchange programs, drop-in centres, safe injection education;
- Methadone maintenance clinics.

Most of the services listed above are available in larger urban settings. People living in smaller centres or rural areas may be referred elsewhere in order to receive the level of service that is most appropriate to their need. Similarly, services for special population groups, such as people with co-occurring disorders, the young, the elderly, women, minority ethnic groups, and Aboriginals (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) may not be widely available in all parts of the country. While some larger organizations, particularly those with a mandate to provide services on a provincial or territorial level, offer a broad spectrum of services, other agencies often limit the scope of service provision to a

smaller menu of services. Employment opportunities within these services appeal to people with various levels of expertise in the prevention, management and/or treatment of substance abuse.

Research within the alcohol and drug field indicates that people working on the front line in substance abuse treatment programs are likely to be most effective if they have good *listening and empathy skills*. Informal discussions with service providers also suggest that front-line workers will be most effective and find the work more satisfying if they also have the following qualities:

- A strong and genuine desire to help people;
- Respect for people from different cultures;
- Ability to leave work-related issues at work;
- Ability to leave personal problems at home;
- Good verbal and written communication skills;
- Basic computer skills;
- Good time-management and organizational skills;
- Ability to work independently and as a member of a team;
- A good sense of humour.

Following are descriptions of various types of front-line jobs that require differing levels of education and experience; however, people who are interested in working in the field of substance abuse should speak with local service providers to find out about opportunities and hiring requirements, bearing in mind that requirements may vary from organization to organization.

Support worker (also known as outreach worker, needle exchange worker or attendant. While not the standard, some organizations refer to staff in this category as "counsellors").

Support workers provide encouragement and emotional support to clients as well as help and advice on practical matters. Support workers are also expected to keep good records, to participate as members of a treatment team, and to contribute to the operation and development of the agency in which they work.

In services that provide clean needles to injection drug users, support workers may be expected to arrange for the distribution of needles, bleach kits, condoms and educational material to walk-in or scheduled clients, and to those clients contacted through various outreach initiatives. In these services, support workers also offer assistance to clients who express an interest in exploring their treatment options.

In services that provide support for detoxification, support workers may be expected to screen clients for problems that may require medical intervention, assign beds, supervise showers and changes of clothing, monitor clients during withdrawal, and take appropriate action where indicated, facilitate educational sessions, supervise meals and help to maintain order and cleanliness in the facility.

In treatment programs, support workers may be expected to assist with client intake and discharge planning, facilitate educational sessions, and provide practical support to counsellors, other staff and clients.

Services that operate on a 24-hour basis, such as in-patient detoxification services and residential treatment programs, usually require support workers to be available for shift work.

Entry-level educational requirements for support workers are typically a community college certificate in the human services field or a bachelor's degree in social work, psychology or a related discipline. Previous paid or voluntary work in the substance abuse field may also be required. Some employers also value community college certificates in addiction studies and/or counsellor certification.

When hiring entry-level support workers, some employers consider relevant life experience, including a personal history of substance abuse, and may attach less weight to formal education. However, a commitment to continuing education is usually encouraged.

Counsellor

Depending on agency size and resources, counsellors may have responsibilities similar to those of support workers and may also be expected to provide more intensive interventions designed to support clients in changing their substance use and related behaviours. Counsellors are also expected to keep good records, to be members of a treatment team and to otherwise contribute to the operation and development of the agency in which they work.

The focus and style of counselling varies among agencies, but in general, the counsellor aims to help the client understand his or her problems and to develop a plan that will change the behaviour, lifestyle and/or environmental factors that contribute to these problems. Counselling may be with individuals or with groups of clients or family members. Frequently counsellors work in multi-disciplinary teams composed of physicians, social workers, financial and housing assistance agencies, educational program workers, and mental health professionals. Counsellors working in small agencies do not typically work in multidisciplinary teams and therefore often refer clients to outside services.

Increasingly, many clients of substance abuse services are recognized as having mental health problems in addition to substance abuse problems. This is referred to as a *co-occurring* or *concurrent* disorder. Counsellors are therefore expected to be able to recognize this type of disorder and respond appropriately, either by providing counselling for both mental health and substance abuse problems or by liaising with mental health professionals to develop a coordinated treatment plan. In addition to mental health problems, clients of substance abuse programs frequently present complex problems related to multiple substance use (also known as poly-drug use), physical health issues and/or social issues. This complexity of presenting problems makes the work of the counsellor especially challenging and reinforces the need for counsellors to be well educated, experienced and committed to ongoing professional development.

Educational requirements for counsellors are generally higher than those for support workers, with the majority of agencies requiring at least a bachelor's degree and many requiring a master's degree in social work, psychology or a related discipline.

Some substance abuse counsellors work in private practice, serving clients directly on a fee-for-service basis. Some of these private practitioners also have contracts with employers to develop Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and to provide assessment and counselling to workers with substance abuse problems. Those working in private practice should have appropriate education, experience and certification by a recognized body (essential for malpractice insurance).

Prevention educator

Substance abuse is usually included in school health education programs delivered by teachers, school counsellors, health educators and, in some cases, by specialists from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) or other police forces. However, broader education and awareness programs aimed at the general public or specific target groups such as high-risk youth, drivers, snowmobilers or boaters often involve prevention specialists who work in provincial addiction agencies, public health departments or with large multi-function substance abuse agencies such as the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC). Many on-and off-reserve programs for Aboriginal people also employ prevention specialists.

These specialists work closely with other agencies and community coalitions to develop, deliver and evaluate addiction awareness initiatives, such as Drug Awareness Week, workshops and presentations that target various groups in the community, including teachers, school administrators, guidance counsellors, professionals in health and social services, parents, youth, and youth group leaders.

People working as prevention specialists typically have a bachelor's or a master's degree in disciplines such as education, nursing, psychology or public health in addition to specialized knowledge of substance abuse.

As well, prevention specialists often have skills in health promotion, consultation, program planning, training and group facilitation, instructional design, community development, project management, evaluation, and social marketing. For those working with youth, an understanding of adolescent development and experience working with the education, children's services and health sectors would also be an asset.

Positions for Other Certified or Licensed Professionals

Larger substance abuse treatment agencies employ certified professionals from a variety of disciplines, including medicine, nursing, nutrition, pharmacy, psychology, social work, occupational therapy, and recreational therapy. Employees in these positions are required to be certified or licensed by the appropriate Boards and to adhere to expected standards of practice.

Physicians and other certified or licensed professionals can seek certification as a substance abuse counsellor; however, the only certificate in substance abuse for professionals in a specific discipline is the Certificate in Addiction Medicine offered by the Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine (CSAM). This certificate is available to graduates of recognized medical schools who work in the substance abuse field, take a special examination and meet other requirements set by CSAM. For additional information, see the website for the [Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine](http://www.csam.ca).

Careers in Administration and Management

The front line is supported and directed by people working in various levels of administration and management. Opportunities exist within the field for people working in administrative support to transfer into front-line work and/or from the front line to supervisory or management positions. Following are descriptions of various types of administrative and management jobs that require differing levels of education and experience:

Administrative and other support services

The substance abuse treatment sector employs people with skills in administration, information specialists/librarians and, in some cases, food service staff, cleaners and maintenance workers. These jobs can be especially rewarding for people who have a particular interest in the issue of substance abuse and who want to be part of a worthwhile enterprise. Since almost everyone working in this type of environment, regardless of the job, will have some degree of contact with clients, it is important that all employees receive at least a basic level of training in substance abuse and the effective management of issues that may arise.

Clinical supervisor

Clinical supervisors/directors are responsible for the overall development, functioning and evaluation of treatment services and program staff. They oversee and evaluate the quality and efficiency of services; monitor referral, case management and treatment protocols; manage the clinical practice of the staff; and provide clinical supervision to all counselling staff. In many cases, clinical supervisors/directors report directly to the organization's executive director.

Educational requirements for clinical supervisors/directors are generally higher than those for counsellors and many agencies require a master's degree. Three to five years of experience as a counsellor is also usually required.

Executive/Program director

In specialized substance abuse treatment agencies, the executive/program director is responsible for all aspects of the agency's functioning and the services it provides. He/she may report to a board of directors, to a senior manager, or to the president of a regional, provincial or territorial health or social service agency. Responsibilities include providing leadership in the development and implementation of strategic and operational plans, managing the organization's finances, managing the organization's human resource strategy, and serving as a spokesperson for the organization.

It is becoming increasingly important for executive directors to have strong strategic planning skills to ensure they are meeting the challenges of working in complex and changing environments. For this reason, expertise in substance abuse and also in administration, leadership, program planning, evaluation and public relations would be considerable assets. In most regions, a high percentage of executive/program directors have master's degrees with specialized qualifications in business, health or public administration.

Careers in Substance Abuse Research

Research has a significant influence on policies and programs in the substance abuse field. Research is conducted by investigators from a wide range of disciplines, including biochemistry, psychology, sociology, social work and economics. Research initiatives are usually linked to universities, government-sponsored health agencies or large multi-function substance abuse agencies such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto.

There are also some research firms in the private sector. These tend to specialize in research to inform and evaluate policies and programs of interest to government departments or to community groups and agencies. Most of their revenue comes from contracts with governments and other agencies. As well, industries with a specific interest in substance abuse, such as alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical companies, often sponsor research initiatives.

Lead investigators on projects supported by major granting agencies such as the [Canadian Institutes for Health Research](#) have Ph.D.s and work in agencies that support research. Grant monies are used to hire research assistance and/or to purchase equipment and supplies to support the research.

Many research projects hire research assistants to support the work of the lead investigators. In some cases, new graduates are hired as research assistants, who are presented with a good opportunity for gaining valuable skills and knowledge. Generally speaking, however, work as a research assistant requires a master's degree.

► Finding Work

Databases of Potential Employers

A database maintained by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) has records for approximately 2,400 organizations involved in the addictions field in Canada and which employ substance abuse specialists ([CCSA - CCSA ADDICTIONS DATABASES](#)). This includes federal, provincial and territorial government departments or agencies involved with addiction issues, non-governmental organizations, hospitals, public health units and other health care organizations, treatment agencies, research agencies, and some school boards. Substance abuse specialists also work in prisons and other corrections agencies and for the RCMP, provincial and municipal police.

The agencies listed vary greatly in size, ranging from fewer than 10 employees to several hundred. In general, the largest employers are provincial and territorial government departments. As well, there are three large multi-function organizations in Canada that also employ a large number of people: the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto (<http://www.camh.net>), the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (<http://www.afm.mb.ca>), and the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (<http://www.aadac.ca>).

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse maintains a database of researchers who may be able and willing to advise you on the trends in hiring practices and the need for research assistants and lead researchers ([CCSA - CCSA ADDICTIONS](#)

[RESEARCHERS DATABASES](#)). For people interested in obtaining employment in a program that specializes in the treatment of Aboriginal people, a database of these programs can be found on the website of the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation ([National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation](#)).

Where Jobs are Advertised

Jobs in the substance abuse field are not always widely advertised. Therefore, it is recommended that people interested in pursuing employment in this field make contact with prospective employers to find out about current and future job opportunities and hiring requirements.

When jobs are advertised, notices appear in local and national newspapers, agency newsletters and notice boards, and Internet sites (such as [Charity Village®](#) or those maintained by substance abuse organizations). The Canadian Network of Substance Abuse and Allied Professionals (www.cnsaap.ca) also maintains a job board for people interested in working in the field.