

# Art therapy requirements put in place, still largely unregulated

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Modern terms such as binge-watch, face-palm and photobomb recently joined the pages of the Merriam-Webster dictionary. In Arizona, art therapy won an official definition this year as well.

Art therapists use creativity and artistic practices to help process emotions and heal trauma. In August, legislation went into effect that requires people in Arizona who use the job title of art therapist or offer art therapy services to be certified with the national Art Therapy Credentials Board. This certification comes with significant educational and training requirements.

Prior to this, there were no legal requirements for art therapists. Industry professionals say this left the public exposed to people without training incorrectly performing art therapy.

“Well meaning citizens would maybe take a course or read something on art therapy and think that they could then practice it and that was leaving the public very vulnerable,” said Margaret Carlock-Russo, president of the Arizona Art Therapy Association.

Flagstaff art therapist Molly Sutton was less sympathetic, equating practicing art therapy without training to fraud. She said the danger to patients was obvious.

A search of the popular magazine “Psychology Today” revealed that many professionals in Arizona who are not certified continue to advertise art therapy services. Of 16 therapists that listed an art therapy specialty or claimed to be trained in art therapy, only five had the required board certification.

It’s tough to say whether all of them are operating illegally.

“The language right now is a little vague,” said art therapist Natalie Foster, who is also the president-elect of the Arizona Art Therapy Association. While the legislation is meant to curtail the practice of art therapy by those not qualified, it’s not meant to stop traditional therapists from integrating some art into their practice, according to Foster.



Art therapist Natalie Foster looks through some of the art in her office made by patients.

Foster’s co-worker, Lanie Smith, said “the art therapy credentialing board doesn’t have the right to the crayon.”

Either way, Foster says it’s unlikely that anyone will be monitoring for infractions. Under current rules, employers are responsible for making sure they hire accredited art therapists. In the private therapy world, this leaves the public responsible for checking for qualifications. For action to be taken, a private citizen or fellow professional would have to report an offending professional.

Carlock-Russo was involved in changing the professional requirements for art therapists through the Sunrise process — a legislative process through which health fields are expanded or amended.

She said that leaders in the profession

are undergoing the challenging process of educating both professionals and the public about an industry that was previously entirely unregulated.

“It’s hard to know if everyone knows,” said Carlock-Russo. “We’re just going to keep advertising it and keep talking about it.”

The Arizona Art Therapy Association is about to launch an educational campaign to disseminate information about new requirements, targeting agencies that already hire art therapists.

In addition, industry professionals say title protection for art therapists is only the first step in giving the discipline the legitimacy and protection it deserves. The profession is still not covered by insurance and has no professional board.

Art Therapy Professor Camille Smith says the profession should have equal

recognition, as there is growing research that art therapy is as or more effective than other therapies. Smith has been an art therapist for over 20 years and never doubted that this was the right career.

“I think that the more people know about art therapy and the value of art therapy the better,” said Smith. “People are able to access different feelings and express different things more readily than if they had to use words.”

Smith teaches a master’s degree program in art therapy at Prescott College and says the course load is completely different from a traditional counseling degree. Techniques range from visual art to music, poetry and performance. She believes many people don’t understand art therapy and the profession has a ways to go in educating the public about its benefits. 🏛️



Flipping through a journal, art therapist Lanie Smith shows how her patient’s expression changed over many sessions from dark to hopeful.



This box was created by one of art therapist Lanie Smith’s patients to represent a safe space, a common art therapy exercise.