

Massage Credentials in the State of California

At this time, it is important to understand that if you earn a certificate or diploma from the Massage Therapy Program, this does not mean you are “certified” or have a “certification.” Any certificate or diploma from a massage school in California is simply a piece of paper stating that a student has completed a certain course of study. Although many massage schools in California and massage professionals who receive their training in these schools use terms such as “certified massage practitioner” (“CMP”) and “certified massage therapist” (“CMT”) when describing their training programs and the credentials earned in such programs, massage professionals in our state are not certified, registered or licensed by the State nor by any agency.¹

The only credential granted to massage professionals by the State of California was the “Certificate of Authorization for Service,” or CERT, issued by the (currently inactive) Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education (BPPVE). The CERT authorizes “an individual to be an instructor or administrator in any private vocational postsecondary educational institution in California.” This credential does *not* authorize a massage professional to *practice* massage. The right to practice massage is granted by city and county governments that issue permits and business licenses to massage professionals who satisfy the requirements of the particular municipality in which they want to practice.²

The BPPVE provided the only state regulation of our profession: issuing CERTs and granting approval to private massage schools to offer instruction in massage therapy. The Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education Reform Act states that any “certificate” issued by a California massage school is recognized by the state as merely a diploma. The state’s definition of “Diploma” is “any diploma, certificate, transcript, document, or other writing in any language other than a degree which signifies, purports, or is generally taken to signify satisfactory completion of the requirements of an academic, educational, technological, or professional program of study beyond the secondary school level.”

Many massage professionals who receive their training in California use the terms “certified” and “certification” because they have been used—albeit incorrectly—for decades. The terms sound professional, they make the business of massage seem more legitimate, and it always looks good to have some letters or a title after your name. However, since these terms are misleading at best, we encourage massage professionals to use the terms “certified” or “certification” only when referring to someone certified by an organization such as the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB)³ or by one of the few states that certifies massage professionals. When referring to someone not certified by any state or agency, we encourage use of terms such as “massage practitioner” or “massage therapist.”

Another term California-educated massage professionals have used mistakenly for decades is “state certification,” and many referred to themselves as “state certified.”⁴ The myth of “state certification” may have started when graduates of private massage schools noted that the State of California “certified” or “licensed” the massage schools they attended (this information may appear on a school’s diplomas). Since they earned diplomas from schools certified by the State, graduates may have jumped to the mistaken conclusion that they were therefore “state certified” or possessed “state certification.” Some California massage schools still claim that they offer a “State Certification Program,” a phrase that perpetuates the myth.

MPC is accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, an institutional accrediting body recognized by the Commission of Recognition of Post-secondary Accreditation and the U.S. Department of Education. MPC is also approved by the California State Department of Education. MPC’s certificates and degrees are therefore acceptable in any California city or county that requires a diploma from an approved school as part of the application for a massage permit or business license.

The State of California is considering legislation—Senate Bill 731—that will create a certification program for massage professionals. Senate Bill 731 will create a private non-profit Massage Therapy Organization empowered by the State to issue certification to massage professionals using a two-tier system: a Massage Practitioner level for those with 250 hours of training and a Massage Therapist level for those with 500 hours of training. The certification will be “voluntary,” meaning that you can still practice massage without the state certification if you meet local business-licensing requirements, but you will then have to abide by the onerous municipal codes. SB 731 will hopefully preempt the patchwork of demeaning and discriminatory municipal codes that currently regulate many massage professionals in California.

To practice massage in another state, you must meet the requirements (if any) for licensing, certification or registration in that state. For current massage laws in the U.S. and Canada, go to <http://www.massagemag.com/Resources/USCan/laws.php>

¹ Generally, in the nomenclature of massage professionals, “practitioners” have less than, and “therapists” more than 500 hours of training.

² The amount of training required for a massage permit or business license in California varies widely, from 100 to 500 hours or more. Many employers now require that their employees have 500 hours of training as well as be Nationally Certified in Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork.

³ The certification granted by the NCBTMB is approved by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), which is the accrediting body of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA). Massage professionals who gain national certification may call themselves Nationally Certified in Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCTMB).

⁴ Mr. Greg Benton of the former Council for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education stated that it is illegal for massage professionals in California to use the terms “State Certified” or “State Certification” when advertising their services.