

Speaker 1:

This week on Pathways.

Lexus Howland:

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Speaker 1:

Behavioral health professionals of all levels and certifications are in high demand. A rewarding career assisting adults with a mental health diagnosis isn't out of reach and can be completed much quicker than you might think.

Emily Tadlock:

Welcome back to Pathways, part of Northern Light Health's Healthy, Happy, Wise podcast series. If you're just tuning in this season, we are doing a whole series about two year or less programs, or certifications, propelling you into a healthcare career. Today I am sitting with Lexi Howland. She is an MHRTC at Northern Light Acadia Hospital. Lexi, thanks so much for being on with me.

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, thank you.

Emily Tadlock:

First question, what is an MHRTC, that's a lot of letters?

Lexus Howland:

Yeah. MHRTC stands for mental health rehabilitation technician certified, so the last is like a little dash C. You get that through the Muskie Institute grants it here in Maine, and it is a certification that allows you to work with adults in the community with serious and persistent mental health diagnoses.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, so what do you do on a typical basis with this certification?

Lexus Howland:

Sure. So I work at Acadia Hospital as a behavioral health home coordinator, it's like case management for adults, and so I see people who were diagnosed with a long-term mental health diagnosis. And I do case management for them. So I help them apply for housing, apply for food stamps, just whatever they need. I can be there for them and offer support.

Emily Tadlock:

Let's head into how you got your certification.

Lexus Howland:

Sure. So it actually was kind of a long story. I didn't plan to get my MHRTC, but I had been looking through jobs. I was still in school in my junior year at UMA, and I was looking at jobs at Acadia and saw

this one came up, and it required an MHRTC. And so I looked into it and realized that I was able to sit for it because I had enough credits in the psychology field at UMA. And so I sent off my transcripts to the Muskie Institute and they sent back a conditional approval because I had met most of my domains, and from there I applied at Acadia because they had granted me by provisional. And it's history from that point.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. So you were in a bachelor's program originally.

Lexus Howland:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

And then realized you had enough credits. If someone just wanted to sit or just wanted to become an MHRTC, are there ways to do that other than going through a bachelor's program?

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, so different schools will offer specific MHRTC certificate programs. I can't speak for all the schools, I know the one I went to, you could sit and just do enough credits to get your MHRTC, which I think has got to be less than 30 credits. I can't imagine it's more than that. But there's eight specific domains that you have to meet to get your full MHRTC certificate. So those domains would all be covered in those specific classes, and then you'd be able to get it. I imagine maybe it would take two semesters.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Wait, so you said domains, what are domains?

Lexus Howland:

So the Muskie Institute has eight domains that you have to meet to get your MHRTC, and each one is specific to a part of the mental health rehabilitation technician. And so don't quote me on them, but it's community outreach, substance use. You have to have a class-

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, in each different domain to be able to...

Lexus Howland:

Yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, so that makes a little more sense.

Okay. So for those folks who are like, "Okay, you said MHRTC, you said just a couple of semesters to get it. You said case manager," what exactly would they be doing for people? Obviously without going into detail about specific patients, but I think it could be confusing if you don't understand the term case manager to know exactly how you're assisting. Because you're not a social worker, you're not a psychologist, you're not any of those types of professions, so you're not necessarily handing out mental health advice.

Lexus Howland:

Sure. It's social work-esc, I would say, because we do do a lot of similar things without the therapy portion of it. So I keep a caseload of around 30 clients, and I meet with them usually at least once or twice a month and we just assess their needs. So we do things like psychosocial assessments, which tell me about you now, tell me about your past. What are these things that you're struggling with right now? And then we make goals for people and treatment plans. And so we say in a year, what do we want to see? In three months, what do we want to see? A lot of people, it's related to housing, it's related to medical needs, it's related to support services in their community. So it really all depends on each individual person, but they follow the same theme.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, that was a wonderful explanation. I feel like I understand better what you do now. You said you didn't necessarily, when you were going to school, think that this was what you wanted to do. And you're currently still in school, right?

Lexus Howland:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. So tell me a little bit about your journey, what you went to school for, what you thought you were going to do, what you're headed for now.

Lexus Howland:

So when I started at UMA, I started in 2021. I started actually in the Bachelors of Arts and Sociology program, so I thought that's where I was going to go with it. After taking a couple of psychology courses and human services courses, I decided that I was going to switch to the Bachelors of Science in Mental Health and Human Services. And my focus was on child and family services, they have a couple different minors you can choose from. So that's where I am. I'm a senior right now, I'm going to graduate in May, hopefully. And I went into it not really knowing where I was going to go with it or what I was going to do with it. I knew that I wanted to work with people and support people, I just wasn't sure what that exactly meant.

Emily Tadlock:

So now that you've worked as an MHRTC, do you have a better idea of what you want to do with your life and what sort of jobs you want?

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, so my goal after I graduate with my bachelors is take a little bit of time off, and then I'd like to go back and get my master's in clinical social work.

Emily Tadlock:

And that would give you what certification?

Lexus Howland:

Licensed clinical social worker.

Emily Tadlock:

Right, okay. So that is huge, and you could continue working at Acadia with your patients or with different patients in a different capacity even. So not only did you get the certification and get to work in the certification while you were continuing to go through school, but now it's given you an idea of what you want to do in your future and you're going to be able to keep going with that. And I'm assuming your superiors, your bosses know that this is what you...

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, I've asked my manager. She's given me a reference for a master's program I was looking into, so it's been nice. I'm working on that clinicals portion of it. And so I'm actually using my job right now to be my clinical portion, which has been really nice. So the Acadia Education Department signed on to let me do my clinicals there. I have a support person who does my school portion.

Emily Tadlock:

So you're getting all the support you need to continue in your education and to further your career?

Lexus Howland:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

That's awesome.

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, it's been really nice.

Emily Tadlock:

That's really cool. So for those people out there, what would you say it takes to be an MHRTC and to help people in this capacity?

Lexus Howland:

I think you'd have to have a lot of compassion. You have to understand that not everybody is where you are mentally, they're not ready to make every change that you suggest to them. You have to have thick skin. You have to understand that people are going through really tough things that maybe you don't get, you've never been through yourself. Empathy to meet people on their level, and just a really good work ethic to say, "I'm going to do my best for you, no matter what that looks like."

Emily Tadlock:

I love that. And just for all those listeners out there who obviously can't see us right now, we are sitting in Lexi's home, in her lovely home, sitting right next to her sleepy doggo.

Lexus Howland:

Her name is Jolene.

Emily Tadlock:

Jolene, she's snoozing. Oh, I just woke her up. Nope, she's snoozing. I met you in your home today because you get to work from home, right?

Lexus Howland:

Yes. Yes, I love it.

Emily Tadlock:

Yeah, so that's another perk of this type of job. You do a lot of tele appointments.

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, I see I want to say probably 80% of my clients over Zoom.

Emily Tadlock:

And when you are seeing your patients in person, how are you doing that? Where are you going?

Lexus Howland:

So I go to their homes, which they're usually all within a 30-minute radius. I go into their homes, I meet them there. It's pretty casual. It was something I was nervous about not ever being in this type of field before, but they've all been great and I've never had an off-putting experience.

Emily Tadlock:

Well, that's good. And you mentioned earlier too, you occasionally go to emergency departments and help out there. What do you do in terms of that?

Lexus Howland:

So I don't necessarily help the emergency department personnel, I just go as a visitor. I wear my badge and I'll go in, and I say, "Hey, what's going on? What happened here today? What can I help you with?" And so that's more of a rare instance that that happens, but I always offer it to people if they end up in the emergency department for any variety of reasons, that I'm happy to go and see them and see what I can do while I'm there.

Emily Tadlock:

That's really awesome. Okay, so let's talk about your job a little bit more. You're not just working with a client though, you're working with multiple people, correct?

Lexus Howland:

Yes. So the client's the center of the picture, but you're also going to be working with their medical doctor, their psychologist, their therapist, their medication managers, all these people who are their collateral contacts that they give you consent to talk to will be a part of their team that you're going to be working with to make sure that they're doing well and being taken care of.

Emily Tadlock:

We mentioned the work from home portion of your job. I feel like you've got to be a go-getter, you've got to be someone who's ready to make those phone calls and do your best work outside of an office setting.

Lexus Howland:

You have to be comfortable working independently, and you have to be able to make those phone calls, get up in the morning and start work even though you're in your own house and you want to lay in bed.

Yeah, working from home is great, but if you don't have that kind of ability to push yourself, then it would be difficult.

Emily Tadlock:

Yeah, it would be hard. So we've talked about your job, we've talked about what it looks like. What I haven't touched on is the need for MHRTC people, we need people like this.

Lexus Howland:

Adult case managers are few and far between. It's very, very difficult for a lot of people to find case management services, especially in the more rural places, like Ellsworth area and down east. There's just not any programs. And so a lot of the times people get put on these super long wait lists because there's nothing else. And maybe by the time they come up on the wait list their needs have been met in other ways. And so it would be nice if people could get put on a wait list and assigned quickly, and have their needs addressed quicker.

Emily Tadlock:

Yeah, we might see more results.

Lexus Howland:

Definitely, definitely. I know down where I am, things are short for case management services for adults, so there's only a few of us to go around.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Well, that's good to know. Definitely a needed position. We didn't really talk about this too much, but it's a program that doesn't take very long to get into. And it's a well compensated program, I would assume.

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, the program does pretty well.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, so there you have it. You could get a certification if this is the right type of job for you, make good money, and help people and help your community.

Lexus Howland:

Absolutely. Yeah, it's very rewarding. There's more good days than there are bad, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

That is wonderful. So if someone was interested in this, what would you say to encourage them to go after this career?

Lexus Howland:

I say go for it. I say there's nothing stopping you, and it's rewarding to spend your time helping other people. I've usually finished my week feeling like I've done something for somebody. And I love it. I think it's a great field to get into if you want to help people but maybe you're not super interested in the medical side of stuff, but you want to still be a part of their care team.

Emily Tadlock:

That's a wonderful way to do it. That's a great way to put that. Awesome. Is there anything else you'd like to add, Lexi?

Lexus Howland:

I don't think so. Well, if I could add one thing, I would say, even if you think you're not going to get the full MHRTC, it's worth sending your transcripts in and getting them to look at them. Because even if you meet one domain, they'll give you a two-year provisional. And so during that time, you can use work experience to do it. Acadia Hospital offers the domains, you can sit in on the domain programs that they offer so you can earn your domains through them. It's a really good way to get into the field without doing a four year.

Emily Tadlock:

And getting your feet wet and trying to find out if it really is what you're interested in doing.

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Tadlock:

You make your job seem wonderful. I can tell how passionate you are about it and about the work that you do with your clients, but not every day is sunshine and rainbows, you're working with people who are having some of the worst times of their lives.

Lexus Howland:

Yeah, it's hard. It's nice to be able to help people and feel like you're making a difference. Sometimes you feel like you can't make that difference for people, and that can be really, really hard to know that you're putting in your effort, but things aren't changing. So that's where I think things can get a little disappointing.

Emily Tadlock:

And I think that's where you have to have the drive to keep going, and knowing that maybe you couldn't help that person, but you can help the next one.

Lexus Howland:

Absolutely. And you're putting in your effort, you got to go to bed at night knowing that you've done everything you can. And sometimes things just don't work out, and that's just how life is, and you're going to get up and do better tomorrow.

Emily Tadlock:

I love that. And this career is not for everybody, like many careers. I'm sitting here on a podcast with you right now, and you are totally game for it, but this isn't everybody's cup of tea.

Lexus Howland:

No. Yeah, I'm a yapper, I love to talk.

Emily Tadlock:

And this has been a wonderful way to talk and get to know you and get to know your career. So I just thank you so much for hopping on with me today, I really appreciate it.

Lexus Howland:

Of course. Yeah, it was great.

Speaker 1:

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