

Public Health Social Work & the Nation

Uncovering the best interventions and coordination of care for substance abusers is the long term work of public health social worker **Julie Witas** (SSW '06, SPH '07). Julie is a project manager of two large, multi-year, federally funded research projects at Boston Medical Center.

"We are committed to improving the health care system for people who struggle with alcohol and drug abuse," says Julie. "What we're doing here is finding clear answers as to whether these interventions are effective in improving outcomes, increasing abstinence, or at least reducing use [of substances]. We want a clear answer as to whether [these interventions are] effective, so that we can help disseminate the information and providers can use another tool for treatment."

Julie explains that in one of her National Institute of Health (NIH) research projects, the "interventions are all behavioral specific and it is our job to offer specific types [of intervention] to different people at risk." The other project examines health care management and how coordination of care might affect patients dealing with substance abuse. Together, these projects create a fast-paced environment with tight deadlines for Julie, and she is constantly collecting and managing data, and reporting findings.

"I probably would not have gotten this job if it wasn't for the degree and level of experience I had. . . my Master of Social Work and Master of Public Health degrees brought a unique perspective to my work," she says. "[They] gave me some edge over other applicants and I could bring a unique perspective [because I had] done work with patients. I could work with different players on a team and I could handle giving difficult feedback."

She continues that her role as a public health social worker provides valuable insight into a community traditionally oriented to population-level prevention. "Sometimes [in public health] there is a need for more of an individual perspective, [particularly] when thinking about how real life situations may play out for an individual research subject," she says. "Social work can help

to provide some stories to inform the data. For instance, we administer questionnaires to people in our research studies, and they may give

responses that may not seem so logical or consistent throughout the interview. When someone looks at this one line of data and wonders whether it makes sense, they may need to talk with someone with a client centered background [to get more perspective]."

Julie continues, "Working with all different players is really satisfying. I get to be somewhat creative within a structured bound. At start up, there's a lot of problem solving, and I make sure we're efficient, and our research goals are being met. From a patient perspective, I am being mindful to their needs. From a service provider perspective, I work so that she feels fulfilled [on the project], and has the proper amount of training and feedback available."



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