

MESSAGE CERTIFICATION IN CALIFORNIA

If you earn a certificate or degree in the Massage Therapy Program, you are not “certified” nor have you earned “certification.” Moreover, it is now illegal to use terms such as “CMP,” “CMT,” “Certified Massage Practitioner,” or “Certified Massage Therapist” unless you are certified by California Massage Therapy Council, created after enactment in September 2008 of California Senate Bill 731 (SB 731), California’s Massage Therapy law. SB 731 was amended by California Assembly Bill 1147 (AB 1147, the Massage Therapy Act, passed September of 2014)). The issue of certification and the new laws are discussed below.

Before enactment of SB 731, there was no State-approved certification, registration or licensure of massage professionals in California, nor was there any State regulation of the practice of massage. The only credential granted to massage professionals was the “Certificate of Authorization for Service,” or CERT, issued by the former Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education (BPPVE) in the State of California Department of Consumer Affairs. A CERT authorized “an individual to be an instructor or administrator in any private vocational postsecondary educational institution in California.” The CERT did not authorize a massage professional to practice massage, only to be a teacher or administrator in a private massage school. Because the State didn’t regulate the practice of massage, city and county governments created municipal codes authorizing the issue of business licenses and permits to massage professionals who satisfied the requirements of each municipality in which they wished to practice.¹

Prior to SB 731, the BPPVE (and its predecessor, Council for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education) provided the only state regulation of the massage therapy profession: issuing CERTs and granting approval to (and regulating) private schools offering training in massage therapy. The BPPVE administered the Private Postsecondary and Vocational Reform Act of 1989, which stated that any certificate issued by a private California massage school was recognized by the state as merely a diploma.

Since there was never any state agency or private organization empowered to certify massage professionals in California, why have massage professionals trained in California, and the schools providing this training, used the terms “certified,” “certification,” “state certified,” “state certification,” “Certified Massage Practitioner,” “CMP,” “Certified Massage Therapist,” or “CMT”? The myth of massage certification in California is at least several decades old. Perhaps the myth began when graduates of private massage schools noted that the State of California “certified” or “licensed” the schools they attended (this information sometimes appeared on a school’s diplomas). Since these graduates earned diplomas from schools certified by the State, some probably jumped to the mistaken conclusion that they were therefore “certified,” “state certified,” or possessed “certification” or “state certification.” The myth may have originated if a municipality in California issued a certification allowing the practice of massage within its jurisdiction. Maybe the myth started when graduates of massage schools in states that do certify massage professionals entered California and used the titles granted to them in those states.

Use of the aforementioned terms sounds professional, the terms make the business of massage appear legitimate, and it always looks good to have some letters or a title after your name. However, the terms never had any legal standing in California, and many people both inside and outside the massage profession still don’t realize or admit this. Moreover, some California massage schools use misleading phrases—“Massage Therapist Certification Program,” or “Certified Massage Therapist Program,” for example—implying that a student will be certified upon graduating. However, only the California Massage Therapy Council can certify graduates of massage schools in California.

Under SB 731 and AB 1147, massage professionals are regulated by the private non-profit California Massage Therapy Council (CAMTC), empowered by the State to issue certification to massage professionals using, initially, a two-tier system: a Massage Practitioner level for those with 250 - 499 hours of training (phased out 12/31/14, but Practitioners certified prior to 12/31/14 can renew their certification indefinitely) and a Massage Therapist level for those with 500 or more hours of training. AB 1147 requires that, beginning January 1, 2015, CAMTC will issue only Massage Therapist Certification, and applicants must complete 500 hours of training and pass a currently approved exam: Massage & Bodywork Licensing Exam (MBLEx) and Board Certification exam if passed at any time; and the NCETMB and NCETM if taken on or before February 1, 2015.²

SB 731 intended certification to be “voluntary,” meaning that massage professionals could still practice massage without the state-approved certification if they met local municipal code requirements. However, since some cities and counties require that massage professionals who apply for a business license possess CAMTC certification, it will be mandatory in many cases. Fortunately, for those who earn certification from CAMTC, they no longer are subjected to the demeaning and discriminatory provisions of municipal codes that regulated many massage professionals prior to passage of SB 731.

SB 731 requires that massage professionals who use any of the terms denoting certification, or others, such as “licensed” or “registered,” must be certified by CAMTC. Using the terms without CAMTC certification is an “unfair business practice,” “unfair competition,” and a violation of section 17206 (a) of the California Business and Professions Code, which authorizes “a civil penalty not to exceed two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500) for each violation.”

When referring to someone not certified by CAMTC, we can use terms such as “massage practitioner” or “massage therapist.”

¹ The amount of training required for a massage permit or business license in California varied widely, typically ranging from 100 to 500 hours or more. Many employers require that employees have 500 hours of training. With passage of SB 731, many employers may require that massage professionals be certified by CAMTC, even if local municipal ordinances do not require it.

² MBLEx is administered by Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB). Board Certification exam, National Certification Examination for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (NCETMB) and National Certification Exam for Therapeutic Massage (NCETM) are administered by National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (NCBTMB).