

Mental Health Law Syllabus

Spring 2026

Professor: Melinda Heath Brents

Classroom: 312

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5238 Mental Health Law Section 25551

Course Overview: This class is a 2 hour seminar examining issues related to the role of state and local agencies and the courts in the treatment of mental illness. Particular attention will be given to Texas mental health laws including civil commitment, the impact of mental illness on the criminal system, mental health policy and regulation as well as practice issues for attorneys (both those in the mental health field and those in general practice). Federal statutes impacting mental health issues will be included.

Class meetings: Tuesdays from 4 – 6 pm; Zoom will be used to facilitate guest lecturers who are unable to join us in person.

If an unavoidable absence occurs, I will make the zoom recording available. I will be recording the class but students are not to record the sessions themselves without permission and may not share recordings received from

me. If an accommodation is necessary please contact the Office of Students with Disabilities to begin that process.

Form of address: Please tell me how you prefer to be addressed – especially pronunciation – and I will do my best to comply.

Changes to syllabus: If changes become necessary due to unforeseen circumstances they will be announced via email in a timely manner.

Thursdays from 10 – 4 will serve as the primary contact day for questions and concerns however, I will make every effort to reply to emails as they come in. I will send a recap email to the class on Thursday evenings.

Class preparation: Reading will primarily consist of statutes, a list of which will be made available the week prior to class discussion. For general purposes you may familiarize yourself with the Texas Mental Health Code (Texas Health & Safety Code, Title 7, Part II, Subtitle C) beginning with section 571. Other readings will be presented as well; also provided a week in advance and reading materials will always be available online and at no cost.

In addition to our readings, I encourage you to note events or stories in the news referencing mental health and the law and ask that you share these items with the class during discussion period.

The class will involve a number of guest lecturers whose expertise is in line with the topic of the week. Please be on time to class as a courtesy to the speakers and your colleagues.

There will be a public policy related project midway through the semester. We will provide a variety of policy issues and enigmas and students will select one and present a concise explanation of the current policy and share some possible solutions or amendments. This will not be graded as a writing assignment but will account for 15 % of your grade based on the

timeliness of completion and the quality of sharing your findings with the class.

Class participation is valued and when time is short questions and comments may be shared with me by email.

A final exam will account for the remaining 85 % and will consist of multiple choice and short answer using Electronic Blue Book format.

Attendance: per UH Law Center and ABA policy attendance will be taken. Circumstances will be taken into account but continued absence must be reported to the Law Center. Whenever possible, alert me to absences in advance. Attendance will be taken by sign in sheet in the classroom.

The University of Houston has a number of resources to support students' mental health and overall wellness, including CoogsCARE and the UH Go App. UH Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers 24/7 mental health support for all students, addressing various concerns like stress, college adjustment and sadness. CAPS provides individual and couples counseling, group therapy, workshops and connections to other support services on and off-campus. For assistance visit uh.edu/caps, call 713-743-5454, or visit a Let's Talk location in-person or virtually. Let's Talk are daily, informal confidential consultations with CAPS therapists where no appointment or paperwork is needed.

The Student Health Center offers a Psychiatry Clinic for enrolled UH students. Call 713-743-5149 during clinic hours, Monday through Friday 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. to schedule an appointment.

The A.D. Bruce Religion Center offers spiritual support and a variety of programs centered on well-being. Need Support Now? - If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call CAPS crisis support 24/7 at 713-743-5454, or the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988, or chat 988lifeline.org.

Course Topics (order of presentation may vary due to scheduling of guest speakers):

Initial reading prior to the first class - Introduction to the JCMH Bench Book and sequential intercept model.

1. Brief introduction to psychiatric illnesses, terms, common state and federal statutes involving and impacting the mentally ill. The sequential intercept model for government interactions with the mentally ill, both treatment/civil/and criminal interactions. Reading assignment for week 2 provided.
2. Flexibility in treating mental illness in an involuntary setting; AOT (Assisted Out Patient Treatment) as a tool. Reading assignment for week 3 provided.
3. Public Policy issues discussed in anticipation of class assignment. Reading assignment for week 4 provided.
4. Intercept Zero – statutes directing voluntary and involuntary care (civil commitment); including criteria for commitment and forced medication procedures. Reading assignment for week 5 provided.
5. Discussion of involuntary commitment in different areas – chemical dependency, intellectual disability, medical conditions (TB). Reading assignment for week 6 provided.
6. Intercepts 1 – 3; part 1 – State level involvement in criminal cases involving mental health issues. Reading assignment for week 7 provided.
7. Intercepts 1 – 3; part 2 – Local involvement with law enforcement and the courts. Mental health aspects of criminal procedure will be discussed. Policy Assignments chosen (due for presentation beginning after spring break)
Reading assignment for week 8 provided.
8. Intercept 1-3; part 3- Criminal cases involving mental health issues from the defense viewpoint. Brief midterm review. No reading assignment – work on policy presentation.
Spring Break – no class on March 18th
9. Policy Presentations
10. Policy Presentations

11. Finish Policy Presentations and discuss what best practices we have learned from the exploration of these issues. Reading assignments for week 12 provided.
12. Intercept 4 – 6 – reentry to the community, community supervision, cyclical nature of the intercepts. Reading assignment for week 13 provided. Where does guardian ship fit in?
13. Discussion of regulatory agencies and the Federal programs affecting the law and the mentally ill. Practice issues for attorneys in the area of mental health law. No reading for week 14.
14. Final review

Learning Outcomes: At the completion of this seminar students should have a good working knowledge of the ways mental illness and the law intersect and the effects that public policy have on the outcomes of those intersections.

Additional useful information from UHLC:

Honor Code

The UHLC Honor Code applies to all aspects of this course. You are responsible for knowing all Honor Code provisions and for complying with the Honor Code. Please inquire if you have any questions regarding how the Honor Code's provisions apply to specific activities or situations related to this course. Your continuing enrollment in this course is deemed to be a pledge by you under the Honor Code to comply with the Honor Code in relation to this course and to comply with the instructions in the course syllabus.

AI Generated Work product – prohibited.

The software technology known as artificial intelligence has recently expanded its capability to generate text and other work product (AI Generated Work Product). Examples of the technology include what are

known as “generative” large language models (LLMs), and a specific implementation what is well known in the general public is ChatGPT. These systems can generate text and other work product in response to prompts and/or input of other text/documents/code/images. The output, the AI Generated Work Product, appears to have human-mimicking “intelligence” and is thus potentially usable as a substitute for material one might generate themselves. AI Generated Work Product can include computer code or programs as well as human language content and materials.

Your continuing enrollment in this course obligates you to not knowingly prompt, generate, or use any AI Generated Work Product in relation to any activity or assessment in this course. This applies to AI Generated Work Product from yourself or others. This obligation includes that your assessment materials in the course be without any contribution from AI Generated Work Product. This obligation specifically extends to not plagiarize any writing required of you for assessment in the course: AI Generated Work Product will be treated as from another/others in applying the plagiarism policy to this course. The term “assessment” means any material generated for this course that is submitted to the instructor or presented in a class session, regardless whether it is graded content or not. Assessments include mid-terms and final exams. AI Generated Work Product may not be used in the development or drafting of any assessments created by you in a non-proctored environment, such as a “take-home” final examination.

Prohibition.

Subject to the exceptions immediately below, your continuing enrollment in this course constitutes your pledge not to generate or to use any AI-Generated Work Product—whether from yourself or others—in relation to any assessment in this course. The term “assessment” means any graded or ungraded work product for this course that is submitted to the instructor, presented in a class session, or used in an oral or written graded assessment for this course.

Exceptions.

The following AI-Generated Work Product uses are exceptions to the preceding prohibition. The exceptions’ intent is to allow the generation and use of AI-Generated Work Product for specific, narrowly defined activities related to this course.

- You may generate and use AI-Generated Work Product for study supplements to aid with general understanding of course content. This could take different forms that include creating examples or explanations of a concept, generation of diagrams and flow charts, “gamification” of course content, flash cards for study, or sample questions and answers.
- You may use AI-Generated Work Product to check your originally drafted text for misspellings, grammar and punctuation errors, strength and clarity of prose, verbosity, effective transitional language and thesis sentences, word choice, excessive passive voice, and like things.
- You may use AI-Generated Work Product for the purpose of language translation.

Title IX/Sexual Misconduct:

Per the UHS Sexual Misconduct Policy, your instructor is a “responsible employee” for reporting purposes under Title IX regulations and state law and must report incidents of sexual misconduct (sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, sexual intimidation, intimate partner violence, or stalking) about which they become aware to the Title IX office. Please know there are places on campus where you can make a report in confidence. You can find more information about resources on the Title IX website at <https://uh.edu/equal-opportunity/title-ix-sexual-misconduct/resources/>.

Reasonable Academic Adjustments/Auxiliary Aids:

The University of Houston is committed to providing an academic environment and educational programs that are accessible for its students. Any student with a disability who is experiencing barriers to learning, assessment or participation is encouraged to contact the Justin Dart, Jr. Student Accessibility Center (Dart Center) to learn more about academic accommodations and support that may be available to them. Students seeking academic accommodations will need to register with the Dart Center as soon as possible to ensure timely implementation of approved accommodations. Please contact the Dart Center by visiting the website: <https://uh.edu/accessibility/> calling (713) 743-5400, or emailing jdcenter@Central.UH.EDU.

The Student Health Center offers a Psychiatry Clinic for enrolled UH students. Call 713-743-5149 during clinic hours, Monday through Friday 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. to schedule an appointment.

The A.D. Bruce Religion Center offers spiritual support and a variety of programs centered on well-being.

The Center for Student Advocacy and Community (CSAC) is where you can go if you need help but don't know where to start. CSAC is a "home away from home" and serves as a resource hub to help you get the resources needed to support academic and personal success. Through our Cougar Cupboard, all students can get up to 30 lbs of FREE groceries a week. Additionally, we provide 1:1 appointments to get you connected to on- and off-campus resources related to essential needs, safety and advocacy, and more. The Cougar Closet is a registered student organization advised by our office and offers free clothes to students so that all Coogs can feel good in their fit. We also host a series of cultural and community-based events that fosters social connection and helps the cougar community come closer together. Visit the CSAC homepage or follow us on Instagram: @uh_CSAC and @uhcupbrd. YOU belong here.

Women and Gender Resources Center:

The mission of the WGRC is to advance the University of Houston and promote the success of all students, faculty, and staff through educating, empowering, and supporting the UH community. The WGRC suite is open to you. Stop by the office for a study space, to take a break, grab a snack, or check out one of the WGRC programs or resources. Stop by Student Center South room B12 (Basement floor near Starbucks and down the hall from Creation Station) from 9 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday

