

Two Decades on the Front Lines of Brazil's Mental Health Crisis Response

How one psychologist's near-fifteen-year commitment to a public crisis center shaped a career built on preventing suicide before it happens

Miami, Florida Oct 1, 2026 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - In 2005, Michele Lima Fontes Pinheiro was invited by the municipal health administration of Castanhal, a city in Brazil's northern state of Pará, to join the team at a newly organized psychosocial crisis center. She would stay for almost fifteen years.

The Centro de Atenção Psicossocial (CAPS III) where she worked is a reference unit within Brazil's public health system, built specifically for people experiencing severe or recurring psychological crises, including patients at active risk of suicide. It is, by design, a place where prevention and crisis response happen in the same room, often in the same conversation.

Pinheiro, who holds a degree in Psychology from the Universidade da Amazônia (UNAMA), describes those years as the foundation of everything that came after. Her responsibilities ranged from intake and clinical assessment to crisis management and building what's known in Brazil's public health system as a Projeto Terapêutico Singular, an individualized care plan built around each patient's specific history, rather than a fixed protocol. Much of the goal, she says, was intervening early enough to avoid hospitalization altogether.

"You learn very quickly that the people most at risk usually give some sign beforehand. The work isn't just responding to a crisis; it's being present enough, and trusted enough, to catch it before it becomes one," she says.

That instinct for reading what's underneath, she says, comes from a psychoanalytic orientation she carried from her specialization in Clinical Psychology into every setting since, an attention to what repeats in a patient's story more than to what's said only once. "Trust isn't built in one session. It's built over months, sometimes years, and a lot of what a patient eventually tells you is only there because you didn't rush the years before it. What people repeat, without quite meaning to, usually matters more than what they say on purpose," she reflects.

That conviction extended beyond the walls of the crisis center. Between 2013 and 2016, Pinheiro simultaneously worked with Castanhal's municipal social assistance department, supporting families in vulnerable situations, an assignment that, she says, taught her how much psychological risk is shaped by circumstances well outside a clinical setting. In 2017, she completed a specialization in Traffic Psychology, finishing with the highest possible grade, training that qualified her to evaluate cognitive function, emotional stability, and risk factors like impulsivity in candidates for a driver's license.

The following year, she began a parallel role as a credentialed forensic psychologist for the Federal Police of the State of Pará, applying a similar kind of structured, high-stakes evaluation to candidates for firearm licensing, a role obtained through the institution's own formal selection process and one she describes as one of the clearest institutional recognitions of her clinical judgment. Years later, between 2021 and 2024, she took on a similar role with the municipal health department of Inhangapi, this time in a smaller community, where the work included home visits and mental health education, a reminder, she says, that crisis prevention looks different depending on where you find it, but never stops being about the same thing: paying attention early.

“Every place I worked had a different name and a different set of rules, but the underlying skill was always the same: read the signs, build enough trust that someone will tell you what's actually happening, and act before it becomes an emergency,” Pinheiro reflects.

Along the way, she was also repeatedly invited by companies and organizations to speak on workplace mental health, talks with titles like “Preventing Burnout” and “Humanized Leadership: How to Truly Engage a Team,” and, on at least one occasion, volunteered psychological support directly to the employees of a manufacturing company, extending her prevention-first approach from public health into the corporate world.

Throughout that same period, beginning in 2016, Pinheiro has also kept a private clinical practice open in Castanhal, Espaço Psi, treating trauma, grief, and psychosomatic complaints in children, adolescents, and adults, a thread of ongoing, one-on-one clinical work that has run alongside every institutional role she has held since.

Pinheiro holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from the Universidade da Amazônia (UNAMA, 1997–2002), along with specializations in Clinical Psychology (2003–2005), Health and Hospital Psychology (2007–2009), and Traffic Psychology (2016–2017), and has maintained active registration with Brazil's Regional Council of Psychology since 2005 (CRP-10/02105).

As she looks toward the next chapter of her career, Pinheiro carries with her nearly twenty years of experience built at the intersection of public mental health, crisis intervention, and forensic evaluation. Her focus, she says, hasn't changed: reaching people before a crisis happens, not just after.

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