

# Health Care Reform and the Occupational Therapy Assistant

#### Health Care Reform: The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) was signed into law by President Obama in 2010. Legal challenges to the ACA were largely resolved by the Supreme Court in 2012. However, implementing the ACA will be a long and complex process that requires federal agencies, state governments, and health care organizations to adopt a variety of measures for years to come.

The ACA was designed to expand access to health insurance, improve the quality of health care, and reduce the growth of spending on health care. If implemented as intended, millions of Americans will be newly insured by private insurance or Medicaid, and the health care delivery system will be more integrated and coordinated to produce better patient outcomes at less expense.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) was active during the legislative process leading up to passage of the ACA, working to achieve victories such as inclusion of rehabilitation and habilitation within the 10 essential health benefits.

AOTA continues to work to protect the interests of the occupational therapy profession and consumers. In doing so, AOTA has submitted comments on proposed federal regulations, worked with state occupational therapy associations to influence state implementation of the ACA, and partnered with allied organizations to increase its influence. One key focus of these efforts has been to ensure that occupational therapy is a core component of the habilitation benefit. Habilitation encompasses services designed to help a person attain and maintain function, in contrast to rehabilitation, which has traditionally been perceived as limited to services designed to restore a previous level of function. AOTA has also formed an Ad Hoc Committee on Health Care Reform Implementation, composed of volunteer member experts, to help advise the organization on implementation issues relevant to occupational therapy.

### **Implications for Occupational Therapy Assistants (OTAs)**

- As a vital part of the occupational therapy team, OTAs in every state will see an increase in the number of potential clients as formerly uninsured persons gain access to health insurance that covers occupational therapy services.
- In states that elect to expand Medicaid eligibility, even more people will have access to occupational therapy services, which in most cases will have to be

covered as essential health benefits. That could increase the demand for OTAs to provide those services.

- OTAs will be able to provide habilitative services, which will have to be covered to some degree for most of the newly insured population, even if such coverage has often been excluded by private health insurance in the past.
- OTAs may have new opportunities to participate in the care delivery models of the future such as accountable care organizations (ACOs) and patient-centered medical homes (PCMHs). ACOs exist with different structures, but are generally systems of health care providers designed to improve patient outcomes, lower costs, and share in the resulting savings. PCMHs similarly can vary in terms of their structures, but generally consist of teams of health care providers coordinating an array of health care services across the care continuum, also with the goals of improving patient outcomes and lowering costs.
- An increased emphasis on integrated, team-based, coordinated, and interdisciplinary care models will present new opportunities for OTAs to demonstrate the value of occupational therapy services to produce improved patient outcomes at lower cost.
- New health care delivery models also will create opportunities to promote the value and role of occupational therapy services in prevention, wellness, chronic disease management, and other areas.

# How can OTAs take action to promote occupational therapy under the ACA?

- Promote the value of occupational therapy to patients, other health care providers, employers, and public policy decision makers.
- Promote the fact that OTAs are already recognized as educated, nationally credentialed, and highly skilled health care practitioners that are regulated by the state and recognized by major public and private payers as occupational therapy providers.
- Learn more about implementation of the ACA by following AOTA's advocacy efforts and by examining informational resources from respected organizations, such as the Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Become a member of AOTA and state occupational therapy associations, and get involved in advocacy efforts so OTAs can have a direct influence on how the ACA is implemented, and ensure that occupational therapy services are fully recognized.

- Seek opportunities to impact private implementation of the ACA by investigating how your employer is responding to ACA-related public policy decisions.
- Demonstrate leadership by offering to participate as a representative of the profession on advisory committees.

# For more information, visit these Web sites:

AOTA Advocacy Highlights - <a href="http://www.aota.org/News/AdvocacyNews.aspx">http://www.aota.org/News/AdvocacyNews.aspx</a>

AOTA Resources - ACA Implementation <a href="http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/Advocacy/Health-Care-Reform.aspx">http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/Advocacy/Health-Care-Reform.aspx</a>

Kaiser Family Foundation Health Reform - <a href="http://healthreform.kff.org/">http://healthreform.kff.org/</a>