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Occupational Therapy in Mental Health Act

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, wellness, and rehabilitation service dedicated to the maximization of performance and function. Occupational therapy practitioners are health care professionals whose education and expertise address the social, emotional, psychological, and physical aspects of interaction between and individual and their environment. Occupational therapy emphasizes the provision of supports and services that enable a person to carry out their everyday life activities so that they can be productive, independent, engaged, and safe in the environments in which they live, learn, work, and play. Within mental health, occupational therapy utilizes this unique perspective to provide client-centered, occupation-based interventions that enable individuals with a mental illness to maximize their potential and lead productive, full lives. Medicare recognizes occupational therapy as a mental health service; other federal programs should do so as well.

AOTA Position:

Support the Occupational Therapy in Mental Health Act (H.R. 1037) to add Occupational Therapists to the federal definition of "Behavioral and Mental Health Professionals" under the National Health Services Corps.

This bill would modify 42 Section 254d – National Health Services Corps to read:

(E)(i) The term "behavioral and mental health professionals" means health service psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychiatric nurse specialists [strike "and"], psychiatrists, and occupational therapists.

This change would enhance recognition of occupational therapy as a key mental and behavioral health services. The National Health Services Corps (NHSC) appears to be the only place in the U.S. Public Health Service Act where the term "behavioral and mental health professionals" are specifically defined.

Additionally, the NHSC designation of mental and behavioral health professionals would be a guideline for states and other federal programs to define qualified mental health professionals. Inclusion of occupational therapy will provide greater access to the functional benefits of occupational therapy services for people with behavioral and mental health conditions. While inclusion in the NHSC would be limited to occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants also use their skills and expertise to benefit the mental health system.

Occupational therapists who work in mental and behavioral health would be newly eligible to participate in the NHSC Scholarship and Loan Repayment Programs. If OTs receive assistance from either of these programs to finance graduate training, they would be required – upon graduation – to provide services in practices or facilities located in "health professional shortage areas" [so-called HPSAs] for two to four years. HPSAs are typically located in rural and low income urban areas.

The amendment described above would not generate a Congressional Budget Office (CBO) score because it would not trigger additional NHSC, Medicare, or Medicaid spending.

Please cosponsor the Occupational Therapy in Mental Health Act (H.R. 1037).