

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD  
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR  
HEARING ON  
"The Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act of 2007 (H.R. 1424),"  
July 10, 2007**

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The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) submits this statement for the record of the July 10, 2007 hearing. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this information regarding the relationship of occupational therapy services to mental health and substance abuse treatment and highlighting the unique contributions of occupation based interventions. AOTA fully supports passage of H.R.1424, The Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act of 2007 and joins several hundred national advocacy organizations and a majority of House members in urging rapid passage of the bill.

**Occupational Therapy for People with Mental Illness and Substance Abuse Disorders**

Occupational therapy is concerned with an individual's ability to do everyday activities, or *occupations*, so that they can participate fully at home, work, and in the community. Occupational therapy practitioners use purposeful activities as therapy to help individuals with functional impairments, regardless of the cause, to maximize performance and independence. The profession has been guided by a holistic approach with an emphasis on psychosocial factors that impact human function. Occupational therapy brings a rehabilitation perspective to mental health and substance abuse treatment in keeping with increased emphasis on recovery and functionality.

The expertise of occupational therapy in the assessment and treatment of function and functional impairment across the lifespan argues for occupational therapy practitioners' full inclusion in mental health and substance abuse systems of care. Inclusion would ensure that their unique educational preparation and experience can be utilized for the benefit of people with mental illness and substance abuse conditions. According to the Institute of Medicine's Quality Chasm report, *Improving the Quality of Health Care and Substance Abuse Conditions* (November 2005), integration and collaboration among mental health practitioners is crucial to improving the mental health system. AOTA believes that inter-disciplinary teams maximize the level of expertise and experience available to a patient with mental illness. The federal New Freedom Initiative also calls upon the nation's mental health system to deliver higher quality, integrated services that contribute to more successful outcomes for people with mental illness. Occupational therapy is an essential part of the mental health assessment, treatment planning, and intervention process that will improve and restore function and independence for people affected by mental illness. There is also a distinct activity-based role for occupational therapy in both the acute treatment and recovery models of substance abuse treatment.

Occupational therapy practitioners work with people throughout the lifespan and in all types of settings where mental health services, substance abuse treatment and psychiatric rehabilitation are provided. Through the use of real life activities as therapy, occupational therapy practitioners improve functional capacity and quality of life for people with mental illness and substance abuse in the areas of employment, education, community living and home and personal care. As well as providing care in home and community based settings, in roles such as case managers, occupational therapists continue to work in traditional mental health settings such as hospitals, state mental health institutions and partial hospitalization programs. Occupational therapy is covered by Medicare as a mental health service, especially in the partial hospitalization program. It is also recognized in many state mental health programs.

AOTA believes that occupational therapy is an underutilized service for people with mental health and substance abuse disorders that can meet and address independent living and recovery needs. This limited access affects both substance abuse and mental health systems of care and the limitation is often due to a lack of understanding about how occupational therapy can help or because of perceptions that therapists only address impairments of function caused by physical illness or injury. Occupational therapy can be invaluable in helping individuals maximize performance and develop or maintain skills for independent living and recovery consistent with a rehabilitation model of care. Recognizing the potential of occupational therapy to address functional impairment for people with mental illness and addictive disorders is essential to moving toward a recovery model for mental illness and substance abuse treatment that takes into account the importance of community integration and independence.

AOTA is committed to working collaboratively with other mental health and substance abuse providers and consumer advocacy organizations to improve the integration and coordination of services to meet the needs of patients suffering from these conditions. Occupational therapy's unique perspective and focus on activities of meaning can deliver positive outcomes for patients in regard to both community integration and recovery. Fully utilizing the expertise and knowledge of occupational therapists to minimize functional impairment caused by behavioral and substance abuse disorders and to maximize independence is an essential part of developing more integrated and effective systems of care.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to comment on the role of occupational therapy in improving mental health and substance abuse services and to express our support for mental health and substance abuse parity. We look forward to continue working with the Committee to improve treatment and outcomes for people with those conditions.