



The American  
Occupational Therapy  
Association, Inc.

Occupational Therapy:  
*Skills for the Job of Living*

**STATEMENT OF THE AMERICAN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION  
FOR THE RECORD OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
HEARING ON  
THE TRUTH ABOUT VETERANS' SUICIDES  
MAY 6, 2008**

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The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) submits this statement for the record of the May 6, 2008 hearing. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this information regarding the relationship of occupational therapy services to the prevention of suicide among veterans and military personnel and commend the committee for holding an oversight hearing on such a difficult and growing problem. AOTA is the nationally recognized professional association representing more than 38,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants and students of occupational therapy.

Issues related to mental health needs in this country have been clearly articulated in numerous sources, including the 1999 Surgeon General's report on mental health and the 2003 report of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. Since the 1950's the suicide rate has tripled nationwide (Gutman, 2005) and that does not speak to specific populations such as veterans and military personnel and their families who have experienced extraordinary trauma and stress during their service to our country. It is critical for Congress to be aware of issues regarding America's public health needs so that it can develop appropriate national policies to meet society's needs. The topic of this hearing is critical to the development of a better, clearer picture of how to address the growing problem of veteran suicides and the devastating effects of suicide and suicide attempts on veterans, families and communities.

**How Occupational Therapy Helps Address Veterans' Mental Health Needs**

Occupational therapy is concerned about an individual's ability to perform everyday activities, or *occupations*, so that they can participate in school, at home, at work, and in the community. Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants provide critical services to and for veterans in a variety of medical and community settings, where they address functional needs related to behavioral and social-emotional needs that may place a veteran at greater at risk for suicide. Occupational therapy practitioners use purposeful activities to help veterans and their families bridge the gap between their ability to process and manage their experiences and their innate strengths and capacities for resilience.

Occupational therapists look at the individual's strengths and needs with respect to daily life performance in all areas, focusing on the relationship between the client and their performance abilities, the demands of the activity, and the physical and social contexts within which the activity is performed. In addition, each individual's occupational performance is viewed through a psychological-social-emotional lens. This perspective helps the occupational therapist to understand what is important and meaningful to the veteran as well as how their past roles, experiences, strengths, and patterns of coping work together to shed light on current challenges.

Occupational therapy intervention for veterans emphasizes functional and readiness skills and behaviors, and includes consultation with families, friends, fellow veterans and other professionals. Services are directed toward achieving desired outcomes that were developed in collaboration with the veteran and their core support team. The unique person, environment and activity focus of occupational therapy provides veterans with the opportunity to engage in therapeutic activity and helps them, through action, to regain control of their behavior, emotions and lives.

Occupational therapy for veterans at risk for suicide utilizes activity-based interventions that serve as the vehicle for enhanced self-understanding, provide a reality-based structure, and supports skill acquisition or enhancement. Services focus on mobilizing both internal and external resources that support the individual's self-understanding within the context of a safe, caring, therapeutic relationship. Intervention strategies address interpersonal communication and other social behaviors. Strategies include helping the veteran learn to manage and organize their behavior and feelings and make progress on their recovery. Occupational therapy's focus on mental health and suicide prevention can be integrated seamlessly into many veterans existing rehabilitation and reintegration plans because occupational therapists are often part of the rehabilitation team addressing other physical, emotional or cognitive wounds suffered by the veteran.

Due to the increased demand for mental health and rehabilitation services the Veterans Administration (VA) has a shortage of both mental health and rehabilitation professionals. In facilities like the Montgomery, Alabama VA and others across the country, occupational therapists are being removed from positions where they have treated patients with mental health needs because the occupational therapists are needed to address physical rehabilitation needs of other veterans. At a time when the country as a whole and the VA in particular have a shortage of mental health professionals, it is essential that the VA utilize the resources they have at hand and take advantage of the full scope of practice of professions like occupational therapy to ensure veterans have access to the mental health services they need. Occupational therapists stand ready to help veterans recover from the physical, psychological and emotional wounds they have suffered and to help them return to their maximum level of function so that they can once again go on to lead satisfying and productive lives.

AOTA commends the committee for its leadership in addressing this difficult but critical problem. We look forward to working with Congress and the Department of Veteran Affairs to ensure that veterans have access to all of the services necessary to allow them to return to the highest levels of function, performance and quality of life. For additional information about the contributions of the profession of occupational therapy to our nation's military personnel and veterans please contact the American Occupational Therapy Association.

**References:**

Gutman, S.A. (2005). Understanding suicide: What therapists should know. *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*, 21(2), 55-77