



The American
Occupational Therapy
Association, Inc.

Occupational Therapy:
Skills for the Job of Living

May 22, 2008

Donna Nangle
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W., Room 6029
Potomac Center Plaza
Washington, D.C. 20202-2700

RE: Input Regarding NIDRR's Long-Range Plan for Fiscal Years 2010-2014

Dear Ms. Nangle:

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) represents over 37,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students of occupational therapy. We appreciate the opportunity to provide input regarding the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research's (NIDRR's) Long-Range Plan (LRP) for Fiscal Years (FY) 2010-2014.

AOTA has created a Research Advisory Panel (RAP) to support and promote the role of the profession in science and research. This is a joint venture with the American Occupational Therapy Foundation. The comments herein represent those of AOTA only.

Through our strategic priorities, AOTA is embarking upon an effort to increase the profession's ability to conduct research by developing a forward looking research agenda and promoting the development of scientists within the profession. Our aim is to increase the understanding of the factors that support everyday life and identify barriers that limit social participation with the goal of improving the lives of individuals and their families. Occupational scientists do their work across the life span as disabilities present challenges to children and youth, workers, and older adults who face the consequences of aging with chronic illness that can lead to disabling conditions. Because our focus is on everyday life we offer resources to translational studies that seek to understand the impact of interventions on well-being.

AOTA provided input to the NIDRR LRP for FY 2005-2009 on August, 26, 2005. AOTA recommends that NIDRR continue to build upon the current plan which established a progressive framework for organizing and implementing disability and rehabilitation research. Based upon preliminary information on the development of the NIDRR LRP for FY 2010-2014, AOTA understands that the new LRP will focus research tied to improving outcomes in employment of people with disabilities, and link NIDRR's research and development, capacity building and knowledge translation to the elimination of employment barriers. While employment is important for people with disabilities, it is only a piece of the puzzle in improving the abilities of people with disabilities to engage in the meaningful occupations of their choice. Through the investigation of needs in health and function, rehabilitation, technology, participation, policy, and workplace and workforce issues, AOTA sees a continued focus on the three major life domains of Health/Function, Participation/Community Living, and Employment as critical for targeting research toward practical goals and implementable strategies that will enhance outcomes for people with disabilities.

Furthermore, focusing the NIDRR strategic goals of advancing research and development, knowledge transition and capacity building on the categories of life domains significantly improves the direct impact of research related to disabilities and rehabilitation and creates the ability to transition research from the academic environment to the areas of practice where such



research can positively change lives. AOTA is the national association representing occupational therapy, a profession dedicated to maximizing independence and function for all people across the lifespan. Occupational therapy recognizes and addresses full participation in all domains of life. AOTA provides the following overview of rehabilitation research topics that are in line with NIDRR's mission and that are important to occupational therapy practitioners as well as other rehabilitation researchers. AOTA recommends that NIDRR build into its LRP these areas of concern. The following are all interrelated; participation cannot be achieved by addressing one area. The broad spectrum of life activities must be addressed to achieve real fulfillment of NIDRR's mission.

Driving

The growing needs of older drivers continue to be an important area for research and related training in the future. As long as drivers are functionally competent, they should be assisted in staying behind the wheel to access their community. Community mobility, such as driving, is essential for independence and access to engagement in other everyday life activities, including employment. The LRP should also consider the need for assistive technology and increased research on how to train older people with disabilities on how to use these devices in regard to driving.

Occupational therapy practitioners have taken a leading role in research and training efforts related to the specific needs of older drivers. As skilled therapy professionals they have the skills to evaluate an individual's overall ability to operate a vehicle safely, and, where appropriate, to provide rehabilitation to improve the skills used in driving. By providing this training and rehabilitation, occupational therapists help older people with disabilities to maintain their autonomy, independence and quality of life.

Home Environments

An emphasis on home and community based supports is clearly a component of NIDRR's mission, but additional attention should be paid as to how the home is a hub for community and employment participation as well as the location of resources, devices and services that will help maximize independence and function. The LRP should acknowledge the importance of choice for people with disabilities; no where is that choice more clearly defined by people with disabilities themselves than as related to their living environment and to the setting in which they choose to receive supportive devices and services. This emphasis is furthered by the increased needs of older Americans who overwhelmingly desire to remain at home and age in place. A progressive agenda dedicated to choice for people with disabilities requires increased emphasis on the home as the primary location for activities undertaken by and in support of people with disabilities.

Occupational therapy practitioners help people with disabilities in the home through training on the use of assistive devices, therapy related to improving self-care, providing mobility evaluations, designing and implementing home modifications and by developing plans for safety, independence and function within the home environment. Occupational therapy practitioners also work with people with disabilities with low vision to ensure a safe and secure home environment that reduces the opportunity for falls.



Transition from School to Work

Another area of focus and emphasis within the LRP that relates to employment is transitioning special education students from school into the workforce. This is in keeping with the broad strategic goals of the plan and essential to maximizing participation in employment and community life. Occupational therapists are currently working with students under IDEA to facilitate more successful employment outcomes, but the emphasis in states and specific school systems place on this vital task varies greatly. Progress in this area requires national leadership and must be supported through additional research to demonstrate the true effectiveness and importance of transition efforts to employment outcomes over the life of individual students with disabilities.

Mental Health Outcomes

AOTA recommends investigating the roles of specific professions such as occupational therapy in regard to outcomes for people with mental illness. In keeping with the goals of promoting participation and employment, investigations should encompass the treatment of mental illness as well as the impact of such services on the independence, function, and quality of life for people with mental illness. Occupational therapy practitioners currently work with people with mental illnesses in nearly all settings and contribute to their mental health treatment as well as their ability to participate in activities ranging from self-care to gainful employment and recreation. Research on the specific value of occupational therapy to the treatment and care for people with mental illness will provide outcome data that will be invaluable in identifying participation and employment barriers and designing and implementing a continuum of care that maximizes participation in all life domains.

Grant Process

In order to improve the effectiveness of the LRP, AOTA, in conjunction with occupational therapy practitioners who are grantees of NIDRR, recommends that NIDRR work toward aligning their grant applications with that of other Federal agencies. This would streamline the process and facilitate NIDRR grantees' ability to transition applications among the other grant making agencies and maximize the amount of disability and rehabilitation research conducted to benefit people with disabilities. Such changes would also facilitate the increased involvement of NIDRR researchers and peer reviewers with other groups such as NIH.

Capacity Building in Research

AOTA commends the current NIDRR plan for its emphasis on capacity building; particularly in regard to recruiting of researchers from diverse academic backgrounds. A wide array of professional perspectives is essential to developing quality resources, devices and services for people with disabilities. Although AOTA is satisfied with the success rate of occupational therapy researchers in obtaining research funding, we have significant concerns related to the number of researchers our profession is able to develop. The best way for rehabilitation and disability research to be improved, both in terms of quality and volume is to increase the number of trained professionals capable and willing to conduct scientific research. This process will require the coordinated effort of professional associations and the recently assembled RAP to emphasize the importance of such roles and the financial and technical assistance of many federal agencies to enable occupational therapists and other health care professionals to pursue these careers. Fostering the development of scientists and socializing clinicians into the research environment is a key



aspect of improving and promoting rehabilitation research and a top priority of AOTA, AOTF and the RAP. Rehabilitation research has enormous potential for preventing secondary conditions that cause or exacerbate disabilities and for addressing quality of life and health care outcomes for people with disabilities. The direct impact this research can have is an important way to lure practitioners into research roles.

Development of New Measures of Participation

Several sections of the current plan discuss the need and intent to develop new and more complete measures of participation as related to the major life domains. AOTA fully supports efforts to better demonstrate the efficacy of programs designed to maximize participation by developing specific and more thorough, outcome measures. Occupational therapy practitioners focus their skills on increasing the ability of individuals to participate in the major life domains by working to maximize function. They do this through training on the use and evaluation of the proper fit of assistive devices, planning environmental adaptations to accommodate the needs of individuals within their home and workplace environments, and facilitating social integration by working with individuals to break down physical, emotional and mental barriers to participation. Occupational therapy practitioners do this through careful consideration of the areas of occupation, such as the activities of daily living, instrumental activities of daily living, work and play, and careful assessment of specific performance skills within the appropriate context. Their interventions are developed in full collaboration with the client to achieve the desired outcome in terms of occupational performance, engagement in meaningful activities, client satisfaction, health and wellness and/or quality of life. Quality, inclusive measures of participation, and intervention outcomes will enable disability and rehabilitation professionals to focus their efforts on evidenced-based practices that deliver the most desired outcomes for people with disabilities.

These comments were submitted in response to your request and for the purpose of guiding the development of the LRP. AOTA requests that you give due consideration to these comments and incorporate them into the proposed LRP. Thank you again for the opportunity to share our expertise in the area of maximizing independence and function as it relates to research and direct care for people with disabilities. We look forward to working with you to develop your LRP as it relates to occupational therapy and the people we serve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joan C. Rogers".

Joan C. Rogers, PhD, OTR/L
Professor, Occupational Therapy, Psychiatry, Nursing
University of Pittsburgh
Chair, Research Advisory Panel