

December 20, 2012

Chairman Darrell Issa
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
2157 Rayburn, HOB
Washington DC, 20515-6143

Dear Chairman Issa,

I am writing on behalf of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), which represents the interests of 140,000 occupational therapy practitioners in the United States, including researchers, educators, and students. We appreciate your recent hearing, “1 in 88 Children: A Look into the Federal Response to the Rising Rates of Autism” and its focus on the wide range of issues affecting people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). I would like to take this opportunity, and your request for information for the record, to provide a brief explanation of the role occupational therapy practitioners (OTs) can play in identifying, treating, and supporting full participation of individuals with an ASD.

A recent, informal survey of parents of children with autism conducted by Autism Speaks, ranked occupational therapy as the number one therapy “working best” for their child¹. The purpose of occupational therapy (OT) is to support an individual’s participation in meaningful activities, throughout the day, at every age and across different environments. Occupational therapy practitioners work with individuals with disabilities, their families and other service providers, in multiple environments including the home, school, the workplace and the community. This positions OT to support individuals with autism across the lifespan in some of the areas that most concern parents of children with autism: future independence of their child, life skills, employment, and connection within their community (Easter Seals’ Living with Autism Study).

People with an autism spectrum disorder face significant challenges in many areas including social interaction and communication, as well as possible motor skill delays and difficulty processing sensory information. AOTA has created an evidence-based practice guideline to support and define the role of occupational therapy practitioners in working with people with an autism spectrum disorder². OTs can help support their strengths and abilities by gradating activity, modifying environments, and identifying “just right fit” opportunities. The scope of occupational therapy services across the lifespan may address many issues including:

- regulation of emotional and behavioral responses;
- processing of sensory information necessary for participation;
- development of interpersonal skills and peer relationships;

¹ <http://www.autismspeaks.org/blog/2012/09/25/top-8-autism-therapies-%E2%80%93-reported-parents>

² Tomcheck, SD & Case-Smith, J. (2009) *Occupational therapy practice guidelines for children and adolescents with autism*. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press.

- learning self-management skills such as dressing, feeding, hygiene, and sleep;
- mastering skills needed for success in school such as organization of materials, independent work skills, and working in a group; and identification of and assistance in the use of assistive technology for accomplishing communication, school, or work needs³.

OTs may also provide services to caregivers including strategies for stress and anxiety management, approaches for balancing life responsibilities while caring for the individual with an ASD, and daily routine management. Occupational therapy services can also be provided in relation to significant life events such as moving to a new home, transition into or out of school, and seeking, obtaining, and maintaining employment. Finally, occupational therapy practitioners can play a valuable role in the early detection of autism. As a front line provider occupational therapy practitioners know how screen for developmental delay and to look for the markers of autism.

A common question during the hearing was: What can we do to support individuals, across the autism spectrum, throughout their lifetime? OTs have long been critical providers for people with disabilities, supporting participation in meaningful activity throughout the day in their work, leisure, education, self-care and social participation. These are the core “occupations” of life that all individuals, including those on the spectrum, are entitled to. Occupational therapy practitioners work in many types of community, health care and educational settings. Occupational therapy is a service that can be a part of a special education program in a school, can be provided in health care clinics and hospital inpatient and outpatient facilities and also work with early childhood programs, such as Head Start, and in day care programs. Because OT is covered by most private insurance, by Medicaid and Medicare, and in special education, practitioners are ready and available to be a part of the team approach needed for individuals and families experiencing conditions along the spectrum. As you continue to examine ways which we can support individuals with an autism spectrum disorder throughout their lifetime, occupational therapy can, and should, play a significant role.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our views to the Committee. Should you have any questions or need additional information about the role occupational therapy practitioners can play in supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorder, please do not hesitate to contact me at hparsons@aota.com.

Sincerely,



Heather Parsons
Director of Legislative Advocacy
American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc.

³ American Occupational Therapy Association. (2010). The scope of occupational therapy services for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder across the life course. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 64(Suppl.), S125-S136).