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:

We are seeking support for the Occupational Therapy in Mental Health Act, soon to be introduced by Rep. Tonko (D-NY) and Rep. Kelly (R-PA), to add Occupational Therapists to the federal definition of “Behavioral and Mental Health Professionals” under the National Health Services Corps (NHSC).

These bills 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.

These bills would make occupational therapists newly eligible to participate in the NHSC Scholarship and Loan Repayment Programs. If an occupational therapists qualifies for NHSC loan forgiveness, they would be required – upon graduation -- to provide services in practices or facilities located in a mental health “health professional shortage areas” (MHHPSA) for up to five (5) years. HPSAs are typically located in rural and low income urban areas.

This new addition to the National Health Service Corp would be in keeping with recent federal actions which include occupational therapy as a key part of new mental and behavioral health services. It would help expand access to occupational therapy services by encouraging new occupational therapists to practice in mental or behavioral health, in high needs areas. 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.

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. NHSC designation of occupational therapy as a mental and behavioral health profession would be a guideline for states when defining “mental health professionals”. Inclusion of occupational therapy under this definition will provide greater access to the functional benefits of occupational therapy services for people with behavioral and mental health conditions.

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 co-sponsor the Occupational Therapy in Mental Health Act