Remodelers and Occupational Therapists

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **What kind of training do occupational therapists receive related to disability, aging, and home modifications?**
   Occupational therapists have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree (entry level is now a Master’s degree) in occupational therapy. Their education includes anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, neurology, gerontology, disease and disability, human development, psychology and abnormal psychology, activity analysis, etc. Occupational therapists study a variety of theoretical models, including person-environment-occupation, which focuses on the fit of the person in his or her environment in order to participate in occupations (activities) that are meaningful.

2. **What kind of training do OTs have in construction?**
   Occupational Therapy academic education does not include construction. Occupational therapists who want to specialize in accessibility and home modifications seek additional continuing education opportunities, such as NAHB’s Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS) designation, USC’s Executive Certificate in Home Modifications (ECHM), and other sources of professional development to enhance and improve their knowledge of design/build principles. This supports occupational therapy and remodeler inter-professional collaboration for better outcomes in home modifications projects.

   Design/build professionals and occupational therapists each bring unique and specialized skills to the team and complement each other. Although it is helpful for occupational therapists to know basic construction information, it is much more appropriate to communicate relevant client status information to the design/build professional and collaborate on what would work for specific clients given their physical/health status, attributes and condition of the home, and budget (e.g., a client with multiple sclerosis may want a walk-in tub, but her current and anticipated skills might make that an unsafe or unwise choice. The occupational therapist could discuss other options that better match her current and anticipated abilities).

3. **What can an occupational therapist bring to the project that a CAPS-trained remodeler doesn’t have?**
   Occupational therapists possess a unique skill set in assessing individuals’ current and possible future level of functioning within their home. Occupational therapists can gather an individual's personal health and family health history and apply this information to the home environment and how the person functions in it. Occupational therapists’ recommendations are not generic to all situations—no matter how similar they appear. Occupational therapy clinical expertise and assessment of the client, along with knowledge of the diagnosis and potential future needs, lead to very specific individualized recommendations. Occupational therapists' understanding of the family and caregivers’ roles, and potential safety concerns, are essential to success with home modifications over the long term.

   Occupational therapists have a strong understanding of how an individual functions in his or her space, which supports recommendations to the client that will enhance function and safety in the home environment. An occupational therapist also ensures that the modifications are utilized properly by the clients (by providing training after the changes are in place) and that clients have and know how to use all the necessary durable medical equipment to safely function in their remodeled space.

   Working with an occupational therapist can help minimize mistakes or less-than-optimal results that lead to costly corrections. For example, an occupational therapy assessment might uncover disabilities or
difficulties that were not initially known to the team (e.g., the client is not able to independently use the bathroom). The occupational therapist would use the evaluation and assessment results to feature-match specific equipment and make recommendations for ergonomic installation, based on the specific client, to maximize safety and independence (e.g., choices for shower seat location and type, as well as grab bar location). Demonstrated client skills and anticipated future skills may also indicate safer choices in terms of a walk-in tub vs. a zero threshold shower.

Occupational therapists are covered by liability insurance (either personally if in private practice or by their employer) which reduces the liability of the contractor if he or she is implementing therapist recommendations.

4. **What types of projects benefit most from occupational therapy inclusion on the team?**
   Remodelers are more likely to use an occupational therapist for a client who has physical disabilities than one who is aging in place without a current disability, but occupational therapists can be helpful in establishing the best plan for almost any client. Occupational therapists have the expertise to evaluate and address problems related to physical (e.g., spinal cord injury), sensory (e.g., low vision), and mental health/behavioral/cognitive (e.g., dementia, brain injury) disabilities. It is not uncommon for clients to underestimate their difficulties as they age or live with a disability. They may stop doing things that are getting more difficult and not realize there is a better or safer way to do an activity that would allow them to continue to participate more fully in life. The occupational therapist, as a health professional, can use assessments that bring out that information and ensure that the final design plan includes modifications and equipment/technology that will meet the client’s needs both now and with a view of the future.

5. **How can I persuade a client who I know would benefit from an occupational therapy consultation to include an occupational therapist on the team?**
   A handout/fact sheet aimed at consumers to assist in this discussion has been developed. It includes general information about occupational therapists, how they can add to the team in identifying needs and solutions tailored to the individual client, and testimonials from consumers and team members about the value of that collaboration. Remodelers can use this tool as a way to create a dialogue with the client with regard to the recommendation to include an occupational therapist on the team, as well as to help identify one. This process is easier if you have an occupational therapist with whom you already work.

6. **How are occupational therapists usually paid when they work with remodelers on home modifications projects?**
   Several remodelers employ or use occupational therapists as paid consultants on projects, and the remodeler bills the client for these services. Others work with occupational therapists who bill the client separately.

   Most occupational therapists in private practice specializing in home modifications rely on private pay for reimbursement. Occupational therapists who work for a medical facility (i.e., home health, rehab hospitals, or skilled nursing facilities) will likely be billing Medicaid, Medicare, insurance, or other third parties through their agency/facility. Those assessments and recommendations may be more routine in nature, include durable medical equipment, and not necessarily include collaboration with remodelers or follow-up training on the equipment and modifications because it might be outside their work scope.

7. **Where can I find an occupational therapist to partner with on a home modifications project?**
   As with any consultant, it may take effort on your part to identify an occupational therapist (or several) that you develop a good working relationship with. But the payoff can be well worth it in efficient assessment,
better client satisfaction with the project, increased referrals, and value-added services to differentiate your accessibility and AIP services.

Ways to locate an occupational therapist include:

- Use the CAPS directory on www.nahb.org to identify occupational therapists in your area who are CAPS designees.
- Contact occupational therapists whom you have met at courses.
- Contact occupational therapists whom you have worked with in the past.
- Contact Karen Smith at the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) at ksmith@aota.org to see if she is aware of occupational therapists with home modifications expertise in your area.
- Contact your state’s OT Association to see if they have a list of occupational therapists with expertise in your area.
- Look for opportunities to exhibit at State Occupational Therapy Association annual conferences to let occupational therapists know about your services and engage them in conversation. You may identify occupational therapists with a focus on home modifications.
- Become involved in local aging groups such as falls prevention coalitions, Aging in Place Councils, etc. Occupational therapists may be members as well.
- Host an open house at a home that you have remodeled and invite local occupational therapists to see modifications that you have made. A pleased customer might be willing to consent. Your state OT Association may be able to provide you with contacts to invite or you could advertise the event in their newsletter (which may only be quarterly, so plan ahead!).
- Create networking opportunities through your local home builders association by inviting occupational therapists to a happy hour, meet and greet, or presentation by an occupational therapist you have worked with, a remodeler, or both. Occupational therapists may not be members of the HBA, so you would have to reach out to local therapists via other ways mentioned above.
- Start an online forum or group for local occupational therapists and remodelers through your HBA.

8. How can I get referrals from occupational therapists?

Building relationships with occupational therapists who are generalists or specialists in home modifications will encourage referrals. This collaborative process can be a win-win—creating a reciprocal referral process for both the occupational therapists and the remodeler.

Some occupational therapists may not be able to refer (because of work requirements) individual contractors, but they may be able to provide your name if it is part of a list of several remodelers (suggest the CAPS directory) in their area. Providing an in-service presentation to occupational therapists and discharge planners in health care facilities about your aging-in-place and accessibility services might be possible, or provide them with brochures or website information.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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