

February 6, 2013

Senator Tom Harkin, Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington DC, 20510

Senator Lamar Alexander, Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
835 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC, 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Alexander,

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) is the national professional association representing the interests of more than 140,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students of occupational therapy. The practice of occupational therapy is science-driven, evidence-based, and enables people of all ages to live life to its fullest by promoting health and well-being while also minimizing the functional effects of illness, injury, disability, and other conditions.

AOTA greatly appreciates the recent Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee hearing, “Assessing the State of America’s Mental Health System” and would like to take this opportunity to provide comments regarding this issue. As the Committee proceeds in forming recommendations to improve mental health services, AOTA would like to offer support for your efforts and provide a brief explanation of the critical role occupational therapy practitioners can play in providing mental health services within the school system and the community.

Occupational therapy practitioners have long recognized the glaring need to improve the availability of timely, effective care within America’s mental health system. The profession was founded in mental health, sprouting from its roots in the early Twentieth Century mental health institutions and growing into a widely-ranging profession while maintaining a role in community-based mental health. Occupational therapy emphasizes the provision of supports and services that enable a person to carry out their everyday activities, so that they can be productive, engaged, and safe in the environments in which they live, work, and play.

Within the realm of mental health, occupational therapy utilizes this unique perspective to provide client-centered, occupation-based intervention that enables individuals with a mental illness to maximize their potential and lead productive, full lives. Occupational therapy practitioners are among the qualified mental health professionals who can identify and treat individuals with psychiatric disabilities.

Within schools, occupational therapy practitioners are present throughout all aspects of the school system, working to ensure that every student has the necessary supports to succeed in the educational process. Outside of the school setting, children with mental health issues can also receive occupational therapy services in hospitals, community mental health treatment settings, private therapy clinics, domestic violence and homeless shelters, day care centers, Head Start, and other early education programs.¹

¹American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. Mental Health in Children and Youth: The benefit and role of occupational therapy. Retrieved from: <http://www.aota.org/Practitioners-Section/Children-and-Youth/Browse/MH/44479.aspx?FT=.pdf>

Occupational therapy practitioners are thereby well-positioned in the school environment and in the community to contribute to early identification, prevention, and intervention of mental illness among children.

AOTA has created an evidence-based practice guideline, accepted into the Agency for Healthcare Research Quality National Guideline Clearinghouse, to support and define the role of occupational therapy practitioners in mental health promotion, prevention, and intervention with children and youth². Occupational therapy practitioners' role in mental health within the school setting reaches all three tiers of intervention:

- Occupational therapy can provide informal observation of students for behaviors that might suggest mental health concerns or limitations in social-emotional or educational development;
- Occupational therapy can conduct early identification of mental health problems by providing formal screenings and testing of psychosocial function to at-risk students;
- Occupational therapy can analyze the sensory, social, and cognitive demands of all school tasks and recommend adaptations to support functioning of students to promote positive mental health, prevent psychological decline, and support children with mental illness;
- Occupational therapy can assist other professional personnel in developing and implementing structures to create conducive learning environments supportive of a student's development of specific social-emotional skills;
- Occupational therapy can be part of the team and provide in-service training to educate teachers, staff, and parents about mental illness recognition, behavioral regulation, and methods of promoting successful functioning throughout the child's day³.

Although mental health services within the school system are crucial, it is also vital to ensure collaboration of schools with community-based mental health programs to provide services not only to children with mental illnesses, but also provide support and services for their families. Occupational therapy practitioners can make significant and broad contributions in the school and in the community because the profession focuses on the development of true life skills in order to promote optimum participation and productivity in education, community living, work, health and wellness, and cognition. As part of the team concerned with the mental health of children and communities, occupational therapy practitioners are committed to providing the tools and supports necessary to assist individuals with mental illness live their lives to the fullest⁴.

During the HELP Committees consideration of the current issues within America's mental health system, we suggest that the Committee:

- **Ensure that any language in legislation relating to school-based mental health professionals, or mental health professionals, includes occupational therapy practitioners in recognition of its history, research base and skills.**

²American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. (2005). Occupational Therapy Practice Guidelines for Children with Behavioral and Psychosocial Needs. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press.

³ American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. FAQ on School Mental Health for School-Based Occupational Therapy Practitioners. Retrieved from: <http://www.aota.org/Practitioners-Section/Children-and-Youth/Browse/MH/FAQSchoolMH.aspx?FT=.pdf>

⁴American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. (2012). Occupational Therapy Practice Guidelines for Adults with Serious Mental Illness. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press.

- **Pass legislation to expand the definition of behavioral and mental health professionals under the National Health Service Corps to include occupation therapy practitioners.**

A highly qualified and skilled workforce is essential to meeting the myriad needs of individuals with severe and persistent mental illness disorders as well as those with lesser mental health needs. Access to occupational therapy is critical to enabling these individuals to live as fully as possible in society, which is the focus of the prevalent recovery model in mental health.

Furthermore, we strongly encourage the committee to continue to providing strong oversight of the implementation of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, essential health benefits under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicaid expansion under ACA. Treatment for mental health conditions must be a fully integrated part of health care.

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 mental health and individuals with a mental illness diagnosis, please contact Heather Parsons at hparsons@aota.org.

Sincerely,



Christina Metzler
AOTA Chief Public Affairs Officer
American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc.