Position Paper: Occupational Therapy and Long-Term Services and Supports

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) recognizes that the establishment of a comprehensive system of long-term services and supports should be a national priority and should be addressed as part of efforts to address national health care reform. Federal and state policies currently influence the availability of long-term services and supports; long-term services are an important item on the agenda of both federal and state policy makers.

Occupational therapy practitioners are a major provider of the services that assist persons of all ages to live and function at their maximum levels of independence and participation. Therefore, it is essential that occupational therapy practitioners participate in the debate over long-term services policy at both the national and state levels.

Current estimates indicate that between 9 million and 11 million Americans of all ages have chronic disabilities that may result in a need for long-term services and supports to perform activities of daily living; to fulfill school, work, and family obligations; and to function as fully participating citizens of their communities (Long-Term Care Campaign, 1993).

According to principles of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD), of which AOTA is a member, "long-term care encompasses comprehensive social, support, health-related, and specialized services provided in an individualized manner....Long-term services for people with disabilities must have as their purpose supporting individuals to achieve their fullest potential, to be as independent, productive, and contributing as possible, and to be fully included in and participating members of society" (CCD, 1993, p. 1).

Long-term services and supports encompass a wide spectrum, including assistance with basic activities and routines of daily living, such as bathing, dressing, meal preparation, and housekeeping as well as facilitating full functioning in family, work, school, and leisure. Long-term services may also include skilled and therapeutic care for the treatment and management of chronic conditions.

In the past, long-term services and supports were available only in nursing homes and institutions. Today, persons with chronic disabling conditions are choosing to live in their own homes and communities and receive services and supports to meet their individual needs. Persons are choosing services that can assist them in maintaining greater control over their lives and functioning independently. As supporting independence and full functioning has always been the goal of occupational therapy, these services are an important part of a comprehensive array of long-term services and supports to a wide range of persons.

Occupational therapy practitioners provide long-term services and supports to persons of all ages and across the full spectrum of disabling conditions (e.g., an infant with a developmental disability, an elderly person after a cerebrovascular accident, the adolescent who is affected by a traumatic brain injury, and the person with a persistent mental illness).

Occupational therapy practitioners have unique skills to meet individual needs for the increasing numbers of people who choose to be in their own homes and communities and live full and productive lives. Occupational therapists can conduct functional and environmental assessments that will help identify persons who need assistance to enable them to function at their maximum level of independence. Occupational therapy practitioners can provide service coordination and/or case management to assist persons to negotiate the long-term services and supports system. Occupational therapy practitioners are qualified to provide specialized services such as training and consultation on the use of assistive technology and modification of homes and other environments. Occupational therapy practitioners can provide training for supported employment and other work.

These services can be provided in a variety of locations, including community-based agencies like adult day programs; residential programs, including those for supported living; and, in the person's home, work site, or community setting.

AOTA endorses the following principles related to long-term services and supports programs, policies, and funding at the federal, state, and local levels:

1. All individuals have the right to live and function at their maximum level of independence in environments of their choosing.
2. A comprehensive system of long-term services and supports should be available to all persons who need them, regardless of disability, age, or income.

3. Services, regulations, and standards should be based on the principle of individual choice. Services and supports should be designed and oriented to meet unique individual needs, supportive of families and other caregivers, and biased toward the least intrusive home and community assistance.

4. Any long-term services and supports program should spread the financial risk as broadly as possible.

5. Quality occupational therapy should be a part of a comprehensive array of services and supports. Occupational therapy should be available, accessible, efficient, and effective in promoting full functioning in the home, community, or other setting.

6. Coverage of services should be structured to enable occupational therapy practitioners to provide a comprehensive range of facility-based, community, and individual health, social, and support services to meet individual needs.

7. Individuals who receive occupational therapy services should be participants in the decisions affecting selection, design, and delivery of services.

8. Eligibility for therapy should be based on functional need.

9. Any federal program should include uniform federal requirements for coverage of occupational therapy in all states so that individuals have comparable, predictable, uniform long-term services and supports benefits.

In April 1990 the Representative Assembly of AOTA passed Resolution 631-90 stating that "long-term care is a viable health care issue as society tries to assure quality of life while containing health costs at a time when extended longevity and the ability to preserve lives of persons with increasingly more complex degrees of impairment are being realized" (AOTA, 1990, no page number available). The Representative Assembly further advocated "that political activity surrounding long-term care on the part of consumer/advocacy groups, health care policy makers, health care deliverers, and third party payers exists nationally and at the state level" (AOTA, 1990). AOTA is committed to establishing a comprehensive system of long-term services and supports that embodies the above principles and that assures that all persons have the supports necessary to fulfill their rights to live and function at their maximum level of independence and productivity in environments of their choice.

References


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