

Perception of OTs as Responders in Disaster Management

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PURPOSE: The study explored occupational therapists' (OT) perceived roles of OTs and other healthcare professionals in different stages of disaster response (including disaster preparedness, emergency response, recovery, and development), their familiarity with the disaster management stages, and their training and likelihood of responding to disasters. A review of how OT services were impacted during the pandemic is included.

DESIGN: The quantitative survey, 'A Healthcare Practitioner Disaster Management Questionnaire,' was deployed via REDCap survey system to survey licensed OTs and OTAs actively practicing in fourteen states in the United States. Disaster management definitions were based on the model of Occupational Stewardship and Collaborative Engagement. Data were collected through convenience sampling using clinician emails provided by state licensing boards.

METHOD: Collected data were imported into SPSS for cleaning and analysis. A review of descriptive data indicated the 1,027 OTs and 122 OTAs responses were similar on personal and professional demographics; therefore, the OT and OTA respondents were combined for further analysis. Descriptive and non-parametric analyses were conducted on the nominal, ordinal, and scale data obtained.

RESULTS: Respondents (88.7%) believe that the OT profession has a role in disaster management. When asked which allied health professions have a role in to disaster management, respondents identified nurses, physician assistants, and occupational therapists among the most recognized, followed by physical therapists, physical therapy assistants, and speech-language pathologists as having useful skills. Respondents indicated they had little familiarity with disaster management stages; however, of the responses, they were more familiar with disaster preparedness and emergency response stages than recovery and development stages. Similarly, respondents had little professional experience in disaster management stages. After reviewing descriptive analyses for training in disaster management, most respondents indicated they had no training. A Spearman correlation analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between training and likelihood of responding to a disaster, suggesting that as therapists receive training the likelihood of responding to disasters increases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restricted use of OT personnel was the most common occurrence followed by decreased admissions and referrals, current clients not receiving services, and facility closures.

CONCLUSIONS: This study found that OT practitioners believe they and other healthcare professionals have roles in the capability to respond within the different stages of disaster management, however, there is a lack of training and involvement in disaster response. For occupational therapists, receipt of training increases the likelihood of engagement in the disaster management stages, suggesting that provision of training in multiple venues is needed to increase the impact OTs have on populations affected by disasters.

IMPACT: This study contributes to the literature in occupational therapy to increase awareness of the lack of knowledge, training, and involvement of occupational therapists in the disaster management stages. Hopefully, this study provides a wake-up call to educators of the need to provide knowledge of disaster management in the training of new OT practitioners, continuing education providers of the need to offer disaster management training to practicing therapists, and all OT practitioners of the need to be involved in the health and welfare of people and communities they live in as well as around the world.

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