



Occupational Therapists Improve Lives, Save Money



Submission to the Standing Committee on
Finance for the 2018 Pre-Budget Consultations



CAOT - ACE

Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists
Association canadienne des ergothérapeutes

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Executive Summary

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) is pleased to present its recommendations to the federal government for Budget 2018. CAOT supports more than 16,000 occupational therapists across Canada. Productivity, the proposed theme of Budget 2018, is a central focus in occupational therapy interventions.

Occupational therapists assist people in living life to the fullest. They prevent and solve problems that interfere with a person's ability to do everyday things such as taking care of themselves, engaging in leisure activities, going to work, running errands and participating in the community. Occupational therapists deliver clinically effective solutions that improve health and wellness outcomes and they do this cost effectively, by applying a unique mix of skills that address:

- the whole person – their physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive abilities and their environment
- all age groups
- both prevention and treatment
- care in numerous settings – home, community, institutions, schools, industry, business and government.

Within the theme of productivity among Canadians, CAOT makes three recommendations:

1. Help Canadian seniors age in place through statutory funding for the inclusion of occupational therapists on all primary care teams and on home and community care service teams.
2. Improve the workplace health and wellness of public servants by running a pilot program that includes occupational therapy services as part of the Public Service of Canada extended health benefits.
3. Support the transition from active duty to civilian life for injured or retired soldiers with mental health conditions by engaging occupational therapists to serve in Veterans Affairs Canada regional offices and leveraging their expertise in the development of the Centre of Excellence on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

These recommendations will improve lives and save money. They will also help the current hospital-centric medical model of care to transform into a more effective system that enhances client care in homes and communities, and reduces the per capita costs of health care.

Recommendations

1. Help seniors to age in place

Census 2016 tells us that Canada is home to 5.9 million seniors. Over 85% of aging seniors would prefer to “age in place” in their homes and communities (1). Supporting seniors to experience this will foster the productivity, quality of life and engagement of Canada's senior population and will avoid or reduce the need for more costly acute and long-term residential care. Support for aging in place aligns with a proposed National Seniors Strategy for Canada which promotes seniors as independent, productive and engaged citizens, leading healthy and active lives, with care closer to home. Occupational therapy is a clinically and cost effective component of home and community care services. Occupational therapists enable aging in place because they:

- provide home and community-based services that extend beyond those of physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants, with client-centred strategies that address barriers to participation in everyday activities (2).

- provide interventions that address a wide scope of productivity-related and health promotion issues such as fall prevention, and home safety, strategies to aid with memory difficulties, recommendation of adaptive equipment, techniques for personal energy conservation, accessing community transportation following driving retirement, and more.
- are well suited to work with seniors to assess home safety and to assist with home modifications that promote aging in place. Research from the United Kingdom has demonstrated that occupational therapy housing adaptations can dramatically reduce costs associated with daily home care, with savings ranging from \$2,000 to \$50,000 per year (3). Occupational therapy interventions related to housing can also postpone entry into residential care, saving up to \$48,000 per year per person (4).
- have a unique understanding of how individuals function in their living environment, and can collaborate with design/renovation professionals to ensure the individual's needs are met in the process.

Presently, occupational therapists are not members of all primary care teams. Rectifying this would bring proven productivity benefits:

- decreased risk of institutionalization (5);
- lower hospital readmission rates (6);
- increased physical activity in community dwelling older adults (7);
- improved outcomes in those with chronic diseases (8);
- decreased rate of functional decline (9); and
- reduced cost of fall-related injuries (10).

In Budget 2017, the government pledged \$6B over 10 years to improve Canadian home care services, and another \$5B for mental health care. Given the positive outcomes related to occupational therapy services for seniors, it is recommended that the Federal Government:

Help Canadian seniors age in place through statutory funding for the inclusion of occupational therapists on all primary care teams and on home and community care service teams.

2. Improve the health and wellness of public servants

The Conference Board of Canada (2013) estimates that employee absenteeism costs the Canadian economy \$16.6 billion annually (11), with one long-term absence costing an employer roughly \$8,800 (12). These figures point to the need for improved physical and mental health in the workplace, to improve productivity measures and move Canada's economy forward.

A necessary supporting strategy is to have employers provide comprehensive employee health benefits that recognize the range of therapies and interventions available to improve health and to reduce absenteeism and presenteeism in the workforce.

Presently, occupational therapy services are not covered by the majority of extended health benefit plans for employees, including Federal public servants. Many individuals are unaware of the scope of practice and benefits of occupational therapy, which have been underestimated to date. Without coverage, individual workers may not enlist the services of an occupational therapist due to lack of awareness and out-of-pocket expense. Doctors and other health professionals may not refer their patients to occupational therapy knowing there may be a financial implication. This lack of coverage and resulting lack of knowledge of occupational therapy benefits means workers miss out on a host of practical back-to-work strategies that address all aspects of the person's well-being – physical, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural, cognitive, and environmental. De facto reliance on more expensive health care treatments is an inefficient use of our scarce health care dollars.

Occupational therapists provide a cost-effective service that will:

- identify and address barriers in the workplace proactively, with prevention as the aim,
- work with individuals and employers collaboratively, in the workplace setting, to complete a full, comprehensive assessment,
- tailor interventions to meet the individual's specific needs while taking into account their environment (workplace), and
- reduce the burden of absenteeism by facilitating a timely return to work after illness or injury.

According to Statistics Canada (2016), Canadian public servants are absent from work an average of 12.4 days each year (13). Given the large number of public servants in Canada, and the importance of their productivity to support government priorities, this absentee measure is not only costly but reflects an unmet need for interventions designed to improve workplace productivity.

Including occupational therapy services in coverage provided by Public Service of Canada extended health benefits will help address this pressing issue. The first step is to add coverage for occupational therapy services in a timed pilot program and set measures to evaluate its efficacy. If successful, the public service can serve as a model for Canadian unions and employers to encourage inclusion of occupational therapy services in their own benefit plans. This in turn will increase access to occupational therapy across all sectors, fostering greater workplace health, wellness, and productivity for all Canadian employees.

Given the positive outcomes of including occupational therapy coverage in extended health benefit programs, and the distinct need for addressing the issue of workplace wellness for the more than 258,000 workers in the Public Service, it is recommended that the Federal Government:

Improve the workplace health and wellness of public servants by running a pilot program that includes occupational therapy services as part of the Public Service of Canada extended health benefits.

3. Support the transition of injured or retired soldiers

Mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), can make the transition to civilian life more difficult for Canadian Veterans. There is a high prevalence of PTSD among Canadian Veterans; 73% of Veterans who received a benefit from Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) for a mental health condition received it specifically for PTSD (14). Even when civilian life is attained, there can be long-term effects if PTSD is left unaddressed including poor conflict management and problem solving, aggressive behavior, emotional detachment, avoidance and disinterest. According to VAC, 50% of males and 25% of females with chronic PTSD have major problems with alcohol and drugs (15). In response to Veterans' needs, the Federal Government wisely determined to re-open several VAC regional offices.

Occupational therapists can play a vital role in supporting Veterans to overcome symptoms of PTSD and other mental health conditions and thus be able to meaningfully reintegrate into their family lives, communities, and paid civilian employment.

Occupational therapists provide expertise in addressing:

- depression
- anxiety
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- substance abuse

- dysregulated routines and habits
- social isolation
- chronic pain

Budget 2017 announced funding (\$17.5M) for the development of the Centre of Excellence on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and related mental health conditions. Occupational therapists can support the knowledge translation process through the development of tools and resources for Veterans who face mental health issues. Along with establishing the Centre, the re-opening of VAC regional offices indicates that professional staffing resources must be identified and hired to ensure the success of these initiatives. Inclusion of more occupational therapists, with their unique mix of clinically and cost effective skills, will measurably advance the aims of these two projects and help return more Canadian Veterans to a productive, fulfilling life.

Given the positive outcomes of including occupational therapy services for Canadian Veterans, and given the Government of Canada's jurisdiction in this area, it is recommended that the Federal Government:

Support the transition from active duty to civilian life for injured or retired soldiers with mental health conditions by engaging occupational therapists to serve in Veterans Affairs Canada regional offices and leveraging their expertise in the development of the Centre of Excellence on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

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