

CONSULTATION ON A FRAMEWORK FOR ACCESSIBILITY LEGISLATION

Executive Summary

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) BC, as the regional chapter of the national association represents over 2000 OTs in BC, is pleased to submit a brief with the following two recommendations in response to the consultation on the Framework for Accessibility Legislation.

Recommendations

1) That occupational therapists (OTs), as regulated health professionals, be consulted in the development of accessibility legislation and standards

As accessibility experts, occupational therapists consider their clients' health and well-being in relation to their environment (be it physical, social, mental or spiritual) and how these factors affect their ability to participate and be included in the daily activities that provide meaning to the lives of individuals. Occupational therapists' education, training and professional competencies lie in enabling individuals to remove barriers that prevent them from full engagement and participation in their lives and in society. In addition to assessing physical barriers, OTs consider how individuals interact with their environment and recommend changes accordingly to remove barriers to accessibility and support inclusion of all individuals. OTs are well versed in universal design principles, and work with contractors, renovators and designers to recommend accessibility features in residential and public spaces. They are therefore integral to any inter-professional consultation on the development of accessibility legislation or standards, both with their technical competencies and their client-centred approach, particularly as it relates to the built environment and in the workplace.

Built environment

As a regulated profession, OTs are accountable for providing client-centred services as well as quality assurance in accessibility assessments and implementation. They bring knowledge of broad accessibility criteria, which can protect against fraudulent or incompetent contractors or third-party operators functioning under false "certifications" without standard accessibility measures or operating

procedures. Having an OT involved in modification or planning of new projects assures that accessibility features are in fact accessible, done to standard, and are implemented with the unique functional needs of the end user and broader community in mind. As experts on accessibility, they are well within their scope of practice to be essential advisers on standards development and within the CASDO forum.

Workplace

Individuals who will benefit from this legislation are not a homogenous group. Individuals with disabilities, functional limitations, sensory differences, learning difficulties or mental health challenges all have different needs when it comes to full and equal participation and inclusion at work. OTs recognize that there is not a one size fits all approach and can provide tailor-made solutions to enhancing the engagement and participation of individuals in their workplaces. Having a global and holistic understanding of how various functional impairments can affect functioning in general also makes them an essential component in the development of broad standards. They incorporate a person's health, how they interact with the physical workspace, what potential barriers they may encounter, and how to optimize it to allow individuals to participate without impediment. Whether they are providing ergonomic assessments, musculoskeletal assistance or mental health support, OTs are a necessary voice and client advocate for advising on development of accessibility standards as it relates to employment.

2) OT be covered under extended health benefits

The Conference Board of Canada estimates that middle class, middle aged Canadians between the ages of 45 to 64 have the highest absenteeism rates from their workplace, between 10 to 13 days. (Stewart, 2013) Some of the contributing factors include organizational influences such as working conditions, and the workplace environment. This can include both the physical and social environment, especially as it relates to the treatment of employees with visible and not visible disabilities. Absenteeism (9.3 days in the private sector and 12.9 days in the public sector) is costing our economy \$16.6B annually (Stuart, 2013). Occupational therapists:

- identify and address barriers in the workplace proactively, with prevention as the aim,
- work with individuals and employers collaboratively, in workplace settings, to complete comprehensive assessments which costs as little as \$500 to \$1000 per employee,
- tailor interventions to meet the individual's specific needs while taking into account their environment (workplace), and
- reduce the burden of absenteeism by facilitating timely return to work after illness or injury.

Presently, OT services are not covered by the majority of extended health benefit plans for employees. Without coverage, individual workers may not enlist the services of an OT due to 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 means that employees miss out on a host of practical return-to-work strategies and interventions that directly address barriers that impede participation in the workforce.

The government of British Columbia should lead by example and provide comprehensive employee health benefits that recognize the range of therapies and interventions available, including occupational therapy, which directly contributes to removing barriers in the workplace and improving accessibility and inclusivity. In order to support accessible businesses, the governments should be in contact with all necessary health professionals in developing accessibility standards. Occupational therapists are the only health professional that directly assesses and implements accessibility features and takes into account inclusivity as part of their scope of practice.

Conclusion

Given their expertise in accessibility, OTs should be required partners in support of the government of BC to meet the goals of legislation on accessibility, including by acting as expert advisors on accessibility standards, and by targeted changes to the government's workplace extended health benefits to include occupational therapy. These steps will help advance a barrier-free society for all.

About occupational therapists (OTs)

OTs are regulated health professionals that provide accessibility assessments as part of their scope of practice. They help remove barriers to participation in daily life and assist people in living life to the fullest. They prevent and solve problems that interfere with a person's ability to take care of themselves, engage in leisure activities, go to work, run errands and participate in the community. OTs deliver evidence-based solutions that are both clinically and cost-effective, improving health and wellness outcomes, 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.

About CAOT-BC

CAOT-BC is a regional chapter of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, providing regional representation and support to occupational therapists in British Columbia. CAOT's mission is to advance excellence in occupational therapy, and its vision is that occupational therapy is valued and accessible across Canada. CAOT provides products, services and learning opportunities that assist occupational therapists in achieving excellence in their professional. Additionally, CAOT provides leadership in the development and promotion of the occupational therapy profession in Canada and internationally.

For more information or to set up a meeting, please contact CAOT-BC's Managing Director, Tanya Fawkes-Kirby at tfkirby@caot.ca.

References

1. Stewart, Nicole. Missing in Action: Absenteeism Trends in Canadian Organizations. Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2013.