

# Community Practice in Occupational Therapy

A GUIDE TO  
SERVING THE COMMUNITY

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**Susan K. Meyers, EdD, MBA, OTR, FAOTA**

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# Dedication

To students who encourage me to imagine possibilities for better communities and to Sam, Ethan, Lily, Lucy, and Isabel, who are the imagineers of the future.



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I would like to acknowledge the following authors for their contribution to this text:

Fengyi Kuo, DHS, OTR, CPRP  
Assistant Professor, Occupational Therapy  
University of Indianapolis  
Indianapolis, Indiana

Ann Chapleau, DHS, MS, OTR  
Assistant Professor, Occupational Therapy  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan

Leslie Roundtree, DHSc, MBA, OTR/L  
Program Director, Occupational Therapy  
Chicago State University  
Chicago, Illinois



# Reviewers

**Debra (Tiffany) Boggis, MBA, OTR/L**

Assistant Professor  
School of Occupational Therapy  
Pacific University  
Forest Grove, Oregon

**Julie A. Dorsey, MS, OTR/L, CEAS**

Assistant Professor  
Occupational Therapy  
School of Health Sciences and Human Performance  
Ithaca College  
Ithaca, New York

**Debra Hall, MS, OTR/L**

Department Chair  
Occupational Therapy Assistant Program  
Delaware Technical and Community College  
Owens Campus  
Georgetown, Delaware

**Anne M. Haskins, PhD, OTR/L**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Occupational Therapy  
School of Medicine and Health Sciences  
University of North Dakota  
Grand Forks, North Dakota

**Beth Ann Hatkevich, PhD, OTR/L**

Clinical Associate Professor  
Director, Clinical and Educational Programming  
& OTD Program Admissions Chair  
Department of Occupational Therapy  
College of Health Science and Human Service  
The University of Toledo Health Science Campus  
Toledo, Ohio

**Ada Boone Hoerl, MA, COTA/C**

Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor  
Occupational Therapy Assistant Program  
Sacramento City College  
Sacramento, California

**Brenda Kennell, OTR/L**

Clinical Assistant Professor  
Department of Occupational Therapy  
Winston-Salem State University  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

**Kathryn M. Loukas, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA**

Associate Clinical Professor  
Occupational Therapy  
University of New England  
Portland, Maine

**Jean MacLachlan, MS, OTR/L**

Associate Professor  
Occupational Therapy Department  
Salem State College  
Salem, Massachusetts

**Terry Peralta-Catipon, PhD, OTR/L**

Faculty  
Department of Occupational Therapy  
California State University-Dominguez Hills  
Carson, California

**Hermine Plotnick, MA, OTR/L**

Associate Professor and Program Director  
Department of Occupational Therapy  
School of Health Professions, Behavioral and Life Sciences  
New York Institute of Technology  
Old Westbury, New York

**Pat Precin, MS, OTR/L**

Assistant Professor  
Occupational Therapy  
New York Institute of Technology  
Old Westbury, New York

**Stacy Smallfield, DrOT, OTR/L**

Assistant Professor and Chair of Admissions  
Department of Occupational Therapy  
The University of South Dakota  
Vermillion, South Dakota

**Peter Talty, MS, OTR/L**

Professor  
Occupational Therapy  
Keuka College  
Keuka Park, New York

**Jodi Teitelman, PhD**

Associate Professor  
Department of Occupational Therapy  
School of Allied Health Professions  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia

**Barbara J. Williams, DrOT, OTR**

Director  
Occupational Therapy Program  
University of Southern Indiana  
Evansville, Indiana



# Introduction

This book introduces readers to community practice and provides suggestions for developing a program to respond to community needs. It is not intended to be a comprehensive listing of all types of community practice in which occupational therapy practitioners are involved. Many exemplary programs exist in communities throughout the country where excellent occupational therapy intervention enhances quality of life for individuals and communities. Some of these programs have been published in professional publications, many are described in student papers and manuscripts, and a great many more have gone unreported.

This book evolved from thinking about the history of health care and the role of economics in our current delivery system, the resilience of occupational therapy practitioners to identify and address changing human needs over time, and my own experiences practicing in the community. I hope that sharing these ideas will encourage others to investigate opportunities that exist for occupational therapy programs in their own communities.

Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 introduce community practice and place it in historical and economic contexts. Chapter 1 is designed to frame occupational therapy in historical context with evolving health care from home environment to hospital treatment. World events, development of technology, and economic conditions have played roles in determining human needs and the resulting methods of health care delivery. Chapter 2 includes stories from practice that describe how therapists transition from working in a medical model practice to a sometimes more flexible and challenging community practice that involves working with clients in their natural environments. Meeting clients in their homes offers an opportunity to experience other cultures, which can be one of the greatest rewards of community practice. Client-centered care involving the entire family is proposed as an ideal model for community practice. Occupational therapy has many models and frames of reference for practice, accompanied by evaluation instruments and intervention strategies. These are not included here but knowledge and skill in application will carry into community practice. I believe that occupational therapy practitioners will utilize the entire spectrum

of evaluation and intervention allowed by local professional regulations to provide optimal outcomes for clients.

## **EXPLORING THE COMMUNITY: OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRACTICE**

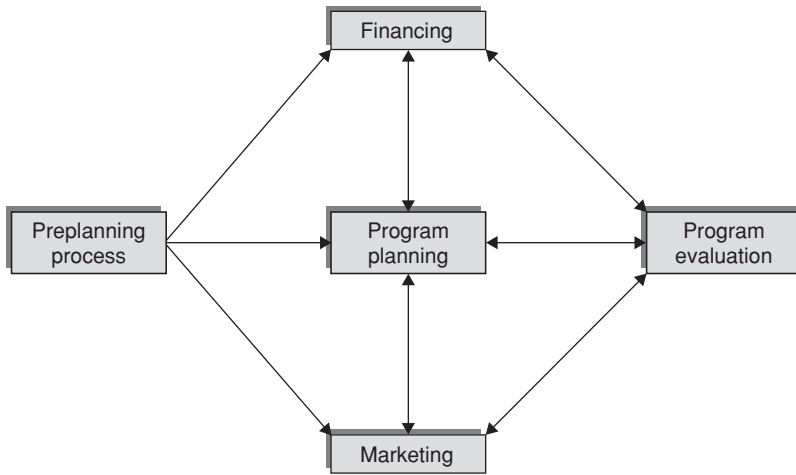
Chapters 3 through 6 introduce community practices that have emerged over the past 30 years. Each of these chapters focuses on a particular age group and the developmental tasks associated with it. Occupational therapy practitioners may choose to remove barriers or facilitate performance around age-appropriate occupations through the community practice contexts described in these chapters, or they may consider opportunities to develop new programs in their communities. These chapters are intended to stimulate thinking and discussion about potential for community services for each age group; they do not replace in-depth study or acquired knowledge of each population.

Chapter 3 explores tasks for childhood and adolescence and gives some examples of work opportunities available in most communities with this age group. This discussion is accompanied by stories from practice as told by experienced therapists to give readers a vicarious experience of some of the benefits and challenges of community practice. Chapter 4 focuses on adulthood and Chapter 5 is devoted to aging adults. Chapter 6 discusses opportunities to provide mental health services in the community. While some of the types of community practices described in this section employ significant numbers of therapists, options for less familiar community practices are also identified.

Most of the practice options presented in Chapters 3 through 6 are well established and offered through formal organizations that may provide job security in the form of a contract, a salary, or an established method of payment for your services. Many offer benefits such as health insurance and vacations, which are important considerations for many employees. At the same time, these practice options often offer flexibility in working times and autonomy in work environment, which may be an incentive for therapists to move into community practice.

The next five chapters are designed to take a reader through the process necessary to develop a community practice. You may want to develop a practice modeled on existing ones in other areas but new to your community, or a novel practice arising from personal interests. These chapters offer suggestions and resources for program planning, financing, marketing, and evaluation.





**Figure FM-1** Integrating business functions provides valuable feedback to community practitioners in a changing environment.

In Chapter 7, readers can examine themselves and community opportunities as a precursor to further development of a practice. This is a process in which readers identify the motives as well as the skills and abilities to perform the actions required for successful community practice. Exploring the community for opportunities and resources completes the preliminary planning process and helps to reach a decision as to whether human needs can be addressed through an economically feasible community practice.

Having made a decision to develop a practice, you begin a second, more intensive phase of planning that involves four main functions: program development, marketing, financing, and evaluation. Although each function will be explained in detail along with resources that will assist you to move through planning and implementing your new community practice, each function will also be shown in relation to the others.

Figure FM-1 above illustrates how each function relates to and impacts the other functions of starting a community practice. The preplanning process of gathering data and reflecting on your own assets ends in a decision of whether or not you should move forward and develop your business; it also contributes data to be used in further development of your practice. Deciding on and developing your services presents a challenge when first starting your practice. This process includes making many decisions that will influence the structure and eventual success of your practice. These decisions will influence marketing plans and determine how you will finance

your community practice. Integrating a fully researched program with financing, marketing, and evaluation activities provides built-in mechanisms for continuous feedback that can help you reach decisions and respond appropriately to a dynamic environment as well as to anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of your program.

The final three chapters are examples of community occupational therapy programs developed using the processes described in the earlier chapters. Each program was developed in response to a community need and was implemented and evaluated successfully.