Community Practice in Occupational Therapy

A GUIDE TO SERVING THE COMMUNITY

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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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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 ther-
apy practitioners may choose to remove barriers or facilitate performance
around age-appropriate occupations through the community practice con-
texts described in these chapters, or they may consider opportunities to de-
velop 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 knowl-
dge 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 adult-
hood and Chapter 5 is devoted to aging adults. Chapter 6 discusses oppor-
tunities to provide mental health services in the community. While some of
the types of community practices described in this section employ signifi-
cant 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 pay-
ment 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 prac-
tice modeled on existing ones in other areas but new to your community,
or a novel practice arising from personal interests. These chapters offer sug-
gestions and resources for program planning, financing, marketing, and
evaluation.
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.
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.