

Occupational Therapy's Role in Senior Centers

Senior centers are an important community resource for older adults. Recognized as a designated focal point by the Older Americans Act,¹ senior centers help older adults to access programs and services that promote health and independence. Today, senior centers serve a multitude of purposes, including meal and nutrition sites, screening clinics, recreational and fitness centers, social service agency branch offices, mental health counseling clinics, older worker employment agencies, volunteer coordinating centers, and community meeting facilities. With each generation, senior centers continue to grow and evolve in order to help older adults age in place and age successfully.

Occupational Therapy in Senior Centers

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants bring an understanding of the importance of participation and occupation for overall well-being to senior centers. Occupational therapy practitioners can fill a unique role by enhancing client-centered programming in senior center communities.

Occupational therapy practitioners can:

- Evaluate members' needs and interests for specific health education programs, and then design programs around these needs.
- Help members compensate for challenges they experience in activities of daily living (e.g., dressing and feeding), instrumental activities of daily living (e.g., driving and home management), leisure participation, social participation, and productive activity (e.g., volunteering and employment). The occupational therapy intervention plan, developed in collaboration with the member, considers the member's specific conditions (e.g., chronic pain, arthritis), and develops strategies to help maintain or improve his or her safety and well-being.
- Develop educational programs to provide center participants who have a variety of conditions (e.g., vision and hearing impairments, mobility limitations) with fall prevention, energy conservation, and other compensatory techniques. Information can be delivered to individuals or groups about community mobility, environmental modifications (e.g., bathtub bench, grab bars), and assistive devices (e.g., one-handed cutting board for meal preparation, built-up eating utensils) to increase ease, safety, and independence with daily tasks.
- Assist participants with life transitions. Occupational therapy programming designed to help address role transitions and changes in routines associated with retirement, widowhood, caregiver role, and relocation can alleviate some of the anxiety associated with these changes. Opportunities for participants to recognize the commonalities in their experiences and to gain problem-solving abilities to handle these transitions are just some of the ways that occupational therapy practitioners might support individuals at senior centers during these times.
- Create and implement health promotion programs to assist participants who wish to "redesign" their lives in order to experience greater health-related quality of life and well-being.² Programs can address the benefits of health-promoting behaviors, and potential barriers or fears that are preventing individuals from participating in valued life activities. Occupational therapy practitioners provide a unique educational approach that allows participants to analyze their own occupations, which then enables them to adapt their approach to everyday living for optimal well-being.



- Serve as consultants to the senior center for facility environmental modifications to enhance client access, participation, and safety. Examples include recommendations on bathroom modifications, accessible furniture, lighting to reduce glare, and color schemes to enhance visual contrast. Occupational therapy practitioners can also support facilities with the development of information and media intended for senior center participants to ensure that content and style are sensitive to age-related sensory changes and supportive of cognitive processes associated with older adult learning.

Evidence Supports Occupational Therapy

The University of Southern California Well Elderly Study² demonstrated that occupational therapy improved health and slowed aging-related declines for older adults who live in the community more effectively than engagement in basic social activities. As a result, occupational therapy health-promotion programs might include the following: (a) exploration of community resources for volunteering in the community, (b) improvement of emotional well-being through engaging in new or previously done leisure and social activities, and (c) strategies to increase clients in their mobility, to eliminate fear of falling. Occupational therapy practitioners can also create effective walking programs and programs to support advocacy efforts of older adults, and address topics ranging from energy conservation to successful time management.

As the population of older adults continues to grow and the desire for community-based services increases, occupational therapy can be a critical link to the success of multipurpose senior centers. Occupational therapy offers the solution to participation, engagement, and well-being for older adults in the community.



References

1. Older Americans Act Amendments of 2006. Pub. L. 109–365.
2. Clark, F., Azen, S. P., Zemke, R., Jackson, J., Carlson, M., Mandel, D. et al. (1997). Occupational therapy for independent-living older adults. A randomized controlled trial. *JAMA*, 278, 1321–1326.

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Occupational therapy enables people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—injury, illness, or disability. By looking at the whole picture—a client's psychological, physical, emotional, and social make-up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence, and participate in the everyday activities of life.

