

Forging Connections


A National Public Awareness Survey of Occupational Therapy's
Role in Helping Independent-Living Older Adults



Preliminary Report

June, 2003

Conducted by
The Gallup Organization

Commissioned by
 **The Fund To
Promote Awareness of
Occupational Therapy**

With Generous
Support From
**Marsh Affinity Group
Services**





Introduction

Dear Reader:

In a 2001 survey, American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) members informed the association that raising public awareness and understanding of occupational therapy and its contributions to society must be among the association's highest priorities. The AOTA Board of Directors heeded this call, and as the centerpiece of its long-term strategy created The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy (The Fund) in 2002. This is The Fund's first formal report, and it presents findings from public opinion research it undertook in 2003 with the assistance of the Gallup Organization.

To know where you are going, it helps to know where you are. So this first report from The Fund describes its efforts to gauge our challenge amid a demographic population—the “well-elderly”—whose needs for occupational therapy are expected to grow exponentially as baby boomers become senior citizens over the next 3 decades. The research findings confirm the harsh reality of the awareness challenge but also provide key insights into how our messages can most effectively reach our various publics and build a consistent and lasting identity for our profession. The other good news is that AOTA has created a formal vehicle, The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy, to give that goal the attention it needs to succeed.

This is but the first of many such initiatives that The Fund will undertake with the support of corporate donors and others. We are most grateful to **Marsh Affinity Group Services**, a long-standing corporate partner and supporter of the profession, whose generous contribution made possible the research described in this report. Marsh continues to demonstrate a genuine commitment to bringing the value of occupational therapy to more people.

For additional information about this research report and The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy, please contact Nancy Green, The Fund's executive director, at 301-652-6611, ext. 2141 or at ngreen@aota.org.

Sincerely,

Barbara L. Kornblau

Barbara L. Kornblau, JD, OT/L, FAOTA
President, The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy

Forging Connections

Preface

Occupational therapy practitioners have a long-standing commitment to enhancing the performance, wellness, and independence of older Americans. The commitment is broad in scope, powered by science-based interventions and underpinned by actions that recognize participation in occupation as a route to health and psychosocial well-being.

Occupational therapy practitioners fulfill their commitment to older Americans in assisted-living and skilled nursing facilities, in rehabilitation units, in community-based adult day care facilities, and increasingly through involvement with older Americans seeking to live independently and productively in their homes and communities.

Despite the commitment and service to older Americans, public awareness of the unique role and contribution provided by occupational therapy practitioners is low among older adults who are living independently. This was a key finding of a national telephone survey of independent-living Americans ages 65 and older conducted by The Gallup Organization on behalf of The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy. It is the first such national survey focused specifically on the perceptions and awareness of occupational therapy by older adults living independently.

The preliminary report's findings largely confirm recent survey results from other national organizations. But more importantly, the survey shines a bright light on the potential impact that a sustained public awareness campaign could have in building a broader and more in-depth understanding of the critical role that occupational therapy is playing in improving the quality of life for older Americans living independently.

The Opportunities Presented to Occupational Therapy as America Ages

With the burgeoning growth in the number of Americans age 65 and over during the next three decades, the opportunities are expansive for occupational therapy practitioners to provide transformational services that enhance the quality, dignity, and meaning of life for millions of older adults.

By the year 2030, more than 70 million Americans will be over 65 years old. They will represent the largest segment of the population. The vast majority (95%) will continue to live in the community as they age.

The survey shines a bright light on the potential impact that a sustained public awareness campaign could have in building a broader and more in-depth understanding of the critical role that occupational therapy is playing in improving the quality of life for older Americans living independently.



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Consequently, the results of a May 2000 AARP study of housing and home modification issues for older adults were not surprising. The study reported that most Americans (71%) ages 45 and over said they “strongly agree” with the statement that they would like to remain in their current residence for as long as possible. An additional 12% of respondents “somewhat agreed” with the statement according to the national telephone survey.

But many homes today are not designed to allow people to successfully age in place. Moreover, between one third and one half of community-dwelling older adults report being afraid of falling. Although most older adults do not experience falls in the home, fall-related injuries are a leading cause of hospitalization among this segment of the population. In addition, as a result of those falls, up to one in three older adults suffers injuries severe enough to reduce mobility and independence.

Equally interesting, though no less surprising, recent research indicates that more than four out of five respondents (82%) say if they need help caring for themselves they prefer not to move from their current home.

The Power of Occupational Therapy To Make a Difference

Occupational therapy has shown itself effective in an array of ways for older Americans living at home.

A University of Southern California study published in the August 2002 *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* showed that preventive occupational therapy is a cost-effective health care intervention for independent-living older Americans. The study, conducted by leading health care economists and occupational therapy researchers, was the first to measure the impact of preventive occupational therapy on the “well-elderly.”

Study participants reported striking improvements in their quality of life, including better physical and emotional well-being. “The research results highlight the enormous promise of low-technology interventions to improve quality of life and prevent disability among America’s aging population,” noted a senior researcher at the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, one of the funders of the study. “Cost-effective, community-based interventions such as preventive occupational therapy can play an important role in fulfilling that promise,” she concluded.

To help a person successfully age in place, it takes the skills and expertise of an occupational therapist to match the environment to the person’s abilities so they can do what they want and need to do at home. In part, creating that match means the occupational therapist will identify modifications to the person’s home that result in a fit between a person’s physical and cognitive abilities and the features of the physical environment. As a result, occupational therapy practitioners promote clients’ abilities to perform the daily occupations that provide older persons with a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

For older adults living independently, the ability to move about safely in the home as well as the community is a critical factor in determining quality of life. A 2003 AARP “Report to the Nation on Independent Living and Disability” concluded: “How older persons interact with their physical environment can have important consequences for their ability to age in place and remain independent.” It’s a concept occupational therapy practitioners have promoted for decades.

A recent survey about retirement by Hart Research Associates reported that the number of independent-living older adults expected to do volunteer work in their communities could double in coming years. Respondents said they did not simply want to fill time in retirement. Rather, they said it was very or fairly important to be involved. Indeed, volunteer tasks often heighten an individual’s sense of connection to the community and perceived quality of life. But getting to those volunteer opportunities may prove problematic.

Most independent-living older adults (87%) are highly dependent on the use of their own cars to get around their communities. Yet most of these individuals will outlive their ability to drive safely. As a result, according to an August 2002 National Institute on Aging study, males and females will be dependent on alternative sources of transportation for at least 7 years of their lives.

Some occupational therapists today already play significant roles in working with clients to ensure they remain mobile and active in their communities through meaningful activities such as volunteering. For example, occupational therapists conduct clinic-based and on-road evaluations and retraining to help some older individuals remain safe drivers.

Against this backdrop of enormous change, need, and activity among a growing number of older Americans, The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy conducted a national telephone survey in the spring of 2003, with support from Marsh Affinity Group Services. Responding effectively to the needs of older Americans will require a specific understanding of current perceptions and desires among this group.

This preliminary report summarizes key outcomes from the survey and follow-up actions suggested by the outcomes.

Survey Objectives

In conducting its formative research, The Fund sought to establish baseline data that would achieve three key objectives:

- **Understand** awareness and perception of occupational therapy services in a home- or community-based setting among adults ages 65 and older living independently in the community
- **Understand** what lifestyle choices are most important to older adults living independently
- **Inform** the development of follow-up research and programs to heighten awareness and understanding of occupational therapy services among this population and ultimately, to broaden demand for these services, thus responding to a clear societal need.

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However, awareness and perception of occupational therapists is not in line with the importance and relevance of the services they offer.

Survey Highlights

- The need for occupational therapy services will expand given the significant increase in the number of Americans ages 65 and over.
- At present, most use of occupational therapy services by older Americans is reactive and often occurs following a hospital visit.
- Stated awareness of occupational therapists is low—only 5%. In contrast, total unaided awareness of nurses and physical therapists is 60% and 16%, respectively.
- In households that have not received occupational therapy services, the role of the occupational therapist is not clearly perceived. Only the attribute, “can best assist with the activities of daily living” is strongly associated with occupational therapists.
- Home health aides, nursing assistants, and other home health agency staff are perceived in a fashion highly similar to occupational therapists.
- Households that have received occupational therapy services have a much clearer perception of what an occupational therapist does. There are strong associations with “helping individuals perform daily activities,” “can best suggest modifications to your home to make it a safer place,” and “can best conduct a safety evaluation of the home.” However, home health aides and nursing assistants are still perceived in a fashion highly similar to occupational therapists.
- Significant differences in knowledge were observed based on where respondents live, with urban dwellers having more stated knowledge about occupational therapists than their rural counterparts. Knowledge of suburban respondents about occupational therapists was intermediate.
- About 90% of respondents rated caring for one’s self and being able to live independently in one’s own home as the most important factors regarding aging in place.
- The need for occupational therapy services is seen as extremely important by older Americans who are living independently. However, awareness and perception of occupational therapists is not in line with the importance and relevance of the services they offer.

Preliminary Findings

Spring 2003

Background

- The need for occupational therapy services will expand given the significant increase in the number of Americans ages 65 and older.
- At present, most use of occupational therapy services by older Americans is reactive in nature and often occurs following a hospital visit.
- Accidents, such as falls, and the treatment of chronic medical conditions are common reasons for these visits.

Purpose

- The purpose of this study is to survey older adults living independently concerning their
 - awareness of occupational therapists,
 - perception of occupational therapists and therapy,
 - knowledge of occupational therapy, and
 - opinions about the importance of health care-related activities
- This will help The Fund with public information and education activities to better meet the needs of the independent-living older adults and their families, and to raise awareness of occupational therapy.

Methodology: Sample

■ Age		■ Income	
60 to 64	27%	41% of respondents	
65 to 74	43%	have annual incomes	
75 +	30%	\$35,000 or greater	
■ Gender		■ Region	
Male	30%	South	36%
Female	70%	Midwest	26%
		West	20%
■ Sample Size		Northeast	18%
500 adults age 60 or older			

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Awareness of Occupational Therapists

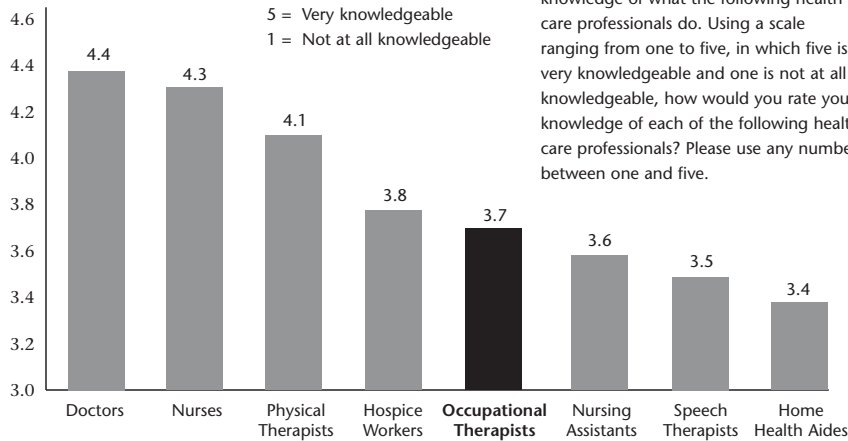
When you think of health care professionals who may visit your home, which is the first type to come to mind? (top of mind) What other types of health care professionals come to mind? (unaided)

- Stated awareness of occupational therapists is low
- Top-of-mind awareness is only 1% (4 responses out of 500)
- Total unaided awareness (net of three responses) is 4%
- In contrast, total unaided awareness of nurses or physical therapists is 60% and 16%, respectively
- Households that have received occupational therapy services have a much clearer perception of what an occupational therapist does. There are strong associations with
 - helping individuals perform daily activities
 - being best at assisting with activities of daily living
 - being best at conducting a safety evaluation of the home, and
 - being best at suggesting modifications to the home to make it a safer place
- Home health aides and nursing assistants are still perceived in a fashion highly similar to occupational therapists.

Knowledge of Occupational Therapists

- Knowledge of occupational therapists is low.
- Less than one third of respondents rated their knowledge of occupational therapists as “very knowledgeable.”
- This is in marked contrast to physical therapists for whom 44% of respondents stated they were “very knowledgeable.”
- Knowledge of occupational therapists rises a great deal if respondents have received occupational therapy services.
- It is interesting to note that knowledge of home health aides, nursing assistants and speech therapists among these respondents also increases steeply. This is likely due to the number of health care workers that provide services along with occupational therapists following a hospital stay.

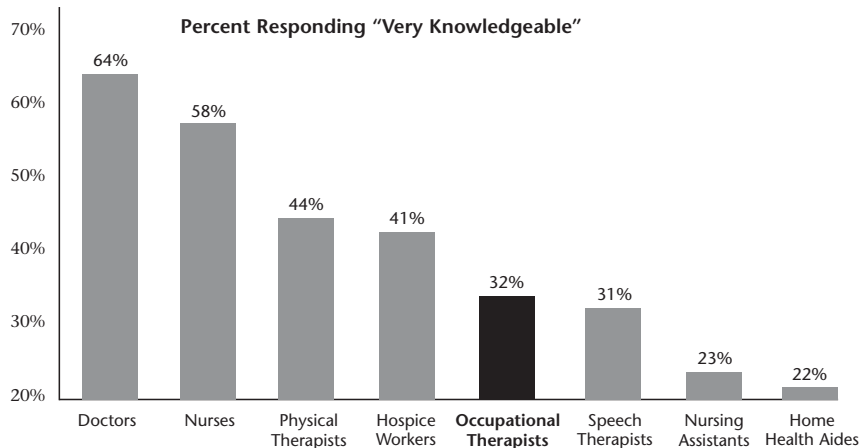
Overall Knowledge of Occupational Therapists



Responding effectively

to the needs of older Americans will require a specific understanding of current perceptions and desires of this group.

Knowledge of Occupational Therapists



What Is Important to Older Americans Who Are Living Independently?

- The ability to care for one's self and being able to live independently were rated most highly by older Americans living independently.
- Clearly the need for occupational therapy services is seen as extremely important by the well-elderly.
- Awareness and perception of occupational therapists is not in line with the importance of the services they offer.
- Four independent factors related to concerns of older Americans who are living independently were identified. These are:
 - **Independent living.** This includes adequate insurance, ability to provide self-care, independent decision making, and overall health maintenance
 - **Preventive activities** including diet, exercise, obtaining preventive health care, and having the needed financial resources
 - **Keeping family at arms length.** Not having family members make their health care decisions is closely tied with their relationship with doctors as defined by choosing their own doctor and visiting a doctor
 - **"What if."** The fourth independent factor appears to be reactive behaviors that would make their home safer and easier to live in as well as teaching family or caregivers how to provide support.
- What this shows is that four factors explain a great deal of the variation Gallup found for what older Americans who live independently perceive as important in regard to themselves.
- Occupational therapy interventions concerning home modifications are seen as reactive and not preventative.
- Stated knowledge of occupational therapist is most strongly correlated to the "what if" factor.

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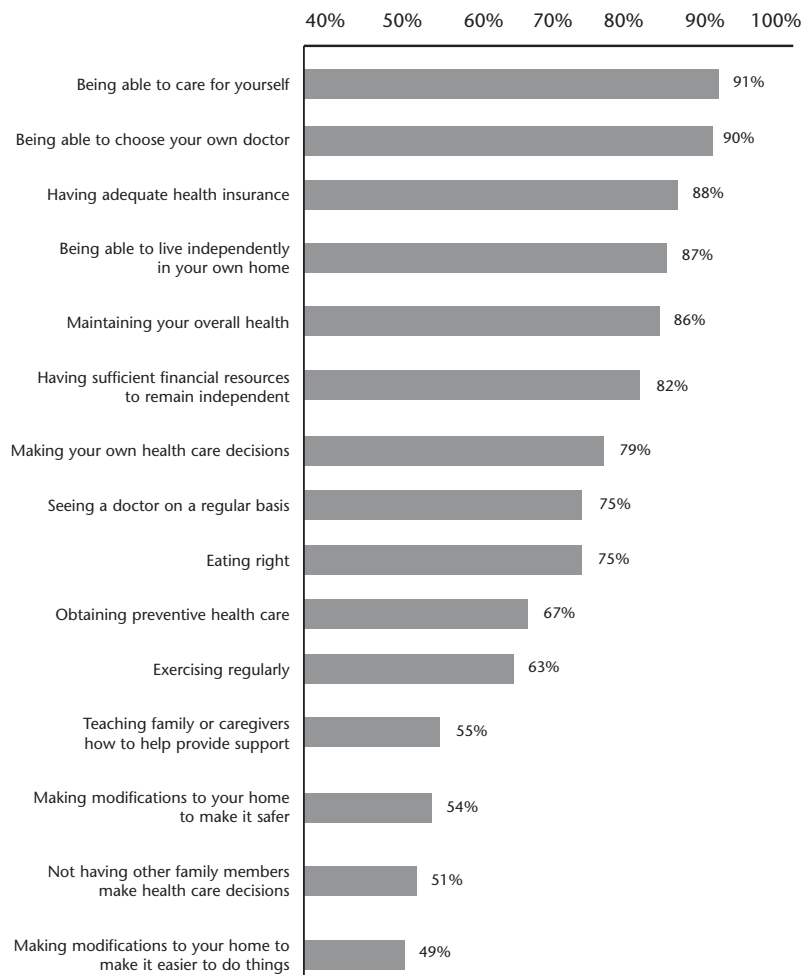
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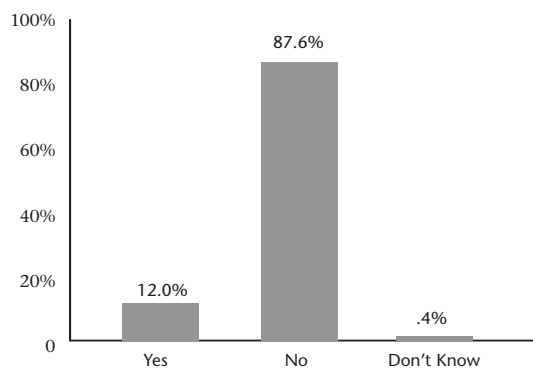
How Important...

I would like you to rate how important each of the following attributes are to you. Please use a five-point scale, where five means extremely important and one means not at all important.

Percent Responding "Extremely Important"

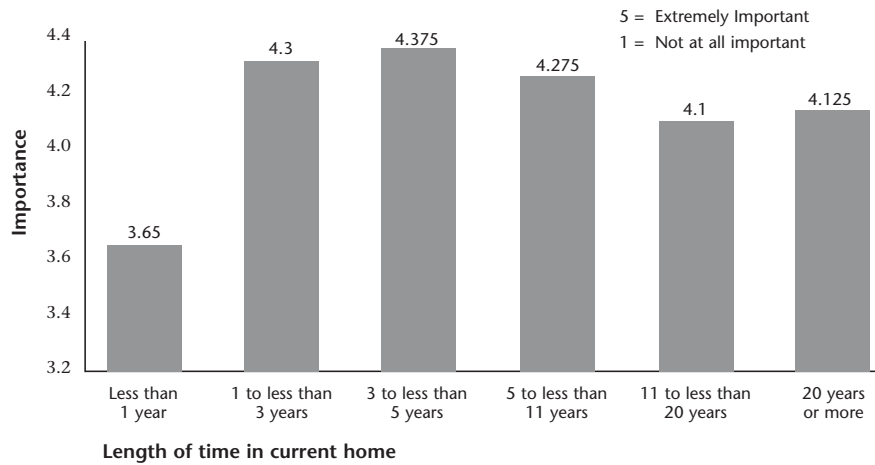


Within The Past 2 Years, Have You or Any Member of Your Household Received Services From an Occupational Therapist?

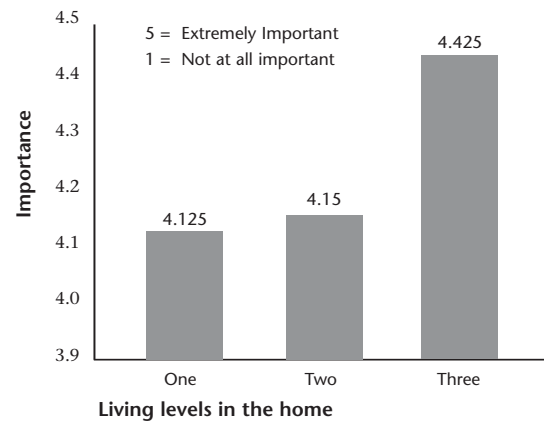


Occupational
therapy
interventions
concerning
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are seen as **reactive**
and not **preventative**.

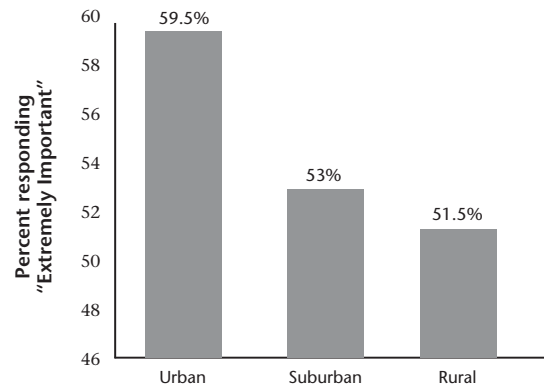
How Important Is It To Make Modifications to Your Home To Make It Safer?



Importance of Modifications by Living Levels



Importance of Modifications by Setting



It is interesting to note that more urban respondents (who generally have more knowledge of occupational therapists) consider modifications to make their homes safer extremely important compared to their suburban and rural counterparts.



Summary

Awareness of occupational therapists is low. However, occupational therapists are generally perceived correctly, albeit this perception overlaps significantly with less well-trained health care workers. This pattern is not shared with physical therapists.

The Gallup Recommendations

- The image of occupational therapists needs to be defined by their training and professional knowledge. This is necessary to distinguish occupational therapists from home health aides and nursing assistants.
- Proactive use of occupational therapists should be promoted to help
 - reduce health care costs to families,
 - increase the quality of life for independent older Americans, and
 - prevent accidents in the home.
- This will further serve to define and identify occupational therapists as essential and important healthcare professionals having both reactive and proactive solutions to promoting independent living.
- Outreach efforts to both the well-elderly and their families should seek to identify occupational therapy services with independent living. The proactive offerings of occupational therapists can help accomplish this.



The image of occupational therapists

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Methodology

- Outbound phone random digit dialing using a 5-by-5 call design
This allows for a statistically representative sampling of households throughout the United States. The confidence level is +/- 4.4%
- Field period March 13–April 14, 2003
- Sample frame consisted of 500 adults age 60 or older living in households in the USA, including Hawaii and Alaska
- Incidence: 22%
- Completion rate: 81%
- Response rate: 22%
- Respondent: The person in the household who is responsible for making decisions about health care.

Action Implications

The findings suggest a three-pronged strategy.

Follow-up awareness and education actions will need to focus on older adults and caregivers; on organizations, such as home health agencies that make referrals for occupational therapy services; and on occupational therapy practitioners themselves.

The findings and recommendations from the Gallup Organization suggest a potential strategy for broadening awareness of the role that occupational therapy can play in enhancing the quality of life for independent-living older adults.

The findings suggest a three-pronged strategy. Follow-up awareness and education actions will need to focus on **older adults and caregivers**; on **organizations**, such as home health agencies that make referrals for occupational therapy services; and on **occupational therapy practitioners** themselves, empowering them to clearly convey their value and leadership in serving this population.

Suggested actions include:

- Target caregivers and older adults with consumer-oriented messages and guidelines about the important role occupational therapy can play in maintaining independence, self-care, and safety
- Develop more robust partnerships with service organizations for the aging and providers at both the national and community-based levels
- Provide occupational therapy practitioners with communication tools that make it clear how the specific service being delivered to clients connects with the larger goal of helping individuals successfully age in place



The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy

Background

The capacity of occupational therapy practitioners to serve societal needs related to daily function and social participation has never been greater. So too, the need for public awareness of these life-enhancing services.

As part of a deliberate, long-term strategy to raise awareness about occupational therapy throughout society and within the profession's various publics, The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy was created by AOTA in 2002.

In response to members' highest priority, The Fund offers a tax-advantaged venue for donations and other support with the goal of creating ongoing resources to support programs that build recognition for occupational therapy among consumers and other stakeholder groups. Over time, The Fund will support a sustained awareness effort that will have lasting impact on the success of the profession and its benefits to society.

At the center of its work, The Fund supports the AOTA vision: The contributions of occupational therapy to health, wellness, productivity, and the quality of life are widely used, understood, and valued by society.

The Fund's Vision Statement

The Fund to Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy facilitates society's understanding of and demand for occupational therapy and the profession's capacity to bring its virtues to more people in existing and future practice environments.

The Fund's Goals

1. To foster greater public understanding, availability, and use of occupational therapy services through targeted education, research, and professional development activities.
2. To foster the profession's attractiveness as a career choice, the demand for services, and the capacity of practitioners to provide valued benefits in a broad range of settings, including existing and future practice environments.
3. To carry out effective resource-development activities that foster The Fund's continuing viability and capacity to be self-sustaining.



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Affinity Group Services
a service of Seabury & Smith

Marsh Affinity Group Services commends The Fund
on its vision to raise awareness of occupational therapy.

