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TEXAS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION, INC.

1106 CLAYTON LANE, SUITE 516W • AUSTIN, TEXAS 78723 • PHONE 512-454-TOTA (8682) • FAX 512-450-1777

Representative Susan King
Health Care Education and Training Select Committee
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78768

Dear Chairwoman King:

On behalf of the members of the Texas Occupational Therapy Association and our patients, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment regarding important issues related to the education and training of occupational therapists. This testimony will address three areas: an overview of the profession, occupational therapy in Texas, and ways to support the education of occupational therapists in Texas.

Overview of Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapists (OTs) are health professionals who work with people to develop their ability to do the activities they need and want to do everyday, or their *occupations*. This may include self-care tasks such as dressing, bathing, toileting, or feeding oneself; work or school related tasks such as handwriting, using a computer, or following a schedule; or leisure or social activities such as performing hobbies, attending social functions, or enjoying family events. In other words, OTs help people be able to do things that allow us to take care of ourselves, be productive, and contribute to a meaningful life.

OTs work with people across the lifespan – from neonates and infants to the elderly – who have sustained an injury or illness, or who have been diagnosed with a developmental, physical, or mental condition. OTs provide services in a multitude of settings, including acute care hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, outpatient clinics, long term care facilities, mental health facilities, early intervention programs, schools, as well as in community settings or people's homes. OTs may work with a person who has had a stroke learn techniques to dress himself so he may return home; or an infant who was born prematurely learn how to suck from a bottle to develop her nursing skills; or a student with autism develop strategies to be able stay engaged for an entire class period.

There are two levels of licensed providers of occupational therapy services. An occupational therapy assistant is a person who is a high school graduate who has achieved an associate's degree from an occupational therapy assistant program. An occupational therapy assistant provides treatment and intervention to patients and clients under the direction of a licensed occupational therapist. An occupational therapist has achieved a master's degree in occupational therapy. Most occupational therapy education programs require applicants to have earned a bachelor's degree and have completed a

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concentration of prerequisite courses in biological sciences and social sciences prior to being considered for admission to the program.

All occupational therapy education programs are accredited by the national accrediting body, the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE). There are currently 14 accredited occupational therapy assistant education programs in Texas, whereas there are six accredited occupational therapy education programs all of which are at public universities across the state.

As with many of the health professions, education in occupational therapy is rigorous and consists of class-based coursework, hands-on lab courses, and clinical training. This type of education requires a high degree of faculty involvement and mentoring. Consequently, program space has to be limited to ensure that students are receiving a high-quality education that prepares them to be skilled practitioners. Due to a selective admissions process and the fact that occupational therapy is a very desirable profession, the admissions process at all programs in Texas is extremely competitive. It is not uncommon for programs to have an acceptance rate of 10 -15% of applicants.

After a person successfully completes an occupational therapy education program including all course work and clinical work, he or she must successfully pass a national certification exam to enter practice. Practicing OTs in Texas must also maintain state licensure which is regulated by the Texas Board of Occupational Therapy Examiners (TBOTE). There are currently 13,000 licensed occupational therapists in Texas.

Occupational Therapy in Texas

As it is nationally, the employment outlook for occupational therapy in Texas is very strong. Figures from the Texas Workforce Commission and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board indicate the projected job growth for a ten year period through 2020 to be 35% for occupational therapists.

This has two implications in Texas. First, it means that jobs for OTs are available in most practice settings and locations across the state. Consequently, it means your constituents who pursue a career in education are nearly guaranteed employment in their setting of choice upon graduation. The demand for OTs also results in strong salaries. OTs in your communities will have high employment rates, contributing to the economic stability of your communities.

However, the high demand for OTs and competitive salaries also means that many areas in Texas are underserved. Not surprisingly, it is easier to attract OTs to large urban areas with robust medical and practice centers. However, communities in west Texas, in the

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Rio Grande Valley, and along the borders historically have more difficulty attracting and then retaining OT practitioners. This means that the health and therapeutic needs of Texas children and adults in many communities are not being sufficiently met.

Support for Occupational Therapy Education

There are three distinct ways the Texas legislature could support the education of OTs:

Support for occupational therapy education programs in the state

Shrinking state contributions to higher education over the past few years continue to pose increasing challenges in delivering high-quality, high intensity education programs as required in the health professions. Restoration of funding for health profession education programs will ensure continued quality education and will be the only way programs have an opportunity to expand or grow.

Support for students pursuing education in occupational therapy

Pursuing a master's degree is an expensive endeavor, only made more challenging for students as a result of eroding state support which has resulted in substantial increases in tuition. For instance, at UT Health Science Center at San Antonio, credit hour cost for tuition has risen from \$86 in 2003 to \$176 in 2014. Therefore, students who enter occupational therapy education programs would truly benefit from financial support either in the form of tuition assistance or loan forgiveness, particularly if they choose to practice in an underserved area.

Support for faculty in occupational therapy education

The accreditation requirements state that the majority of faculty in occupational therapy education programs possess a doctoral degree, so faculty in occupational therapy education programs are typically experienced OT practitioners who have pursued advanced degrees. As in many education programs, the occupational therapy faculty in the state are aging so programs have the challenge of recruiting and retaining faculty from a very small pool of qualified individuals. Although there are many benefits and rewards in teaching, low faculty salaries often make it difficult to attract a highly experienced and qualified person. Increased support designated for faculty salaries in occupational therapy education or support to pursue doctoral education would be extremely beneficial.

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Again, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Occupational therapy is a vital profession that serves to meet health and therapeutic needs of children and adults in Texas. Support from the Texas legislature will not only benefit your constituents who pursue this profession, but also citizens in your community who need occupational therapy services. Please contact Mary Hennigan, Executive Director of the Texas Occupational Therapy Association at mary@tota.org or 214-384-8834 for more information.

Sincerely,

Bridgett Piernik-Yoder, OTR, PhD

Assistant Professor

University of Texas Health Science Center San Antonio

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