



Occupational Therapists Improve Lives, Save Money, Support Accessibility



BILL C-81, An Act to ensure a barrier-free Canada

Submitted to the Standing Committee on on Human Resources,
Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA)

From: The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, www.caot.ca



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Executive Summary

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT), as the national voice of over 17,000 occupational therapists in Canada, is pleased to submit a brief to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA) regarding its study of Bill C-81, an Act to ensure a barrier-free Canada.

Occupational therapists are experts in removing barriers to participation in daily life and assisting people in living life to the fullest. They prevent and solve problems that interfere with a person's ability to take care of themselves, engage in leisure activities, go to work, run errands and participate in the community. Occupational therapists deliver evidence-based solutions that are both clinically and cost-effective, improving health and wellness outcomes, by applying a unique mix of skills that address:

- the whole person – their physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive abilities and their environment,
- all age groups,
- both prevention and treatment,
- care in numerous settings – home, community, institutions, schools, industry, business and government.

CAOT recognizes the importance of creating a barrier-free Canada and believes that occupational therapists have a key role in achieving the goals of the Act. CAOT is pleased to put forward recommendations to support HUMA in its study of Bill C-81:

Recommendations

1. Government of Canada includes occupational therapy services as part of its Extended Health Benefits

The Conference Board of Canada (2013) estimates that middle class, middle aged Canadians between the ages of 45 to 64 had the highest absenteeism rates from their workplace, between 10 to 13 days. Some of the contributing factors include organizational influences such as working conditions, and environment. Absenteeism (9.3 days in the private sector and 12.9 days in the public sector) is costing our economy \$16.6B annually.



Occupational therapists:

- identify and address barriers in the workplace proactively, with prevention as the aim,
- work with individuals and employers collaboratively, in workplace settings, to complete comprehensive assessments which costs as little as \$500 to \$1000 per employee,
- tailor interventions to meet the individual's specific needs while taking into account their environment (workplace), and
- reduce the burden of absenteeism by facilitating timely return to work after illness or injury.

Presently, occupational therapy services are not covered by the majority of extended health benefit plans for employees, including over 258,000 federal public servants. Without coverage, individual workers may not enlist the services of an occupational therapist due to out-of-pocket expense. Doctors and other health professionals may not refer their patients to occupational therapy knowing there may be a financial implication. This lack of coverage means that employees miss out on a host of practical return-to-work strategies and interventions that directly address barriers that impede participation in the workforce.

As the largest employer in Canada, the Government of Canada should lead by example and provide comprehensive employee health benefits that recognize the range of therapies and interventions available, including occupational therapy, which directly contributes to removing barriers in the workplace.

The federal public service can serve as a model for Canadian employers to encourage inclusion of occupational therapy services in its benefit plans, leading to decreased absenteeism, increased productivity as well as workplace health and wellness.

2. Government of Canada supports the role of occupational therapists in making built environments accessible and barrier-free

Presently, the state of federally-administered building and housing stock in need of repairs and retrofits is in dire condition, with 5596 buildings in poor condition, and 1025 buildings registering as critical. The 2016 Census data also pointed to the housing conditions of Indigenous people as being particularly critical, with one-quarter (26.2%) of Inuit, 24.2% of First Nations people and 11.3% of Métis living in a dwelling that was in need of major repairs.

The ambitious goals set out in National Housing Strategy, including 20% of new housing units that must meet accessibility standards and be deemed as barrier-free, is an opportunity to assess needed repairs or retrofits through an accessibility lens, and to build in elements of universal design that optimize an individual's functioning in their physical environment.



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According to a study by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), universal design elements can be affordably included in the design of new homes. The cost of including 75% of the required accessibility features in new homes is **less than \$500 per home**.

Occupational therapists have a unique understanding of how individuals function in their living and working environments and can collaborate with design/renovation professionals to implement universal design elements into built environments, making it possible for people with a wide range of cognitive, physical and functional capacities to participate in daily life without impediment.

Occupational therapists can work with the proposed Canadian Accessibility Standards Development Organization (CASDO) and bring clinical expertise to informing standard development that promotes the understanding of the relationship between engagement in healthy and accessible environments, and the use of universal design principle to remove barriers in the home and workplace.

CAOT recommends that the Government of Canada allocate funding for inclusion of occupational therapists on teams that undertake repairs and renovations of existing built environments under federal jurisdiction, and in the construction of new buildings, to ensure adherence to universal design.

Conclusion

Given their expertise in making built environment accessible, and low-cost, high impact solutions to workplace participation, occupational therapists can partner with Government to meet the goals of Bill C-81.

Targeted changes to Government of Canada workplace Extended Health Benefits to include occupational therapy, as well as earmarking funding for occupational therapists to be included on teams that repair or build federally-administered buildings and housing stock, will provide results for a more accessible, barrier-free Canada.

About CAOT

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) is the national organization that supports the more than 17,000 occupational therapists who work or study in Canada. CAOT's mission is to advance excellence in occupational therapy, and its vision is that occupational therapy is valued and accessible across Canada. CAOT provides products, services and learning opportunities that assist occupational therapists in achieving excellence in their professional



practice. Additionally, CAOT provides leadership in the development and promotion of the occupational therapy profession in Canada and internationally.

For more information please contact CAOT's Director of Government Affairs and Policy, Havelin Anand, at hanand@caot.ca or at 613-523-2268 ext.: 230/ 1-800-434-2268.

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