

Successful Lives by Design

Molly V. Strzelecki

If you could design an ideal model of bringing occupational therapy to your community, what would that model look like? First, you need to take stock of your community and its needs. The question then becomes how to best use occupational therapy to help meet those needs.

For Terry Olivas-De La O, COTA/C, and Vera Arzaga Rubio, MPH, CHES, OTR/L, co-founders of Therapy Designs in Monrovia, California, using occupational therapy as the foundation of their company is key. These two Latina women had a vision of creating a multi-cultural organization that addressed the mind, body, and spiritual issues of those they served. The company focuses on working with at-risk youth, as well as designs successful empowerment programs for survivors of domestic violence, addressing the needs of those in the foster care system, and developing culturally centered conferences for young Latino men, fathers, and mentors.

"Often our Hispanic and African-American communities do not adequately respond to 'mental health services' and need guidance in being part of their children's lives in productive ways that at the same time celebrate their culture," Olivas-De La O explains.

The central concept of Therapy Designs is "to provide services through the eyes of occupational therapy practitioners but to add our unique skills and talents outside of occupational therapy to deliver lasting results to our clients," Rubio notes.

Therapy Designs specializes in providing occupational therapy lifestyle programs, with a focus on areas like anger management, written and verbal communication skills, meal preparation, stress management, and personal identity management, among others. Additionally, the programs offer clients

If you could design an ideal model of bringing occupational therapy to your community, what would that model look like?

case management, housing and social services referrals, cultural awareness, and other services under its umbrella.

"Therapy Designs pulls in various segments of the community to make change occur," Rubio explains. "Through increasing political awareness of occupational therapy services and its practitioners, engaging media coverage to educate the public, collaborating with other agencies, and engaging families and concerned citizens, it is the catalyst in bringing everyone in to bring about positive changes in our families and children."

"Occupational therapy is the foundation of all that we do," Rubio adds. "We can provide more traditional occupational therapy services from a mental health perspective, but also use what we know and love about occupational therapy to enhance other services such as the Latino Young Men's Conference and our Wellness services."

DESIGNING A FUTURE

"We are passionate about collaborative efforts to impact a client on many levels and aid in lasting results," Rubio says.

In October 2005, Therapy Designs held the first Latino Young Men's

Conference, a day of promoting positive living for young Latino men through occupational therapy and life redesign. Olivas-De La O and Rubio asked prominent male Latino figures within their community to talk with the young men at the conference about roadblocks that can occur, and how to overcome these challenges to lead successful and healthy lives.

Olivas-De La O and Rubio believe it is critical to involve the community and their consumers in planning and implementing their conferences. Therefore, the conference also helped community members to understand not only what occupational therapy is and how it affects everyday life, but also its importance to many aspects of life in Hispanic communities. For example, Jose Mayorquin is an administrative assistant and diversity and community relations producer for KABC 7 TV in Los Angeles. He worked with both Rubio and Olivas-De La O for the Conference, and has been invited by Therapy Designs to chair the 2006 event, in addition to becoming an unofficial mentor to one of Therapy Design's clients, through his involvement with the company.

"There is a lot of wasted potential in Latino neighborhoods, particularly among the boys and men, who drop out of school and become involved in questionable activities at a disproportionate rate," Mayorquin says. "When I was approached by Therapy Designs, I was inspired by their 'just go out and do it!' attitude and the unique cultural and occupational therapy perspective. I was on board, without hesitation."

"I knew nothing about occupational therapy coming in to this," he continues. "But the more I was exposed to occupational therapy, the more I realized it was in line with a lot of my philosophies and goals: leading healthy,

happy, productive lives. The only way to achieve that is to approach things in a holistic way, incorporating your everyday activities with family, community, and work."

Response to this unique conference has been positive, and Olivas-De La O and Rubio received extensive print and media coverage praising their efforts. And, too, responses from the young men involved in the conference were encouraging. Currently, Therapy Designs is completing an outcomes study of the conference, as many organizations, media, and political leaders at both state and national levels are asking for evidence of the programs' efficiency and effectiveness.

"One of the main reasons I got involved with the conference was because of the opportunity to make a difference in the Latino community," says Luis, a speaker at the conference (who is now being mentored by Mayorquin). "It was an opportunity where I could show what teenagers or young men need from their parents. Young men need support, love, affection, communication, and understanding from their parents. It is important to show our community that there are people out there who care about them and want them to succeed."

As Therapy Designs heads into the future, Rubio and Olivas-De La O continue to expand the awareness of what occupational therapy can do for youth to succeed in life.

"I would like to see our conference go national," Olivas-De La O says. "I would like to see the elimination of child abuse and domestic violence. As we practice occupational therapy lifestyle programs, this is possible as more occupational therapy practitioners get involved."

"Occupational therapy practitioners bring a holistic approach that allows them to view many levels to improve the lives of individuals in need of change," Rubio says. "Occupational therapy has the power to change lives in powerful and lasting ways."

"[Occupational therapy practitioners] must be culturally competent first and foremost, and not only book-learned," Olivas-De La O notes. "Also, occupational therapy practitioners, researchers, and educators must have a healthy level of courage to go outside their comfort levels to advocate and to work in nontraditional settings. If we do not go into our neighborhoods, many will not receive the expertise

PRACTICE PERKS

Employment and Mental Health

Cindy Barrows

Q: I am an occupational therapist working in a partial hospital for clients with serious mental illness. I spend the majority of my time running therapeutic activity groups with a focus on activities of daily living, work, and leisure. One of my clients who has schizophrenia wants to find employment. The clinical team is not in support of this plan, identifying the client's persistent psychotic symptoms as a barrier to employment. I disagree, given my observations of the client in groups. He is able to concentrate, follow directions, ask questions, and learn. How do I advocate for him?

A: Your question raises issues about the role of occupational therapy in assisting clients with serious and persistent mental illness to acquire employment. Often, the emphasis of treatment in a partial hospital is on symptom reduction, and patient length of stay is brief. Supporting a person's participation in valued occupations, such as work, may not be a primary focus of treatment. There also is an assumption that people experiencing psychiatric symptoms are not ready for employment. This is not always the case.¹

It is clear from your question that your approach is client centered and that clinical observation is a component of your evaluation. Consider the information gained from the occupational profile as a critical part of your evaluation process. This will give you information about the client's needs and direct you in deciding what areas of occupational performance to further assess.² The *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process*² is a valuable reference to guide you in this process.

The first step in advocating for your client is to clarify your role on the team and specify how you can contribute to an evaluation of work readiness. The American Occupational Therapy Association's document *Occupational Therapy*

of our service. Both Vera and I believe we have to go to our communities, not wait for people to come to our office. We are honored each day when we are invited into homes, community centers, and to work with other organizations, which is

AOTA Commission on Practice

Services in Facilitating Work Performance describes the role of occupational therapy in "assisting people to successfully engage in work tasks and satisfactorily participate in meaningful work roles" (p. 369).³ This document, intended for external audiences, identifies evaluation and intervention as the key work-related services provided by occupational therapy practitioners.

Evaluation data may be obtained through interview, clinical observation, evaluation of performance skills and patterns, job analysis, and contextual factors. The range of intervention strategies include consultation, prevention, restoration, and compensatory services.³

Given the brief duration of a partial hospitalization, your occupational therapy interventions may involve referral to other agencies to assist the client in achieving his employment goal. It will be important to develop collaborative relationships with vocational rehabilitation counselors and other community rehabilitation and recovery programs that support employment for people with psychiatric disabilities.¹

References

1. Gray, K. (2005, September). Evidence-based employment services for persons with serious mental illness. *Mental Health Special Interest Section Quarterly*, 28, 1-2.
2. American Occupational Therapy Association. (2002). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 56, 609-639.
3. American Occupational Therapy Association. (2005). Occupational therapy services in facilitating work performance. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 59, 676-679.

Cindy Barrows, MS, OTR/L, is an occupational therapy consultant for Vinlen Corporation in Boston. She consults to residential and day rehabilitation programs in the community designed for people with serious and persistent mental illness. She is a current member of the Commission on Practice.

In Practice Perks, Commission on Practice (COP) members provide regular summaries of different official documents. These documents can be found in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* and in the *Reference Manual of the Official Documents of The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc.* More information about COP can be found on the AOTA Web site at www.aota.org in the Practice and Ethics section.

new and exciting in addressing the needs of our Hispanic and African-American communities." ■

Molly V. Strzelecki is the associate editor of *OT Practice*.