

# Occupational Therapy as a Statutory Service in the Municipal Health Service Act

World Federation of Occupational Therapists  
Innovation Change Agency Narrative



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## Abstract

The Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapists works to ensure that all residents experiencing health challenges with activity and participation are offered occupational therapy services to facilitate their resources for handling everyday life. To fulfil this aim, the Association has worked systematically and politically to include occupational therapy services in the Municipal Health Service Act.

## Location/Region of the World

Norway

## Purpose

To ensure that all residents of Norway experiencing health challenges with activity and participation are provided occupational therapy services to facilitate their own resources for handling their everyday life by including occupational therapy services in the Municipal Health Service Act.

## Background

The Municipal Health Service Act was implemented in 1984. The first edition of this law included a list of professions that were statutory in all municipalities. This list did not include occupational therapy, as the Department of Health at that time claimed that there were not enough occupational therapists in Norway to meet such a statutory requirement.

The law was revised in 2012, and the list of professions was no longer included; only General Practitioners (GPs) were statutory in the revised edition. The statutory aspects of the law were linked to the type of services; examples include public health, antenatal care, acute health care, home care, and rehabilitation. As no professions, apart from GPs, were mentioned, the municipalities were given the responsibility of employing the type of professions needed. The Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapists approved of this approach. There are differences between the municipalities regarding age and population numbers; for example, some municipalities might require more midwives than others.

In the revision, enacted in 2015, the government proposed a suggestion to reinclude a list of statutory professions. This proposal was presented in the Primary Health Service Report [Meld. St. 26 (2014-2015)]. Once again, the list did not include occupational therapists! This was the starting point for working towards ensuring that occupational therapy was included as a statutory service in the Municipal Health Service Act.

## Rationale

Services not included in the Municipal Health Service Act are not prioritized in the budgets, and the municipalities will employ other professions.

## Steps of the Process and Timeline for Change

Important steps in the process	Date and duration	Persons involved
1. A proposal on the need to include occupational therapy was sent to the Health and Care Committee in the Norwegian Parliament. The focus was on occupational therapists as change agents for individuals, groups, and the society, as agents to free up resources for persons and in society.	The entire process lasted from 2015-2020	Examples: 1. The president of the Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapy  2. The general secretary and other employees at of Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapy  3. Several user organisations (e.g., people with disabilities, senior citizens).  4. Collaboration with UNIO (the umbrella union for the Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapists and many other groups).
2. A verbal presentation was made to the Health and Care Committee in the Norwegian Parliament.		
3. Individual meetings were arranged with representatives of several of the political parties in the Parliament, including those in power and those in opposition. In preparation for the meetings, we studied their policies, to ensure we had a common view of the main health challenges; we developed solutions to match each party's focus.		
4. All written and oral arguments were based on the "Core competencies of Occupational Therapists". This documents occupational therapy as a solution to the health challenges and communicates the assessment, measures and evidence behind occupational therapy related to the individual, to the chosen activity, to the environment and to the interaction between these three approaches. ( <a href="https://ergoterapeutene.org/ergoterapi/">https://ergoterapeutene.org/ergoterapi/</a> )		
5. Effectively communicating about occupational therapy has been a priority of the Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapy for several years, and includes words, pictures, colours, and a model.		

## Critical Relationships, Voices, and Collaboration

The political work was carried out by the president of the Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapists. The planning and development of the arguments were carried out by several persons in the Association, with the vice-president, the general secretary and the communication coordinator playing vital roles. The Association Board of Directors was kept informed and involved as well.

Regarding the collaboration activities, as noted by the president in his blog (October 2015):

*I am equally grateful to the user organizations that have always been on our side and provided solid support: Disabled People's Joint Organization, the Norwegian Disability Association and Young People with Disabilities. Hearing their reasoning at the hearing in the Parliaments Health and Care Committee made me proud to be an occupational therapist.*

## Outcomes

The Norwegian Association of Occupational Therapists received full support for the statutory inclusion of occupational therapy in the municipalities from four of the parties in the Parliament, which constituted a majority even before the other parties stated their position.

Since, 1 January 2020, occupational therapy is a statutory service in the Municipal Health Service Act.

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- Planning and development of arguments have been essential as has been the support of the Board of Directors and user organisations. The arguments must be based on those problems that need to be solved. All along, the focus has been on the health challenges being experienced in Norway, and how occupational therapists have an essential role to play in meeting these challenges.
- Key terms include the following: aging population; the need for more people to live in their own home longer; and the need to empower persons to take care of themselves longer. These goals cannot be achieved without occupational therapists. The municipalities and the residents need a profession that asks: *What matters to you?* Occupational therapists have the knowledge and tools to support the individual to reach her or his goal. Too many professions ask: *What is the matter?* Economic realities and evolving demographics make it impossible to respond effectively to all health challenges the way we have done over the years. Many citizens must learn to live with their health challenges, in an inclusive society.

- The focus has also been on occupational therapists' knowledge about universal design, an inclusive society, participation with health challenges in mental health, and on work rehabilitation.
- Communicating all these health-political topics diplomatically in an evidence-based, engaging, and trustworthy manner has been an aim and one of the success factors.

Further recommendations include:

- Work as a team in developing arguments.
- Verify the politicians' perspectives and priorities.
- Use evidence-based arguments.
- Identify your supporters.
- Written papers aimed at politicians should not exceed two pages, to better ensure that they are read.

### Expression of Thanks for Project Support

- We are grateful to the user organizations that have always been on our side and provided solid support: Disabled People's Joint Organization, the Norwegian Disability Association and Young People with Disabilities. Thanks also for the support of UNIO.
- Thanks to the researchers who assisted in gathering arguments on the effect and cost benefit of occupational therapy.
- The Board on Professional Ethics (an elected group within the Professional Association) was engaged. Occupational therapists have made the most of their political connections.

### Contact details

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