

30 July 2020

Mr Terry Mills
Parliamentary Leader Territory Alliance
2 Halkitis Court Coconut Grove NT 0810

By email: Terry.Mills@territoryalliance.org

Dear Mr Mills

Re: Northern Territory Election

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) is seeking information and undertakings from your party regarding issues of concern to our members and the communities they serve. OTA is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. As of March 2020, there were approximately 200 registered occupational therapists working across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in the Northern Territory.

Occupational therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to support their clients to engage in meaningful and productive activities. They provide services such as physical and mental health therapy, vocational rehabilitation services, assistive technology prescription, home modifications, chronic disease management, as well as key supports and services for clients. They work in such key agencies as the Departments of Education and Health, Territory Families, Housing and WorkSafe NT.

Your response to this correspondence will be made available to our members in order that they can make an informed decision at the ballot box on 22 August 2020. Please be assured that similar correspondence has been sent to the other major parties, and their responses will also be made available to our members.

The Territory government has demonstrated its' recognition of the value of occupational therapists via recently established roles in the Department of Education, Territory Families and the Forensic Court Liaison. Occupational therapists working in the private and non-government sector have access to *The Territory Incentives Program (New Territorian Relocation Bonus, Local Spending Incentive, Five Year Retention Bonus)*, the *Primary Health Network Bursary* (enabling non-government and private health professionals to access professional development) and *Business Growth Programs* via the Department of Trade Business and Innovation.

We ask for your party's ongoing commitment to ensuring occupational therapists' access to funding support as both clinicians and business owners.

NDIS Access

While we are aware that the management of the NDIS is primarily a federal concern, problems with the scheme are adversely affecting Territorians' capacity to access support they require in the education, health and housing systems. According to the NDIS Quarterly Report (31/03/2020), there were 3124 active NDIS participants in the NT, with another 73 coming under the Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) category. With regard to services available to NDIS participants, much of the NT is considered a thin market which the NDIS describes 'as inadequate service availability resulting in participants' needs not being met'.

Despite funding being available in many cases, there is an underspend of NDIS plan funds due to the limited availability of providers, including occupational therapists. Even in Darwin, there is currently a six month wait for children to access paediatric occupational therapy services. Remotely, some children and adults are not even on a wait list despite having an active plan. Additional occupational therapy staffing to assist administrative staff who do not have training in interpreting the clinical reports provided to them, would reduce the long-term impact of this lack of paediatric therapies and supports.

The withdrawal of the NT Government from the provision of direct disability supports has resulted in the slow introduction and/or growth of private providers of occupational therapy services. However, these providers need NT government support if their businesses are to prove sustainable. Such support should aim to increase the number of occupational therapists available to complete NDIS assessments. Significantly, the Territory would directly benefit from having more people registered on the NDIS with appropriate plans; there would be positive economic knock on effects in the form of increased demand across a range of businesses providing transport, home modifications, private allied health, and community integration services.

If elected to government, what will your party do to help ensure the growth and sustainability of occupational therapy businesses in the Territory?

Workforce Shortages

Difficulties recruiting and retaining occupational therapists in the Northern Territory are being experienced across both the private and public sectors.

Mandatory registration under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) requires all occupational therapists to have access to supervision and professional development that reflects the complexities of the community in which they work. However, accessing professional development locally is difficult, with no access for the first year of Territory practice and a cap of 50% in the first five years of residence. These early years are precisely when skill development to adapt to the unique Territory context is most needed. Additionally, government departments rarely

support interstate professional learning, however specialised training programs (such as Driving Assessor, Complex Home Modifications and Lymphedema) are not able to be offered in the NT due to our small population ratios.

While “*Boundless Possible*” incentives are available to those working outside the government sector, there are few incentives to support occupational therapists to relocate. There are also very few of the senior positions that might keep experienced occupational therapists (and their skills) in the

Territory to ensure complex service planning is underpinned by high level clinical reasoning and the oversight of new graduates.

The Department of Home Affairs continues to list occupational therapists on the skills shortages list across the country. The growth of private occupational therapist and non-government organisations is vital to sustain the capacity to meet demand for professional supervision, professional development and student placement numbers. OTA supports the planned introduction of Charles Darwin University’s Occupational Therapy program in 2022, but with a caveat regarding the limited capacity of NT Government services to accommodate student placements.

If elected to government, what will your party do to encourage the recruitment and retention of occupational therapists in the Territory, and to ensure appropriate professional support for less experienced clinicians?

Home Modifications/Housing

The establishment of an occupational therapist role within Territory Housing would improve communication between external therapists and enhance program outcomes. It would enable strategic decision making to ensure the modification of homes is completed with appropriate consideration to factors such as cost, longevity and a positive outcome for residents. Without this internal position at Housing, occupational therapists who complete these reports (including those employed by the Department of Health, and the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, and those privately funded through the NDIS or Commonwealth Home Care Packages) often encounter significant delays and/or inappropriate approvals, or do not receive any feedback at all.

There may be many contributing factors to why a housing modification recommendation may or may not be completed, however there are many anecdotal reports of people waiting years for modifications to be completed. People are often referred multiple times for the same issue without any suitable outcome. Because of these significant delays in approvals, often the originally proposed modification is no longer suitable. These delays place residents at a risk, and can result in a range of increased costs for both providers and Housing. Newly arrived and fly-in-fly-out occupational therapists are often unaware of Territory unique contextual constraints and would greatly benefit from an internal qualified Housing advisor. There have also been requests from Housing to complete

joint visits to remote communities to plan for modifications. However, due to funding limitations, many consultant occupational therapy services cannot provide this.

Having an internal occupational therapy role in Housing would overcome these problems, to the considerable benefit of the Housing budget and those vulnerable Territorians wishing to remain safely in their homes.

If elected to government, will your party establish an internal occupational therapy role within Territory Housing?

Mental Health

Further funding is needed to increase occupation focused services in relation to recovery from drug misuse, domestic violence, and mental health episodes across the Territory. The Alice Springs mental health service, for example, has very limited numbers of clinicians despite high mental health needs across trauma, depression, occupational deprivation and schizophrenia. With this shortage of professional roles there is virtually no capacity to train allied health therapists, resulting in an inadequate knowledge base among support workers. OTA supports the aim of embedding a 'recovery partners model' rather than merely continuing the cycle of repeat services with suboptimal outcomes.

If elected to government, what will your party do to improve mental health services in the Territory and, specifically, what will you do to ensure adequate numbers of mental health professionals, including occupational therapists?

A constructive approach across the Territory to funding occupational therapy roles, professional development and service capability will cut down on wasted expenditure, improve outcomes for residents and minimise negative knock-on effects on people's health, safety, and wellbeing.

Thank you in anticipation of your response. We would be happy to meet and discuss some of the above issues once the election has been contested. To ensure our members have adequate time to consider the responses of all parties to this correspondence, we ask that we receive your reply by Thursday, 13 August 2020.

Yours sincerely,



MIRIAM HOBSON
Manager SA / NT