

Queensland Greens
State Director
PO Box 2335
Milton QLD 4064

By email: director@qld.greens.org.au

Re: 2020 Queensland State Election

5th October 2020

Dear Ms Carra,

I write to you in your capacity as director of the Queensland Greens' 2020 state election campaign.

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) is seeking information and undertakings from your party on 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. More than 4,700 occupational therapists currently work across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in Queensland.

Occupational therapists are key allied health professionals who work with people and communities to overcome limitations to everyday living caused by such things as injury or illness, psychological or emotional difficulties, developmental delay, or the effects of ageing. Occupational therapists work in a diverse range of practice settings including acute hospitals, rehabilitation settings, community and primary health, chronic disease self-management, integrated mental health, education, driver assessment, paediatrics and aged care.

Your response to this correspondence will be made available to our members so that they can make an informed decision at the ballot box on 31 October. Please be assured that similar correspondence with the other major parties contesting the election will also be made available to our members.

Public health challenges

Given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare will no doubt be a key consideration for voters this election. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment of unprecedented isolation and uncertainty, and the long-term physical and psychological effects of the virus, and the measures to address it, are not yet fully understood.

As we deal with the immediate challenge of containing the virus, occupational therapists are providing vital services that reduce hospital admission and readmissions and improve transitional outcomes. In a hospital setting, occupational therapists provide care coordination, case management, transition services including discharge planning, and onward referral to relevant services. Given their dynamic skills set, many occupational therapists have been redeployed to assist across various hospital departments. Occupational therapists also provide essential rehabilitation and community care services that are vital to reduce strain on hospital resources.

We urge your party to maintain funding for occupational therapy expertise in this setting and ensure these are not diluted to general roles.

As communities attempt to re-engage, lasting social isolation, loneliness and loss of connections continue to threaten mental health, contributing to an increased risk of mental illness and suicide. There is clearly a pressing need for more mental health professionals to support these increasing demands and we welcome the state Government's recent commitment to a further \$46.5 million to support community mental health initiatives.

Occupational therapists play an important role in mental health care and work across the full spectrum of mental health. While occupational therapists who work in mental health also implement many of the same psychological therapies as other professions, they are uniquely skilled in using 'occupation' to improve wellbeing. Occupational therapists promote health, wellbeing, and recovery through enabling clients to engage in personally meaningful and relevant activities and roles in life. Now, more than ever, occupational therapists are needed in our communities.

Regrettably, the role of occupational therapy in mental health care is currently undervalued by the Queensland Government. Support is lacking for new mental health occupational therapists entering the profession and existing practitioners are overwhelmed by client demands, with many private mental health occupational therapists reporting they have been forced to stop taking on new referrals. This has been compounded since the introduction of the NDIS and will continue to be an issue as new reforms amplify demand, such as reforms proposed to introduce presumptive workers' compensation for first responders and eligible employees who are diagnosed with PTSD.

The Queensland Government has made significant investments in mental health and suicide prevention. To ensure an incoming Government can deliver on these investments it is critical that significant funding is directed to support front line mental health professionals. How will your party invest in professional support and mentorship for mental health occupational therapists, ensuring the ongoing availability of their expertise to those who need it most?

Drastic action is necessary to sustain occupational therapy services for Queensland veterans

While OTA is aware that services for veterans are funded and managed federally, through the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), problems with existing arrangements are adversely affecting Queensland veterans.

Given the demands of military service, both physical and mental, a sizeable proportion of Australian veterans require the services of occupational therapists—clinicians who help our veterans participate in meaningful and productive activities. While occupational therapists derive enormous professional satisfaction from working with veterans and war widows, their work has become increasingly difficult to sustain. This is because remuneration for such work has, in effect, been frozen for nearly twenty years by successive Australian governments. Those experienced occupational therapists still doing veterans work, do so at a loss; they only keep doing it out of loyalty to longstanding clients and by cross subsidies from other work.

Queensland has the largest proportion of veterans receiving support through the DVA. According to the DVA Population Projection, at December 2019, 65,164 people or 32% of total DVA clients were in Queensland. Little is known about Australia's total veteran population however recent estimates by the DVA suggest there are about 640,000 living veterans. Queensland is home to Australia's largest Air Force and Army bases as well as two major

Navy bases and we can therefore assume a significant proportion of Australia's veterans live within the North Queensland, Far North Queensland and South East Queensland regions.

Occupational therapists working in these regions are increasingly facing the difficult decision to stop taking on DVA clients. This is particularly an issue in regional towns such as Cairns where there is a large veteran population and therapists are often required to travel substantial distances to provide services such as complex home modifications. The rates payable to occupational therapists under the DVA scheme do not cover these costs and are close to half those of the rates paid under similar schemes such as the NDIS. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, occupational therapists in Far North Queensland are reporting an increase in DVA referrals which is further straining an already precarious arrangement.

In the Sunshine Coast, which has the fastest growing population of young retired servicemen and women, there is a growing need for mental health support services. Only one DVA-approved PTSD therapy program exists between Brisbane and Townsville, a distance of 1,300 kilometres. As occupational therapists face unprecedented demands for mental health treatment and support services generally, those supplied under the DVA scheme are rapidly becoming unsustainable.

Given Queensland has the highest proportion of veterans requiring DVA funded treatments and supports, OTA implores your party to escalate this to the Federal level. Immediate funding is necessary to increase occupational therapy fees in line with comparable Commonwealth schemes such as the NDIS, and state-based compensable schemes. Without an immediate increase in the fees paid to occupational therapists by the DVA, crucial occupational therapy treatments and supports for Queensland veterans will be lost.

Need for increased collaboration to support occupational therapist access to schools

Occupational therapists are an integral part of learning and support teams for students with disability and special needs in schools. They bring a unique and specialised perspective to maximising student participation and engagement in a learning environment.

In a classroom setting, occupational therapists recommend, implement and monitor services to support a student's participation at school. They help children to manage stress, regulate their emotions and behaviours, work effectively with others and handle challenges constructively. These critical skills support participation across the entire curriculum as they underpin key capabilities like engagement in learning, communication with others and completion of classroom tasks and routines.

Many children access supports through private services or other schemes such as the NDIS, however support for children at school is primarily the responsibility of Education Queensland. The NDIS funds *"therapies a family and school have agreed may be delivered during school time but are not for educational purposes"* yet in practice, occupational therapists are frequently met with resistance from school principals to access the school environment.

While Education Queensland employs approximately 80 FTE occupational therapists to support the provision of learning and reasonable adjustments in schools, collaboration with other schemes is essential to reach the 559,099 full time students enrolled in 1,241 schools across Queensland (Department of Education, August 2019).

We ask your party to direct Education Queensland to work with OTA, to develop guidelines for occupational therapist access to schools that respects both the learning and privacy of students and the rights of disability access for children.

Other Issues

OTA calls on all parties to commit to ensuring that no injured Queensland motorist will be disadvantaged by any reforms to Queensland's compulsory third party (CTP) insurance scheme.

OTA calls on all parties to ensure occupational therapy services remain sustainable under Queensland's worker's compensation scheme. Fees should be reviewed to prevent the loss of experienced occupational therapists to the NDIS and NIISQ schemes which provide greater remuneration.

The health of people in rural and remote areas should also be prioritised. OTA calls on the major parties to move forward with the establishment of an Office of Rural and Remote Health, and to develop a Queensland rural health service strategy that strengthens collaboration between both public and private services. Occupational therapists often work as 'generalists' in rural and remote communities where services are limited and difficulties recruiting health professionals are apparent. There is a need for occupational therapy roles to be formally recognised in this capacity, and for greater access to professional mentoring and support in these geographical areas, with particular focus on Indigenous health.

To ensure that our members have adequate time to consider the responses of all parties to this correspondence, we ask that your reply reach our office by 22 October 2020.

Should you wish to discuss any of the matters raised in this letter, please contact Brooke Carter, Queensland Manager on 0466102603 or brooke.carter@otaus.com.au.

Thank you in anticipation of your response.

Yours sincerely,



Brooke Carter

Queensland Divisional Manager