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Abstract

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Keywords

Role-emerging fieldwork, homelessness, non-traditional fieldwork

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to develop and evaluate student learning outcomes of a role-emerging fieldwork Level II placement in a local homeless shelter. A role-emerging fieldwork placement denotes any placement in which there is not an identified occupational therapy program or no on-site occupational therapy (OT) supervisor. The project ran from January through June 2017 at a local homeless shelter with 1 Masters of Occupational Therapy (MOT) student from a local university completing their first Level II fieldwork rotation from January through March, followed by 2 MOT students completing their second rotation from April through June. Fieldwork supervision was provided by an off-site fieldwork educator to meet the minimum Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) standard of 8 hours per week of direct supervision. Student experience was evaluated using the Fieldwork Experience Assessment Tool (FEAT) after the first week of the rotation, at midterm, and during the final week. Students reported decreased stigma towards the population, increased skills in occupational therapy practice, and improved confidence in their clinical decision making. Role-emerging fieldwork placements can provide a productive learning opportunity for selected students to explore the occupational therapy role in non-traditional settings. This paper will describe the creation of the role-emerging fieldwork project, development of student-run occupational therapy programming in a homeless shelter, student feedback regarding progress towards learning objectives, and describe student attitudes towards role-emerging fieldwork placements.

INTRODUCTION

As the profession of occupational therapy adapts to meet the changing needs of society, occupational therapy practitioners must focus on addressing social and occupational justice concerns through community-based practice (Thew, Edwards, Baptiste, & Molineux, 2011). Therefore, educational institutions must prepare students for professional practice within a variety of new settings and populations, in addition to

traditional practice settings (Overton, Clark, & Thomas, 2009). A traditional fieldwork placement is any one-to-one ratio between a student and clinical instructor within established settings (hospitals, outpatient clinics, long-term care facilities, etc.). A role-emerging placement is defined as any placement without an "established occupational therapist role or program" (Overton et al., 2009, p. 296). The student's task is to create occupational therapy programming while supervised by an off-site occupational therapist. Role-emerging fieldwork placements have gained traction as a viable option for fieldwork education due to changes to the healthcare system, development of emerging practice areas, and a need to provide students with opportunities to diversify their practice settings (Clarke, de Visser, Martin, & Sadlo, 2014).

Initially described in the 1970s, role-emerging placements have been intermittently addressed in the literature (Overton et al., 2009). The current literature available on role-emerging fieldwork focuses primarily on student perceptions with little feedback from community organizations or fieldwork educators (Clarke et al., 2014). Yet, role-emerging fieldwork placements can provide benefit to all parties involved in the student placement. The literature reports that students benefit from role-emerging fieldwork through an increase in understanding of interprofessional behaviors, communication, and clinical reasoning skills. Further, students who participate in role-emerging placements note some of the largest benefits as increased confidence, time management skills, and opportunities to engage in multidisciplinary teamwork (Clarke et al., 2014; Edwards & Thew, 2011; Prigg & Mackenzie, 2002). Community organizations note the benefits of role-emerging fieldwork include: decreases in workload for other staff when students are able to take on a caseload; opportunities to keep clinician skills current through student in-services; and greater understanding and appreciation for the value of occupational therapy interventions for their populations, which can result in some sites hiring a full-time therapist following the experience (Friedland, Polatajko, & Gage, 2001; Thew et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2007).

Totten and Pratt (2001) described an example of role-emerging fieldwork, with the creation of a fieldwork placement at a homeless shelter with off-site faculty supervision from a nearby university. During the rotation, the student developed a series of group interventions targeted at improving clients' leisure participation, social skills, and self-confidence. The student reported that the population was eager to participate in occupational therapy but noted concerns about the ability to complete continuous interventions due to temporary residency of the participants. Additionally, the authors noted that structuring formal time for fieldwork educator observation of the student and subsequent feedback was necessary for the student to feel supported throughout the placement.

Beyond the immediate benefits of role-emerging placements, occupational therapy's involvement with new populations can broaden the scope of the profession. In 2015, only 4.3% of occupational therapists reported working in community-based settings, with a separate 2.9% practicing in a mental health setting (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2015). One way to encourage therapists to work in community-based mental health settings is through fieldwork opportunities. Fieldwork

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opportunities have demonstrated a high correlation with future employment settings (Crowe & Mackenzie, 2002). Students report that positive fieldwork experiences directly related to a desire to work (or seek employment) in the treatment setting. One of the largest factors influencing fieldwork success is a fieldwork supervisor. Students report that a positive relationship with their fieldwork supervisor can improve their overall experience, making them more likely to continue to work in the practice setting (Crowe & Mackenzie, 2002). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the student-clinical instructor relationship is strong and based on critical reflection. A study conducted following a role-emerging fieldwork experience identified several key components to fieldwork supervision based on responses of students (Mulholland & Derdall, 2005). Students reported they received the most benefit from a clear definition of the occupational therapy role and their expectations, interactions with other professionals, and structured supervision (Mulholland & Derdall, 2005). Students have also reported that positive experiences and relationships with clients during fieldwork increase the likelihood of continuing to work in a specific setting (Crowe & Mackenzie, 2002). Based on the distinct need for more community-based practitioners and the correlation between fieldwork experience and practice setting, it is imperative that fieldwork opportunities are offered in new and emerging practice settings to increase service provision in these populations.

Implementation of role-emerging placements can be difficult to establish as a result of several barriers. Students and clinical instructors have reported a lack of resources within the facility, limited opportunities for supervision, increased workload for off-site supervisors, and high expectation from the agencies as challenges to the placement (Rodger et al., 2009). Additionally, many practitioners and students have noted concerns over sending inexperienced students into settings where no identified occupational therapy program exists (Thew, Hargreaves, & Cronin-Davis, 2008). Further, many practitioners are hesitant to support this type of fieldwork placement citing that limited supervision can result in a diminished professional identity and lack of necessary entry-level skills compared to traditional 1:1 fieldwork models (Dancza et al., 2013).

As healthcare undergoes rapid changes over this next decade (McLaughlin, 2017), occupational therapy practitioners must evolve and explore new venues for service delivery within the scope of practice to meet the ever-changing societal demand for holistic healthcare (AOTA, 2017a). Role-emerging fieldwork placements can provide opportunities for students to explore new and changing areas of practice, which are necessary to ensure the progress of the occupational therapy profession remains consistent with societal demand. Therefore, there is a need for continued research into this area of fieldwork to produce greater evidence and develop strategies to facilitate role-emerging fieldwork placements.

PROJECT METHODS

A Level II fieldwork placement was created at a local homeless shelter, to explore the development of an occupational therapy program for individuals who were experiencing homelessness and provide an opportunity for student experiential learning. The goal of

this project was to develop, implement, and evaluate the benefits of a role-emerging fieldwork placement providing occupational therapy services with the homeless population. Student learning needs were the predominant focus of this community-based fieldwork. It should be noted that fieldwork educator and community organization need and support was documented throughout the project but was not formally assessed.

The project was implemented at a local 98-bed overnight homeless shelter with a day services component. A partnership was developed between the fieldwork educator, the community site, and the Academic Fieldwork Coordinator (AFC) at a local university prior to the beginning of the fieldwork rotation. The purpose of this partnership was to ensure that students completing the rotation would be supported by both the academic and community-based institutions throughout the rotation. The AFC was responsible for helping the students create appropriate learning objectives that aligned with educational goals. The fieldwork educator supported the student in on-site occupational therapy services. The community organization provided the student with resources and background information regarding the population. A fieldwork contract was instituted with the employer of the occupational therapist who acted as fieldwork educator for this experience. The fieldwork educator was employed as the Clinical Director at the agency that managed the homeless shelter but, prior to the project, did not have any interaction with the staff or clients at the shelter. The fieldwork educator continued to complete the duties of Clinical Director for the agency throughout the student rotation but was able to maintain a flexible schedule that would accommodate student supervision.

The fieldwork placement began in January of 2017. The first student placement, from January through March, was a three-month Level II fieldwork rotation with a student from a local university. The second rotation, from April to June, consisted of two Level II fieldwork students from the same institution.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Fieldwork students involved in the project volunteered for the placement through communication with the AFC. The AFC determined which students would be placed together and if the placement was the first or second rotation for the student. Of the three students who participated, two were female and one was male. All students had completed the required coursework for a Master's degree in occupational therapy. All students reported at least moderate interest in working with a mental health population prior to participation. Two students completed the entire 12-week rotation, and one student completed nine weeks of Level II fieldwork at the homeless shelter and completed the final three weeks of the placement under direct supervision of an occupational therapist at a permanent supportive housing program within the same local organization.

The student and fieldwork educator spent the first week of the placement shadowing current staff and observing the intake process to gain initial insight into current services provided by non-occupational therapy disciplines and client engagement in services. Next, to determine clients' needs for services, a small written needs assessment survey

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of multiple-choice questions was distributed among clients accessing services at the homeless shelter. Survey results indicated that individuals accessing services at the homeless shelter had the greatest interest in groups on home management skills, work, and social skills. Leisure groups were the least desirable to the population (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants Interested in Occupational Therapy Group Options (N=16)

Occupational Therapy Group Options	Number of Participants Interested	%
Housing-related groups (cleaning, budgeting, utilities, cooking, and bill pay)	11	68.8%
Social skills (conflict management, anger management, realizing your potential)	9	56.3%
Work skills related groups (resume writing, interview skills, appropriate dress)	8	50.0%
Skills for remaining healthy while experiencing homelessness (appropriate clothing choices, infection control)	8	50.0%
Health information (medication info, relaxation)	7	43.8%
Leisure activities (music, free local activities, history, games)	6	37.5%

Following the needs assessment survey, the first occupational therapy fieldwork student (with guidance from the fieldwork educator) created a blueprint for occupational therapy services at the homeless shelter. This was then replicated by the second rotation of students. Additionally, student learning objectives were collaboratively designed by the student and fieldwork educator (see Table 2). These objectives were also used for the students in the second student rotation.

The first student rotation consisted of 12 weeks from January to March 2017. The fieldwork educator engaged in an average of 15 hours per week of direct supervision with the student at the beginning of the experience with direct supervision decreasing as the student gained confidence and competence. The student and fieldwork educator engaged in at least eight hours of direct supervision each week throughout the experience, as required by national fieldwork guidelines (AOTA, 2011). The student and fieldwork educator determined an appropriate schedule for supervision, which resulted in the fieldwork educator providing approximately three hours of supervision per day at the start of the workday. Generally, the student and fieldwork educator agreed upon which student skills should be observed each day. The fieldwork educator rotated observation of each group, with the exception of the cooking group, which consistently required the fieldwork educator's presence due to safety concerns with tasks that could present danger for the participants and students. Communication with both students

and other staff members was essential. Staff at the homeless shelter provided constant feedback about students' progress and required updates on the program's development.

Table 2

Student Learning Objectives for Weeks 1 and 2

Week 1
1. Observe staff and fieldwork educator's interactions and treatments with clients.
2. Establish rapport with clients to support future interventions.
3. Generate a document to determine the possible role of occupational therapy within the setting.
4. Complete weekly supervision with the fieldwork educator.
5. Collaborate with fieldwork educator to determine appropriate schedule for direct supervision.
Week 2
1. Assist fieldwork educator in creation of group protocol.
2. Co-lead 1 group with fieldwork educator.
3. Complete the Fieldwork Experience Assessment Tool (FEAT) with fieldwork educator.
4. Create a schedule for groups and collaborate with shelter supervisors to ensure that occupational therapy is meeting the needs of the agency.
5. Complete preparations for 2 future occupational therapy groups.
6. Complete 1 Canadian Occupational Therapy Measure (COPM) with fieldwork educator.
7. Design and complete a minimum of 15 needs assessment surveys to determine appropriate group subjects.
8. Observe occupational therapy supervisor in 1:1 meetings with clients.

Based on a literature review, it was determined that an activity-based group curriculum focusing on essential skills for independent living (i.e., work, leisure, healthy relationships, parenting, and home management skills), community re-integration, and health and wellness would be beneficial (Peloquin & Ciro, 2013). Group topics were determined from survey results and client report during informal conversations while observing other professionals at the shelter. Each occupational therapy student initially implemented one occupational therapy group per week and gradually increased to three groups per week by the midpoint of the fieldwork rotation. For this experience, groups were designed to run for 40 minutes and formatted using Cole's seven-step protocol, which consists of an ice-breaker activity, purposeful skill-building activity, and guided discussion (Cole, 2012).

Group attendance was optional for all individuals seeking services at the shelter and averaged between five to ten individuals each session. No demographic data was taken on these participants. Groups were offered weekly on health and wellness, life skills,

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and cooking skills. Health and wellness groups included healthy eating at a homeless shelter and low-impact exercise routines. Life skills content rotated weekly and covered social skills, anger management, healthy relationship skills, and job skills. Cooking group consisted of shopping at the food pantry, cooking, food safety, and communication skills. With permission from the shelter, community experiences to everyday locations (e.g., grocery store, movie theater, and zoo) were provided bi-weekly for those clients who regularly participated in occupational therapy. These experiences were designed to address social skills, assist clients in community re-integration, and promote leisure participation on a budget.

In addition to groups, the students determined that individual interventions should be implemented, as needed, per assessment and client request. Interested clients were provided with a brief overview of occupational therapy services prior to participation. Next, the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM; Law et al., 2014) was completed by the occupational therapy student with assistance from the fieldwork educator. A treatment plan was created for each client and consisted of an occupational profile, using the AOTA occupational profile template (AOTA, 2017b). The treatment plan and a set of short and long-term goals were created to ensure interventions were targeted at concerns within areas of occupational performance noted by the client. Individual interventions were then designed and implemented by each student to meet client-centered, occupation-based goals. Documentation, in a narrative note format suitable to submit for insurance billing, was completed for each group and individual intervention to increase student competency with documentation although they were not submitted to any billing entity. At the end of each student's rotation, the COPM was re-administered to all participants. This entire process of assessment, treatment planning, intervention, and re-evaluation was developed during the initial rotation with one fieldwork student and then repeated during the subsequent rotation with the other two students.

Individual intervention sessions focused on the advocacy, life skills, and social skills necessary for community re-integration. Overall, 28 individuals participated in at least one individual occupational therapy intervention. As identified through the COPM, the participants ranged in age from 21-60 years, with a mean age of 45 years. Of the twenty-eight participants, one participant was of Asian descent; five participants reported being Caucasian and 22 identified as African American. All participants in the role-emerging fieldwork were assigned male at birth with one participant who was a transgender woman. The majority of clients asked for assistance with transportation routes to medical appointments, advocacy at medical and social service appointments, procurement of assistive devices or medications, assistance locating or maintaining low-cost housing, and communication skills to assist with phone calls, interviews and composing emails. With assistance and advocacy efforts provided solely by occupational therapy students and the fieldwork educator, four shelter participants moved to independent housing, three attended job interviews, and two enrolled in high school equivalency classes. Without occupational therapy intervention, shelter participants would be forced to wait until they became eligible for government and social service case management for assistance with housing, work, and employment.

To evaluate student experience and learning outcomes, students completed the Fieldwork Experience Assessment Tool (FEAT; Atler et al., 2001) with their fieldwork educator at week 1, midterm, and during the final week of their fieldwork rotation. The FEAT is a self-report questionnaire designed to ensure that learning objectives are being met during fieldwork experiences. During the assessment, both the student and fieldwork educator provide feedback on characteristics of communication and problem solving in three distinct areas: environment, fieldwork student, and fieldwork supervisor. Each area has subsections containing essential characteristics of the fieldwork experience, with opportunities to add site-specific examples. For example, under the category of fieldwork student, the student and fieldwork educator rate the student on their attitude and learning behaviors. The rating scale for the FEAT requires that each characteristic is score as either 'limited', 'just right challenge', or 'excessive'. If an item is rated as "limited", the student and fieldwork educator should develop strategies to increase the occurrence of this item. Conversely, any items marked "excessive" should be discussed by both parties to determine if mitigation is required. These ratings serve as a discussion point for the student and fieldwork educator only and do not correlate to any numerical values. At the end of the rating portion of the assessment, guided questions are asked to allow the student and fieldwork educator to engage in problem-solving and positive discussion. The use of this tool allows students and the fieldwork educator to measure the extent to which the student is provided the necessary guidance and education to meet site-specific fieldwork objectives.

OUTCOMES

Descriptive data obtained from the FEAT was analyzed to determine student attitudes towards role-emerging fieldwork placements and both student and fieldwork educator's assessments of achievement of learning outcomes. Of the three students who participated in the Level II fieldwork placement at the homeless shelter, two students reported positive experiences with this role-emerging fieldwork placement.

Following the first week of the fieldwork experience, all three students reported feeling apprehensive about working with a difficult and occasionally violent population. Further, all three students noted concerns about limited structure during the fieldwork experience and limited opportunity to interact with their fieldwork educator. However, all three students rated the site and fieldwork educator as an appropriate fit during the first week.

At midterm, FEAT results differed based on student attitudes and progress towards learning goals. One student reported increasing challenges with the behavior of the population and difficulty maintaining a caseload while the fieldwork educator was not on-site. Based on this student's concerns, the AFC and fieldwork educator began a dialogue with the student on how all parties involved could assist the student in meeting learning objectives. Conversely, the two other students continued to rate the experience as a just right challenge at midterm and reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to be self-directed with regular check-ins. One student reported that the ability to be self-directed increased their confidence in providing client-centered interventions and another student reported that being self-directed forced them to improve interpersonal and limit setting skills. The students engaged in the second rotation together reported

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enjoying opportunities to interact with another student and felt that having more than one student at the site was beneficial for peer-based learning.

Only two of the three students completed the final FEAT. At the beginning of week nine, in response to one student's performance concerns, that student, the fieldwork educator, and the AFC collaboratively determined the student would benefit from more direct supervision to ensure that the student was meeting the objectives of the fieldwork experience; the change in fieldwork site also addressed the student's perceptions related to safety and fieldwork educator support and access. This student declined to complete the final FEAT because her site and primary fieldwork educator changed in week 9 of her 12-week rotation. Of the two students who completed the final FEAT, both students reported a marked increase in their ability to implement occupation-based interventions and to communicate with the population. One of the students reported that while their skills in communication had increased, setting limits continued to be difficult with this population. Both students reported that completing a fieldwork experience with an off-site supervisor was best for their second Level II rotation after gaining skills in their previous placements, regardless of practice area. Overall, the two students who completed the fieldwork rotation at the homeless shelter reported a positive experience with one student noting that this experience increased their interest in pursuing occupational therapy jobs in community-based settings.

This project primarily focused on student learning outcomes. However, outcomes for the organization were also documented via self-report measures. The organization was asked to provide feedback regarding the student experience via email correspondence with several senior administrators at the site. The administrators reported that the presence of the students increased daily (occupation-based) activities at the shelter, reduced workload on other staff members, and provided much-needed services to their clients. Further, the administrators were interested in continuing the student placement and bringing on a full-time occupational therapy practitioner. The only concern noted by the administrators was a lack of space at the organization to house more than one student.

The fieldwork educator for this student rotation reported the greatest support in the AFC partnership. The AFC provided assistance in creating student learning objectives, in conjunction with the student, as well as assistance in insuring that all accreditation standards were met and providing guidance with any student behavior concerns throughout the rotation. Beyond the AFC, a solid partnership with the community organization was paramount to the success of the rotation for the student and fieldwork educator. The organization supported the fieldwork educator's needs throughout the rotation by providing a staff member to be the point of contact for the student when the fieldwork educator was not on-site and allowing the student to have full access to the clients, facilities, and other resources. The organization was agreeable to providing supplies for many groups and transportation for community reintegration experiences. The fieldwork educator for this role-emerging fieldwork placement noted that the strong partnerships between the school, fieldwork educator, and organization were instrumental in ensuring success of the placements.

DISCUSSION

Many fieldwork educators support the use of role-emerging placements as an opportunity to broaden the scope of occupational therapy and the opportunities these placements provide for clinicians' own personal development (Cooper & Raine, 2009). Based on the results from this project as demonstrated by the FEAT, some students were better suited to participating in this role-emerging placement. Students who are intrinsically motivated, have confidence in their ability to provide occupational therapy services, demonstrate open-communication with fieldwork educator and on-site supervisors, and demonstrate a strong desire to work with the population may be best suited for a role-emerging placement. Students who are fearful of the population or those with a desire for constant supervision and feedback may be better suited for traditional placements.

There were several limitations to this project. Primarily, the small sample size of only three students did not allow for larger generalization of findings to all students. Second, the students who participated in these community-based placements already demonstrated an interest in the population and it is not clear how students without a desire to work with this population would perform. Additionally, this project focused primarily on learning needs of the student in the role-emerging placement with only a small amount of information provided on fieldwork educator and organization needs. Future studies should explore in greater depth the needs and supports available for the fieldwork educator and organizations involved. Finally, the outcomes were self-report in nature and therefore could be influenced by student attitudes and desire to ensure success of the program.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY EDUCATION

Findings from the FEAT indicate that a role-emerging fieldwork placement can be a positive learning experience for certain students. The findings of this project support the literature, which has consistently demonstrated the benefits of role-emerging fieldwork placements for students, including the development of ability to establish client rapport, clinical reasoning and personal development (Overton et al., 2009). Students participating in similar role-emerging fieldwork placements have reported having a greater occupational identity and autonomy following role-emerging placements (Cooper & Raine, 2009). Additionally, many students participating in these placements seek employment in community-based organizations furthering the profession's shift from a medical model to community-based practice (Cooper & Raine, 2009; Overton et al., 2009).

While role-emerging fieldwork placements can be beneficial in providing student learning experiences in non-traditional setting, there are also many barriers to the implementation of these experiences. First, it may be beneficial for students who plan to participate in role-emerging fieldworks to have previous experience embodying the role of an occupational therapist during their first Level II fieldwork experience. The students who excelled at this type of fieldwork were experiencing the placement as part of their second Level II rotation and reported that they felt more equipped for this placement after already successfully completing a rotation at another site. This can become problematic when trying to schedule student rotations, as the site would be limited to

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accepting students completing their second rotation. Next, the student who was not successful during the placement reported a fear of the population. Therefore, it is recommended that the potential fieldwork educator conduct an interview with the student prior to placement to ensure that students are prepared for this type of role-emerging placement and indicate to the student the need for strong skills in self-directed learning and communication. Finally, implementation of this type of fieldwork requires an occupational therapist with the ability to devote time to supervising students outside of their dedicated role or caseload. This type of placement has demonstrated feasibility in the past through using academic faculty members to serve as fieldwork educators but continued research is necessary to demonstrate the possibility of this placement using community-based occupational therapists as fieldwork educators (Totten & Pratt, 2001).

Student-led programs through role-emerging fieldwork placements can provide an opportunity for increased service provision in the community in addition to providing positive learning experiences for students. At the homeless shelter, there would have been no occupational therapy services provided if not for the role-emerging fieldwork student. Therefore, the use of a role-emerging fieldwork placement can provide an opportunity for the profession of occupational therapy to expand through the use of innovative teaching methods to meet the increased demand for community-based practitioners to serve in marginalized populations (Clarke et al., 2014).

There continues to be a great need for occupational therapy services within the homeless population to provide occupation-based interventions to improve client engagement (Grandisson, Mitchell-Carvalho, Tang, & Korner-Bitensky, 2009). At present, the scarcity of occupational therapy literature in the area of homelessness illuminates the large gap between the need for and availability of services for the homeless population (Roy et al., 2017). In this project, a role-emerging fieldwork placement provided occupational therapy services to clients who would otherwise not have access to services, while providing an opportunity for students to meet fieldwork learning objectives and allowing the administration at the homeless shelter to explore provisional occupational therapy services for their clients. The student-led occupational therapy program at the homeless shelter demonstrated the challenges and benefits of role-emerging student placements and the role for occupational therapists with a homeless population.

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