

Expanding Impact: Occupational Therapy's Transition to Key Roles in Mental Health Rehabilitation

What happens when occupational therapists move from providing rehabilitation services to shaping the systems that deliver them?

Samah Kheir, Sivan Regev
sivanreg@bgu.ac.il
samah.kheir@mail.huji.ac.il

WFOT Congress 2026, Bangkok, Thailand 12.2.2026

A situated example of system-level occupational therapy leadership

Arabic OT in a decision-making role within a complex space of cultural and linguistic adaptation.

Work 75 (2023) 1379–1392
DOI:10.3233/WOR-220266
IOS Press

1379

The Arab minority of East Jerusalem: An exploratory study of vocational rehabilitation in mental health

Samah Kheir^{a,b} and Lena Lipskaya-Velkovsky^{c,*}

^a*Mental Health Rehabilitation Department of Jerusalem District, Ministry of Health, Jerusalem, Israel*

^b*School of Health Profession, Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel*

^c*School of Occupational Therapy, Faculty of Medicine, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel*

Received 24 May 2022

Accepted 17 October 2022

Grounded in:

- Clinical experience
- Community-based practice
- Master's research on vocational rehabilitation in Jerusalem's Arabic-speaking service users

Ability to:

- **Build trust**
- Interpret needs
- Improve service accuracy and responsiveness
- Increase accessibility for Arab service users

Language is not an accessory - it is an infrastructure for access

Who we are & why this question matters

Occupational therapists with a shared clinical background in community-based vocational rehabilitation

Shared trajectory:

From similar clinical starting points → to broader systemic impact
(across people, services, and decision-making spaces)

Different current positions within the system:

Samah

District-level coordination within the public mental health system

Issuing decisions, monitoring services, developing needs-based responses,
and guiding teams and students — informed by research and field practice

Sivan

Academic, advisory, and community leadership roles

Clinical training coordination, Editor of the Israeli OT Journal, community-based mental health initiatives, participation in a local academic leadership program and policy advisory committees

**Who are you & why this question
matters**

Who are you & why this question matters

The **literature** offers several ways to understand expanded OT roles:

- Levels of action: **Micro – Meso – Macro** (Bailliard et al., 2020)
- Operate **beyond clinical** encounters, by taking on **functional roles** that shape systems, services, and professional cultures (Hitch et al., 2019)
- **Professional identity:** OT-titled vs. generic/system roles (Fitzpatrick et al., 2025)

Why **leadership** matters in occupational therapy

Mental health **systems** are structured around **services** and **eligibility**, while **recovery** happens in **everyday life, culture, and participation**.

This creates a structural **gap** between systems and lived experience.

Occupational therapy is uniquely positioned to **lead in this gap—by shaping decisions, services, and environments through an occupational lens.**

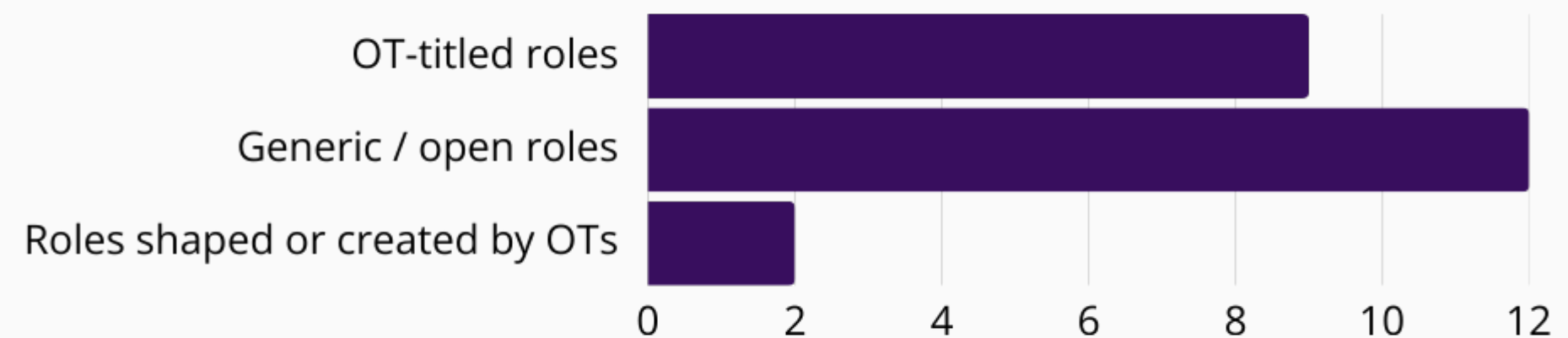
(Lapointe et al., 2013; Shams, 2019)

From literature to practice

A **survey** (n=23) findings Identify roles as:

- **Public-system positions:** ministries, national programs, regulations (n=9).
- **Organizational leadership positions:** service management, implementation, training (n=4).
- **Entrepreneurial & cross-sector positions:** innovation, NGOs, digital platforms, social initiatives (n=6).
- **Educational & capacity-building positions:** Teaching, training, supervision, professional development (n=4).

Are key roles formally defined as occupational therapy positions?



From clinical practice to system-level leadership: an ecological lens

Occupational therapists' transition to leadership can be understood as an expansion across ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)— **not a break from practice, but a deepening of occupational therapy logic.**

Occupational Therapy in
Mental Health Rehabilitation

Working with people, routines,
participation, and recovery within
everyday contexts

Individual: Values, professional
identity, analytical and adaptive skills

Interpersonal: Relationships, trust-building,
cultural and linguistic positioning

Organizational: Roles within systems, translating OT
language into organizational action

Community: Responsiveness to community needs,
participation, belonging

Public Policy: Decision-making, regulation, advocacy,
and systemic influence

Occupational Therapy in a
District-Level Key Role

Applying the same lens to
programs, services, decisions,
and systems

Individual: how do OTs in key roles change what happens to clients?



Key roles promote **evidence-based, occupation-centred** interventions.
The **OT lens** keeps **function** and **participation** central, even in non-clinical roles.
Knowledge translation leadership improves daily clinical decisions.



Respondents used **activity analysis** and **functional reasoning** to design tools/programs.
Success defined as **participation, quality of life, social impact**.
OT background helped **tailor supports** to different functional levels.

“The OT lens allows me to hold the person, the occupation, and the system at the same time.”

Organizational: how do OTs in key roles change what happens for services?



OTs in key roles **lead procedures, standards, and outcome measures.** **Knowledge translation and leadership** roles shift team culture toward **occupation-centred practice.** **Internal advocacy** opens space for collaboration around **function and participation.**



OT language integrated into **policies, forms, and documentation** (function, participation, environment, sensory). **Non-OT staff trained** to use an **occupation-centred, functional** lens. **Frameworks created** to address **all life domains.**

“My ability to analyze activities and environments helps translate field-level needs into system-level decisions.”

Public Policy: how do OTs in key roles change what happens for systems?



OTs in key roles influence **policy, funding, and service design**.
Advocacy and leadership can expand access for **marginalized groups**.
Human-rights and occupational-justice perspectives position OT as a **system-level change agent**.



OT **developed programs** to increase **employment and education** for people with disabilities.
They **participated in parliamentary and inter-ministerial discussions**;
They **designed services** for specific **cultural and linguistic communities**.

“OT training gave me tools to work in complexity not just with individuals, but with systems.”



Expanding Impact – Moving Forward Together

Take home message

This shift did not happen in one jump — it unfolded across ecological levels

Core OT competencies remain central: Seeing the person within systems.
Bridging between needs, services, and participation

The occupational lens is a strategic asset for equity and meaningful participation.

How will you use your occupational lens in key roles in your own context?



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