Advocating for Art Therapy: Planning an Art Therapy Awareness & Advocacy Event

Informational meetings with key government officials who make policies, approve laws, and establish regulations that govern the art therapy profession are an effective way of introducing the art therapy profession and informing government leaders about the importance of art therapy services in addressing health care needs of their constituents in diverse settings throughout the state. A well planned “Art Therapy Awareness & Advocacy Event” enables chapters to maximize the expertise and visibility of the profession and target the most important legislators or program officials on issues of concern to members.

Step 1: Determine the Chapter’s Advocacy Priorities which might include:

- Gain the art therapist license.
- Advocate for the inclusion of ‘art therapist’ in State Medicaid regulations.
- Increase public school funding for Special Needs Programs funded through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) law ensuring services to children with disabilities to whom art therapists provide services.
- Monitor issues related to mental health care funding, legislation, and programs in which art therapists have an interest.

Step 2: Identify and Recruit the Art Therapists Spokespersons to Participate in the Advocacy & Awareness Event.

Art therapist spokespersons should include those working with military service personnel and their families, youth, older adults, and those with specific health conditions such as autism, Alzheimer’s Disease, and cancer and other growing health and mental health needs groups within the state. Select art therapist advocates working in government programs such as the Juvenile Justice System, Social Services, community mental health centers, and public school systems. Representatives from well respected hospitals, educational institutions, and research centers are also recommended.

Step 3: Schedule the Art Therapy Awareness & Advocacy Day.

Schedule meetings with state officials, administrators, legislators, Medicaid directors, members of professional licensing boards, state school board officials, and administrators of public health and mental health programs. Your agenda with each group will vary but it should always emphasize the importance of serving the public through art therapy. The more these officials and program administrators build contacts with art therapists, the more likely they will be to reach out to members of the profession for input on important decisions or rulemaking.

Schedule meetings with legislators in January or early in the legislative session when they have returned to the capital for organizing and planning. Spokespersons should be limited to no more than five Chapter members for each meeting, which is large enough to create the impression of a larger constituency, but still limited enough to avoid overwhelming officials or consuming limited meeting time with introductions.

Step 4: Produce Information Kits for Participants to Present to Those You Meet.

Remember to update your Chapter’s website well in advance of the awareness and advocacy day event to include information about the event, current officers’ names, and updated information on all issues and
legislation you plan to discuss. This will be the first place that officials are likely to look when considering a meeting request or seeking additional information after the meeting.

Prepare awareness and advocacy meeting information kits or folders to guide participants through their meetings and help ensure a positive experience. Include:

- The event agenda and meeting schedule.
- Names and contact information for meeting group leaders and participants.
- Background information and talking points on issues to be discussed and materials to share with those you are meeting with. (See the American Art Therapy Association’s Public Policy section under members only for Awareness and Advocacy event background materials to include.)
- Reminders on what to do and not do in meetings with officials (see “Some tips for conducting a meeting with your legislator” in the Association’s Effective Advocacy Guide in the Public Policy section).

A limited number of succinct “leave-behind” documents can be extremely important in reinforcing the important points discussed during the meeting and providing sources for additional information. Include:

- The What is Art Therapy? document which describes valuable mental health services art therapists provide to important segments of the community.
- Identify your chapter, its mission and national affiliations, and the names of officers or members to contact for information.
- Highlight the issues or proposed legislation or policies discussed in the meeting.
- Provide brief quotes from educators, medical directors, university and hospital administrators, or other influential community leaders that express support for art therapy or for legislation or government actions sought by art therapists.

**Step 5: Structure your Presentations to Legislators.**

Designate a meeting leader to control the presentation and make sure all important points are addressed. Ask individual participants to explain different points to be emphasized—what art therapy is and how it benefits the public; the academic, clinical experience, and ethical standards required for entry into the profession; how and where art therapy is practiced in the state, for example. This will assure that all meeting participants are prepared and involved in the discussion and build the impression of a knowledgeable and well organized organization and profession.

**Step 6: Hold a Pre-Advocacy Day Planning Meeting**

Meet with the art therapy advocacy team to make sure everyone understands the event agenda and knows who the group leader is and who will cover the key points. Discuss the issues to be discussed with legislators and officials and key messages.

**Important Reminders for Conducting the Meetings**

- Arrive early enough at a designated meet-up area to allow time for briefings and changes in meeting schedules;
- Arrive at meetings on time and as a group;
- Make sure to have event kits, business cards, and other “leave behind” material;
- Ask for the name of any staff attending the meeting or the names of other staff to serve as points of contact in the future; and
- Request an opportunity to take photographs.
Important Follow-Up Actions

Follow up on your awareness and advocacy meetings by:

- Writing the legislator, official, and/or staff to thank them for seeing you and to acknowledge any commitments, actions, or support that were offered during the meeting.
- Responding promptly to any requests for additional information.
- Setting up appointments with staff contacts to follow up on questions or commitments made during the meetings.
- Sending information and “leave behind” materials to legislators or officials who were unable to attend a scheduled meeting.
- Identifying additional opportunities to engage with the legislator or official and build ongoing relationships in scheduled public hearings, town halls, regulatory comments, electronic media, and other meetings or forums.
- Sending photos and descriptions of your awareness and advocacy events to the American Art Therapy Association’s national office staff to include in bulletin articles and post on a special website chart showing the art therapy awareness and advocacy events occurring across the county.

For additional information, email Dean Sagar, Public Policy Director, at dsagar@arttherapy.org