Why the Art Therapist License is critical to the practice of art therapy and a career as an art therapist.

Art therapy is a distinct mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem. Art therapy practice requires knowledge of visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms) and the creative process, as well as of human development, psychological, and counseling theories and techniques. Educational requirements include theories of art therapy, counseling, and psychotherapy; ethics and standards of practice; assessment and evaluation; individual, group, and family art therapy techniques; human and creative development; multicultural issues; research methods; and internship experiences in clinical, community, and/or other settings.

Because of the uniqueness of the study and practice of art therapy, practitioners must be trained within an approved and accredited art therapy master’s program recognized by the American Art Therapy Association. Therefore training for the profession is conducted by educational institutions accredited by the Council of Higher Education Accreditation with art therapy master’s programs approved by the Educational Program Approval Board of the American Art Therapy Association.

**Profession growth through licensure**

To practice throughout the United States in other leading mental health professions such as marriage and family therapy, counseling, and social work, a state license is required. The license serves to protect the public from potential harm that may be caused when a non-qualified person promotes himself/herself as a qualified practitioner. The license ensures that the person receiving services has accessed the professional level of care required in state law and regulation. It also qualifies licensed providers for insurance reimbursement for both government and private insurance. Each existing mental health practitioner license outlines the specific requirements for practice which apply uniquely to each profession.

There is not one “mental health practitioner” license for the entire mental health field as each profession requires its own distinct training and related scope of practice and therefore its own license. Likewise, it is not appropriate for someone to practice marriage and family therapy or art therapy, for example, unless specifically trained to do so through a minimum of a master’s degree program.

The license for the art therapy profession must be offered in states throughout the country as part of the professional growth path that all other mental health professions must undergo.

In lieu of the availability of the art therapist license, some art therapy master’s graduates have sought to become licensed in related mental health fields. At the same time the approved art therapy master’s programs have increased their study requirements to
include areas of study that would enable graduates to qualify for licenses in other professions. These measures only serve as a temporary stop gap that will quickly lose its efficacy as the other mental health professions continue to define or re-evaluate their educational or practice standards and related exams and experience required.

Licensure law in many states is increasingly requiring those qualified for the license to be trained through a program accredited through a CHEA recognized accrediting body such as a CACREP approved program, or the Commission on Accreditation Marriage & Family Therapy Education approved master’s programs.

Without question other professions have and will continue to define and fine tune their professional requirements and educational standards to conform to their own national standards and changes in the profession. Those professions may expand educational, practice and other requirements in the future based on the demands and expectations of their unique profession and without regard to those with art therapy training who may hold a license in that profession currently. The institutions providing training in those fields will also modify or expand training in the profession as the specific mental health profession changes to meet new demands and within an era of increasing knowledge about brain functioning.

**Because there are relatively few art therapists licensed in other fields compared to those in the other professions, the influence that art therapist may have in shaping policies and standards in any other mental health profession is negligible.**

In summary, to remain a viable profession the art therapy profession must have its own license to:

- Protect the public and ensure those in need of services receive services from qualified professional art therapists.
- Ensure quality of art therapy services by a specifically trained and experienced provider,
- Provide a distinct service and reimbursement code under public and private insurance for which art therapists are qualified.
- Enable art therapists to provide their distinct services within state law.
- Be recognized as an important, unique mental health profession.

Today art therapy is practiced in a wide variety of settings including hospitals, psychiatric and rehabilitation facilities, wellness centers, forensic institutions, schools, crisis centers, senior communities, private practice, and other clinical and community settings. But often the practice is under a subcontracted license group for insurance reimbursement for example or the practitioners holds a license from a related field which may not include art therapy services in the scope of practice included in licensure law.

In states including Maryland, Mississippi, Kentucky, New Mexico, and others a trained and qualified art therapist can practice art therapy as a licensed professional. All other states must now gain that same status for the future of the profession.