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Employment and Career Planning Opportunities for Young Adults with Disabilities: Advocating for Occupational Therapy

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Background

Despite policy initiatives by the IDEA, young adults with disabilities experience poor transition-related outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers. Only 32% of adults with a disability are employed, compared to 73% of those without a disability (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). In addition, they are more likely to be employed only part-time, receive lower wages, and receive fewer benefits (Campanaro et. al, 2021). OT practitioners are considered a related service and optional members of transition teams. Only 10% of high school students with disabilities receive OT services (AOTA, 2021), and several school-based OT's report limited understanding of their role in transition planning (Pierce et. al, 2020).

Problem

There is a need for greater involvement of OT in transition planning services to provide a unique, client-centered perspective to enabling greater engagement in meaningful employment opportunities.

Purpose

The purpose of this capstone project is to advocate for the role of OT in employment-based training programs for young adults with disabilities following their transition out of high school.

Methods

This capstone experience was completed in collaboration with Gallant Therapy Services in Augusta, Maine.

Observation/Experiential Component

- Work Supports program
- Career Planning program
- Community Supports program
- Adult Supports program

Semi-structured interviews

- Work Supports client
- Site Owner/Program Director/OT
- COTA/Career Planner
- Adult Services/AT Coordinator
- Job Coach staff members

Development of tangible resources to promote client independence and safety in kitchen tasks

- Task-Specific Trainings
- Visual Aids
- Assistive Technology Recommendations

Development of virtual resources to support advocacy initiatives

- Client/Caregiver Resource Handbook
- Employer Resource Handbook
- OT Role "At A Glance" Graphic

Results/Outcomes

Barriers to Service Delivery:

- Lengthy waitlist for adult services
- Limited funding and reimbursement
- Difficulty navigating ongoing changes to service delivery and eligibility
- Access to reliable transportation
- Employer attitudes
- Global pandemic

Impact on Client Outcomes

- Promote greater independence
- Increased confidence and aspirations
- Foster sense of purpose and responsibility
- Improved financial and living independence, freedom of choice
- Opportunity to explore identity, strengths/weaknesses
- Promote greater inclusion and community belonging

OT Role in Career Planning

- Facilitate client-centered interest exploration
- Identify natural supports
- Coordinate volunteer and shadowing opportunities

OT Role in Job Supports

- Analysis and grading of job tasks
- Provide environment modifications
- Conducting AT evaluations
- Facilitating skill development
- Collaborating with employers and staff
- Advocating and providing education

Discussion

Unique OT Contributions

- Holistic, client-centered approach
- Flexible, adapt to changing demands
- Grading job tasks to suit client needs and abilities
- Identifying and utilizing the client's natural supports
- Providing accommodations and AT solutions

Need for further Advocacy

- Increased Medicare funding for adult OT services, reduced waitlist for transition programs
- Increased funding for OT staffing
- Greater OT leadership roles on transition teams, expand involvement beyond traditional pediatric care

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