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## An OT Needs Assessment for Children and Families Residing in Shelters

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# An OT Needs Assessment for Children and Families Residing in Shelters

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## Background

Homelessness is a worldwide complex issue, with a unique range of cases and countless efforts to reduce its prevalence. Often the needs of children experiencing homelessness are overlooked in federal and state programs. (O'Donnell & McKinnon, 2022). The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) states that areas of practice for Occupational Therapy (OT) includes homelessness, early childhood, and pediatric trauma, which makes OTs skills an important asset to the service of children/families experiencing homelessness.

## Problem

There is lacking research on the occupational deficits and needs of families who are homeless and OT services are scarcely established for homeless children and families in shelter settings.

## Purpose

To reveal the lived experiences of families experiencing homelessness in order to identify occupational needs that occur within a shelter setting.

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### References

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2020). *Occupational therapy practice framework domain and process* (4th ed.). AOTA Press.  
O'Donnell, M., & McKinnon, S. (2022). Advocating for change to meet the developmental needs of young children experiencing homelessness. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 76(5), 1–5.  
<https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2022.050114>

## Project Description

This project conducts a needs assessment to identify occupational needs using

1. **Facility observations** of shelter programs for families experiencing or at risk of homelessness
2. **Interviews** of shelter staff, shelter residents, and OT practitioners with relevant experience

### Observation

- Observations of programming and the daily life of residents took place at Interfaith Community Center's Family Shelter

### Resident Interviews

- Parents/guardians were asked open ended questions regarding their family's lived experiences at the shelter
- 5 resident households were interviewed

### Staff Interviews

- To understand shelter programming, staff were interviewed about their interactions with residents and their observations
- 4 family shelter staff members were interviewed

### OT Interviews

- Therapists with experience with the homeless population were interviewed about their role providing services and their input on the needs of this population
- 5 OTs were interviewed

## Assessment Results

### Facility Assessment

#### Supports

- Clinical therapy services
- Housing with amenities
- Case management services
- Playroom and outdoor playground
- Books for adults and children
- Computer room and WIFI
- Laundry room and cleaning supplies
- 3 meals a day and snack
- Adult and children's workshop
- Baby food access
- 24/7 fridge for breast milk
- Mail services
- Accommodations for cultural reasons and special cases

#### Barriers

- Playroom access limited by staff availability
- Laundry use limited to 2 time slots a week
- Time limit for bathroom and shower
- Nonflexible times intervals for meals
- Inconsistent enforcement of shelter rules
- High noise levels
- 9 pm curfew
- Inability to have visitors
- Language barriers
- Children must always be attended
- Prohibition of sexual activity
- Medications held by staff
- Limited options for meals
- 72-hour requests to leave shelter past curfew
- Removal from program with consecutive rule violations

### Needs Assessment

Theme/Occupation	Description
Time Management	ADLs difficult to balance with shelter regulations and expectations
	Families with younger children especially struggled
Health Management	Difficulty managing emotions and developing coping strategies
	Nutrition management limitations
	Limitations with promoting health and wellness
Childcare	Difficulty arranging formal care for children
	Challenges identifying and supporting child's needs
Community Mobility	Some residents didn't have access to a car
Sleep Participation and Rest	Shelter noise levels are high
	Anxiety and overthinking preventing sleep and rest
Leisure Participation and Exploration	Time limitations to family leisure activities
	Lack of knowledge or prioritization of leisure exploration
	Transportation challenges with leisure participation
	Physical limitations with leisure participation
Play Participation and Exploration	Difficulty fostering friendships
	Difficulty designing youth workshops/activities for children of all ages
	Financial limitations for play equipment and toys