



A Step Forward for Distinct Classification of Art Therapy through the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

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The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has released a preliminary listing of Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes to take effect on January 1, 2018, that will classify art therapists within the 29-0000 occupation group for Healthcare Practitioners and under a **29-1129** sub-code for **“Therapists: All Other.”** The proposed reclassification is a marked improvement over the current 2010 SOC system in which art therapists were inappropriately classified within the 29-1125 occupational code for recreational therapists.

The Standard Occupational Classifications cover all professions in which work is performed for pay or profit in both government and private employment. SOC codes are revised every 8 years by a Standard Occupational Classification Policy Committee (SOCPC) comprised of representatives of the ten federal agencies with primary responsibility for collecting statistical data and with input from other federal agencies and the public. Professions are assigned to an occupational group at the most detailed level of classification permitted by data collected about the occupation by the Census Bureau or the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Professions that can't be defined with a distinct occupational code based on federal data are identified within an “All Other” occupational code.

The American Art Therapy Association has been engaged for several years in the process of changing our SOC in O*NET, the nation's primary source of occupational information under the sponsorship of the US Department of Labor/Employment and Training Administration: <http://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/29-1125.01>. To that end, in 2014, the American Art Therapy Association petitioned the SOCPC requesting that the occupational classification of art therapy be changed in the 2018 SOC revision “to more accurately reflect the art therapy profession as a distinct mental health discipline” and to include it under the minor occupational grouping 21-1000, “Counselors and Other Community and Social Service Specialists.” The other occupations under this code most closely correspond to the work art



therapists perform and the substance and level of their training, skills and experience, such as Marriage and Family Therapists and Mental Health Counselors.

The AATA's July 21, 2014 letter provided a detailed description of the distinct training and practice of art therapy and how it differs from recreational therapy and other occupations in the 29-000 occupation group "that do not involve comparable training and clinical practice in psychological and counseling theories and techniques." Furthermore, then-AATA President Dr. Sarah Deaver urged the SOCPC to provide art therapists with their own detailed occupation code: "The uniqueness of art therapy, together with its broad application in a variety of medical, mental health, and educational settings require that art therapists be identified as a separate mental health occupation in the 2018 SOC revision."

The AATA's request for a distinct code classification and change in occupational groups was not accepted by the SOCPC on the basis of a "collectability" standard stipulating that if a profession is to receive a separate defined SOC code "either the Bureau of Labor Statistics or the Census Bureau must be able to collect and report data on that occupation." With only four states providing separate art therapy licenses at that time, and with most art therapists practicing under other professional licenses, it was clear that collecting data about art therapists on a nationwide basis was not a realistic possibility.

While rejecting AATA's request for separate classification, the SOCPC agreed that art therapists should not be classified under the occupation code for recreational therapy. The SOCPC not only recommended moving art therapists to a separate occupational code, but also that the description of the activities performed by recreational therapists should be revised to delete reference to use of art to help avoid further confusion between the two occupations.

Current classification of art therapy within the SOC classification for recreational therapy has created numerous problems for art therapists. SOC classifications form the basis for job descriptions and hiring by both government and private employers and defining categories of services for government and private insurance reimbursement. This has resulted, for example, in art therapists being hired as recreation therapists in VA hospitals and supervised by master's level therapists with little understanding of art therapy. Insurance companies have refused to recognize and reimburse art therapists as providing mental health services. Changes in hospital hiring guidelines in several states have threatened to dismiss art therapists and others hired to fill recreational therapist positions unless they obtain national Therapeutic Recreation Specialist certification. States also did not include, or later dropped art therapy as a related service for school individual services plans because art therapy was not specifically referenced by



occupational code in original Federal regulations implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Reclassifying art therapists as a separate therapeutic occupation will help address many of these problems. It will require government and private employers to redefine job descriptions, pay levels and hiring guidelines, require insurers to reevaluate how art therapy services is covered in individual and group insurance plans, and it could open additional approaches for state licensing. While falling short of AATA's original request for a separate SOC code as a mental health occupation, the proposed change in the 2018 SOC classifications represents a significant "win" for art therapists and an **important step forward in defining art therapy as a distinct profession**. It also clarifies the work that needs to be done to obtain art therapy licenses in sufficient numbers of states to permit national data collection and Federal recognition of art therapists with their own defined SOC classification.

The Preliminary 2018 SOC classifications were announced in the July 22, 2016 *Federal Register* (81FR48306). The Bureau of Labor Statistics is accepting public comments about the SOCP's preliminary 2018 SOC classifications through September 20, 2016.

What you can do: Comments can be submitted by email at soc@bls.gov with the subject line "2018 SOC." We encourage AATA members to submit the following comments:

"I support the change in classification of art therapists as an important step forward in protecting the public through defining art therapy as a separate therapeutic occupation under the 29-1129 sub-code for "Therapists: All Other," and request that it be included in the final 2018 SOC Classifications."

Submission of such comments will help ensure that this needed change will be implemented in the final SOCs that will be announced next year, so that the AATA can continue to build on this initial success.

