

Dept. of Safety and Professional Services: Gov. Evers grants occupational therapy and hearing professions flexibility to avoid interruptions of care

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MADISON, Wis. - Feeding themselves. Getting dressed. Brushing their teeth. Residents in long-term care facilities, such as nursing homes, often work directly with occupational therapy assistants to recover from strokes or other health issues and to maintain, recover or improve their ability to perform activities related to daily life. Yet many individuals who need to work with OT assistants could not get the care they need during the COVID-19 pandemic because of limitations in Wisconsin's rules governing occupational therapy.

That is why Gov. Tony Evers issued [Emergency Order 35](#), which suspends rules related to oversight and supervision of occupational assistants. This order extends to occupational therapists some of the flexibilities afforded to other provider groups, including physical therapists, in previous orders.

Under EO 35, occupational therapists will be able to supervise OT assistants using technology, such as video or phone. Without the order, Wisconsin rules required in-person supervision, which is inadvisable given the social distancing requirements of COVID-19. The order also suspends predetermined numbers of interactions an occupational therapist would have to have with an assistant and client. This change enables occupational therapists to instead exercise their professional judgement to determine how often to have direct contact with a supervised OT assistant and client.

The order also suspends supervision limitations for hearing instrument trainees, the individuals who, among other things, fit hearing aids. Previously, a hearing instrument specialist or an audiologist could supervise only one trainee. Given the limited availability of licensing exams, these licensed professionals may supervise more trainees.

“This pandemic is constantly evolving, and we continue to respond to issues and concerns as they arise,” said Department of Safety and Professional Services Secretary-designee Dawn Crim. “We needed to make further adjustments to enable occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants to safely care for their patients to the greatest extent possible. We needed to ensure that the pipeline of hearing instrument specialists remains open. The changes in this order are in the best interest of both patients and providers.”

Health care practice has been dramatically affected by COVID-19, and Gov. Evers has worked closely with DSPS to adapt professional standards so that providers can most effectively contribute to response efforts.

“We work closely with agencies to ensure that the actions we take will be appropriate, effective and prudent,” Gov. Evers said. “This pandemic is touching every aspect of our lives and every part of government. Our response requires close collaboration not only across the administration but throughout the state, and I appreciate how hard everyone is working with us to protect the health and safety of Wisconsin residents.”

Along with issuing licenses, reviewing building plans, and maintaining the state’s Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, the Department of Safety and Professional Services administers boards and councils that govern many licensed professions in Wisconsin. Many boards have convened to address issues related to COVID-19. Some can act independently to make changes to rules and statutes. Others, like the Occupational Therapists Affiliated Credentialing Board, work closely with the department to advocate for changes to better position their professions to work during the unusual public health emergency conditions and, when appropriate, to respond directly to efforts to manage the spread of disease and to promote health and wellbeing in Wisconsin. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote individual and state economic prosperity.