

A Change in Roles at ConnOTA: NEW Secretary and Membership Co-Chair



Secretary



Membership Co-Chair

ConnOTA is pleased to announce a transition in two of its Board of Directors roles. After dedicated service to the Association, Kristina Cuoco will be passing the Secretary role to Tracy Espada, while Maureen Leyes will transition from Membership Co-Chair to Valerie Williams.

As ConnOTA welcomes these new leaders, we extend our sincere appreciation to Kristina and Maureen for their commitment, leadership, and service to occupational therapy practitioners across Connecticut.

Thank You, Kristina “Nina” Cuoco



Nina Cuoco proudly served two terms as ConnOTA Secretary, totaling four years of service on the Board of Directors. In her role as Secretary, Nina served as a voting member of the Board and was responsible for managing the organization's Zoom platform and monthly board meetings, maintaining accurate records of meeting attendance and proceedings, and participating in board discussions and voting to support ConnOTA's mission and initiatives.

Reflecting on her time on the Board, Nina shared that serving on the ConnOTA Board was one of the highlights of her professional career. She initially joined the Board to become more involved in the profession and learn more about ConnOTA's work, but the experience exceeded her expectations.

Through her service, Nina gained a deeper appreciation for ConnOTA's advocacy efforts, legislative initiatives, and commitment to advancing occupational therapy throughout

Connecticut. Working alongside passionate colleagues broadened her understanding of the diverse roles occupational therapy practitioners hold across practice settings and strengthened her appreciation for the impact of the profession.

Most importantly, Nina developed a greater understanding of the importance of legislative advocacy and the collective influence occupational therapy practitioners have when they work together.

Although her Board service has come to an end, Nina looks forward to remaining an active ConnOTA member and continuing to grow through professional development, networking, and advocacy.

Thank You, Maureen Leyes



Maureen Leyes has been a member of ConnOTA since graduating from CT State Manchester, formerly Manchester Community College, in 2014. Since 2022, she has proudly served on the Board of Directors as Co-Chair of Membership for more than two terms.

During her time in the role, Maureen had the privilege of meeting and collaborating with many exceptional occupational therapy practitioners from across Connecticut. One of her primary areas of focus was increasing student membership and engagement.

As an Associate Professor and Academic

Fieldwork Coordinator at CT State Manchester, Maureen especially valued engaging with students and helping them understand the role of the Occupational Therapy Assistant, as well as the importance of membership in both state and national professional organizations. She also worked to encourage occupational therapy students more broadly to become involved with ConnOTA and develop an early commitment to professional participation.

Maureen also developed a strong passion for advocacy and enjoyed working alongside ConnOTA's Government Affairs Chairs to educate students and practitioners about the importance of involvement at both the local and national levels. Through these experiences, she expanded her own understanding of the important role occupational therapy practitioners play in advocacy and legislative efforts.

She shared that she has been fortunate to collaborate with so many dedicated occupational therapy practitioners throughout Connecticut and looks forward to future opportunities to serve, support, and promote the profession.

Welcome, Tracy Espada — Secretary



ConnOTA welcomes Tracy Espada as its new Secretary. Tracy earned her master's degree in

occupational therapy from the New England Institute of Technology and has dedicated many years to working with children in the public-school setting. She has earned a Professional Certificate in School-Based Practice and is passionate about pediatric school-based practice and evidence-based care.

As Secretary, Tracy will support the Association by maintaining accurate records and assisting with written materials. She brings a strong work ethic, enthusiasm, and commitment to the profession to her new role.

Tracy shared that she is excited to give back to the occupational therapy profession and bring greater awareness to ConnOTA's advocacy work. She hopes to work alongside fellow occupational therapy practitioners to promote advocacy and strengthen support for the profession throughout Connecticut.

"Although we may practice in various populations and settings and have different experiences, we can all agree that our mutual passion and commitment are to help the wonderful people, both young and old, who are entrusted to our care," Tracy shared. "The best way to achieve these goals is by supporting ConnOTA."

Welcome, Valerie Williams — Membership Co-Chair



ConnOTA also welcomes Valerie Williams as the new Membership Co-Chair.

Valerie is an occupational therapist with more than 30 years of experience and brings a broad range of clinical and professional experience to the Membership Committee. She currently works as a pediatric occupational therapist providing early intervention services in the Middletown and New Haven areas.

Her experience also includes working in schools, outpatient settings, and adult home care. In addition to her clinical work, Valerie is currently supervising a Fieldwork II student and mentoring a new occupational therapy employee.

As Membership Co-Chair, Valerie looks forward to bringing her experience and knowledge of occupational therapy to the committee, along with enthusiasm, a strong work ethic, and energy focused on recruiting new members.

She hopes to help expand ConnOTA's membership through education, marketing, and outreach to students and college occupational therapy programs.

Looking Ahead

ConnOTA thanks Kristina and Maureen for their dedicated service and contributions to the Association and the occupational therapy profession. We are excited to welcome Tracy and Valerie into their new leadership roles and look forward to the experience and enthusiasm they will bring to ConnOTA.



Advocacy is More than Legislation-

It's Seeing What's Next

When you think about advocacy, what comes to mind?

For many people, it's a legislator introducing a bill or a practitioner speaking at a public hearing. While those moments are important, they represent only a small part of what ConnOTA's Government Affairs Committee does throughout the year.

Advocacy begins long before legislation is introduced.



Every month, we monitor legislative proposals, state regulations, reimbursement policies, licensure issues, workforce initiatives, court decisions, and national trends that could influence occupational therapy practice in Connecticut. We watch what is happening in other states, collaborate with AOTA and coalition partners, and build relationships with policymakers so occupational therapy has a voice before important decisions are made.

In short, we are constantly asking:



What is changing? What could affect occupational therapy? And how can we prepare?

Sometimes those answers lead to legislation. Other times they help practitioners understand emerging issues, respond to changes in practice, or prevent unintended consequences before they reach Connecticut.

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Advocacy rarely happens overnight.

Over the past several years, ConnOTA has been steadily building the foundation needed to advance meaningful change. We've educated policymakers about occupational therapy, developed relationships with legislators and state agencies, collaborated with coalition partners, and worked behind the scenes to position our profession for success.

Today, those efforts have culminated in two major advocacy priorities:

- **Joining the Occupational Therapy Licensure Compact** to improve licensure portability and workforce mobility while increasing access to occupational therapy services.
- **Modernizing Connecticut's Occupational Therapy Practice Act** so it reflects contemporary occupational therapy education, practice, and professional responsibilities rather than language written nearly 50 years ago.



These priorities didn't appear overnight, and they won't be accomplished by ConnOTA alone. The groundwork has been laid. The relationships have been built. The opportunities are in front of us.

Now we need you!

As we prepare for the 2027 legislative session, we need practitioners and students from every practice setting to help demonstrate why these initiatives matter—not just to occupational therapy, but to the people and communities we serve.

ADVOCACY NEEDS EVERY VOICE

You don't need to be a policy expert to make a difference.

Whether you work in schools, hospitals, outpatient clinics, mental health, home health, early intervention, higher education, or another practice setting, you are often the first to notice changes that could affect our profession.

Your experiences help ConnOTA identify emerging issues, set advocacy priorities, and respond before challenges become barriers to practice.

A single observation from one practitioner can become the catalyst for statewide advocacy.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

As we prepare for the 2027 legislative session, ConnOTA will be expanding opportunities for members to become involved. Watch for Advocacy Action Alerts, mOTivated Morning event, Legislative Action Night, Capitol events, educational programs, and other opportunities to learn about the legislative process and advocate for occupational therapy alongside colleagues from across Connecticut.

Whether you are ready to contact a legislator, attend an advocacy event, or simply stay informed, there is a place for you.

HELP US SEE WHAT YOU SEE

Advocacy begins with awareness. If you're noticing legislative, regulatory, reimbursement, workplace, or practice issues affecting occupational therapy, we want to hear from you. Your experiences help ConnOTA identify emerging issues, shape advocacy priorities, and respond before challenges become barriers to practice.



Email govaffairs@connota.org to share what you're seeing, ask questions, or join our Advocacy Alerts.



Together, we can strengthen occupational therapy's voice across Connecticut.



From YOUR Government Affairs Team at ConnOTA:

Joyce E Rioux, EdD, OTR/L, SCSS, FAOTA

Latasha R. Dionne, OTD, OTR/L

Andy Markowski, Lobbyist



Questions? Email
govaffairs@connota.org

More Than Handwriting: Helping Students Learn, Grow, and Thrive

An Interview with Nina Vardar, OTR/L

What inspired you to become an occupational therapist, and what led you to choose school-based practice?

I've always known I wanted to help people. In high school, I had the opportunity to shadow an occupational therapist, and from that point on, I knew it was the right path for me. I started my career in outpatient rehabilitation, working with both adults and children, before finding my way to school-based OT and early intervention. Twenty-two years later, I still love coming to work because every day is different, and I get to watch kids grow, gain confidence, and do things they never thought they could.



Describe a typical day as a school-based OT. What are some things people might be surprised to learn about your role?

No two days are ever the same! My day might include working with students individually or in small groups, collaborating with teachers, checking in with a student who's having a tough day, or brainstorming strategies with staff. I think people are often surprised that OT can look like we're just playing games. In reality, every activity has a purpose, and some of the best learning happens when kids don't even realize they're working.

What's one success story or memorable moment with a student that reminds you why you chose this profession?

It's hard to pick just one because those moments happen all the time. Watching a student finally master a skill they've been working on for months or seeing their confidence grow is the best part of my job. Sometimes it's the little victories that mean the most, and being part of those moments is so rewarding.

“Every activity has a purpose, and some of the best learning happens when kids don't even realize they're working.”

School-based OT has evolved significantly over the years. What changes have you seen, and what excites you most about the future of pediatric practice?

Students today are facing more challenges than ever, and occupational therapy has become such an important part of helping them succeed. I love that schools are recognizing that every child learns differently and that there's more awareness of sensory processing, self-regulation, and executive functioning. It's exciting to see our profession continue to grow and find new ways to support students.

If you could bust one common myth about school-based occupational therapy, what would it be?

That we only help with handwriting! While handwriting can absolutely be part of what we do, it's really just one piece of the puzzle. School-based OTs help students with everything from fine motor skills and sensory regulation to independence, attention, and participating successfully throughout their school day.



Collaboration is such a big part of school practice. How do you work with teachers, families, and other professionals to help students succeed?

Collaboration is key. The best outcomes come when everyone is working together. I'm lucky to work with amazing teachers, speech therapists, physical therapists, social workers, psychologists, and support staff who all bring something different to the table. Families are such an important part of the team too. When we're all using the same strategies and supporting each other, students have the best chance to be successful.

What is one intervention, tool, or strategy that you find yourself recommending over and over because it really works?

Movement! I'm a big believer that movement is essential for learning. Kids aren't meant to sit still all day, and simple movement opportunities can make a huge difference in attention, regulation, and participation. I also use sensory strategies every day because every child is different, and finding what works for them can make all the difference.

What advice would you give to a new graduate or OT who is considering a career in school-based practice?

If you have the opportunity, work in a district with other occupational therapists. Having others to bounce ideas off of, ask questions, and learn from is invaluable, especially when new to the field.

Just for fun: If your students had to describe you in three words, what do you hope they'd say?

I'd hope they'd describe me as fun, kind, and encouraging. Although if you asked them, they'd probably just say, "She's the one with the swing and all the cool stuff!" Honestly...I'm okay with that!



Interested in
being in the
Spotlight?

Next Newsletter:
October 2026

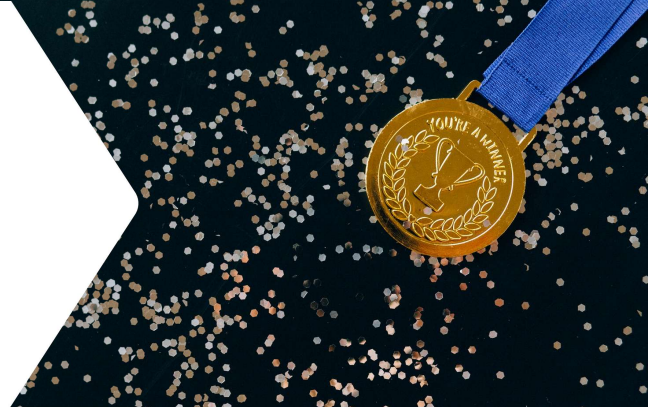
email: info@connota.org

Virtual Interview



THINKING OF SOMEONE WHO DESERVES
AN AWARD?

Stay tuned for 2026
Award Nominations



GIVE BACK TO THE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY COMMUNITY

Open your practice for a day and help students explore occupational therapy firsthand. ConnOTA's Job Shadow Program connects OT practitioners with students interested in learning what OT looks like in real-world settings.

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Share your
experience and
strengthen the
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ConnOTA's Mentorship Program creates intentional mentor-mentee partnerships focused on professional development, leadership, and career growth.



OCTOBER 30, 2026

2026 ConnOTA Fall Conference

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