



# Connection, Community, and Momentum: ConnOTA Spring Summit 2025

ConnOTA's 2025 Spring Summit was a resounding success! Held virtually, this year's event brought together occupational therapy practitioners, students, and advocates from across the state for a powerful day of connection, learning, and professional growth.

We were honored to welcome **Arameh Anvarizadeh, AOTA President-Elect**, as our keynote speaker. Her presentation, "*Connection and Community: Building a Transformative OT Culture*," was both **inspiring and motivating**, reminding us of the profound impact we can make when we foster unity, advocacy, and innovation within our profession.

In addition to the keynote, attendees received important updates during the **ConnOTA Business Meeting** and **Government Affairs Update**, keeping members informed and engaged in shaping the future of occupational therapy in Connecticut.

This year's new **abbreviated format** received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Participants appreciated the concise structure and meaningful content, paving the way for future events. Moving forward, ConnOTA will continue to host a **shorter virtual Spring Summit**, followed by a **full-day, in-person Fall Conference**—an opportunity to reconnect face-to-face and dive even deeper into our shared practice.

**Mark your calendars and stay tuned!** We can't wait to see you at our **Fall Conference**, where we'll continue to build momentum, celebrate our profession, and grow stronger—together.

By: Kristina Kuoco, MS, OTR/L, CBIS



Above: Keynote Speaker, President Elect Arameh Anvarizadeh, OTD, OTR/L, FAOTA

# Bridging the Gap: A Firsthand Look at the COTA to OT Transition

An Interview with Whitney Burns, MOT, OTR/L

**Can you tell us about your journey into the field of occupational therapy and what inspired you to become a COTA?**

In 2005 I met an inspiring OT, I sat down with her at the clinic and watched everyone doing different things.; from exercises, manual therapy, high level balance and custom splitting! The diversity of interventions just in this one setting had me intrigued. I went to Allegany College of Maryland (ACM) to become a COTA, I graduated in 2007. ACM offered clinical rotations immediately, which was a huge success in solidifying my interest. I was able to experience multiple settings to help determine which settings I was most interested in.

**Looking back, how did our role as a COTA influence your decision to pursue a master's degree in occupational therapy?**

After COTA school I quickly learned there is so much more I need to know. I moved to CT in 2007 and was so inspired by some of my supervising OTs.

In COTA school we go over diagnosis, precautions and contraindications, however, we were never taught the why, or understanding how to build a plan of care. I often felt like if I know more I can do better for my patients, I often felt like I could bring more to the table then be told what to do.

**Were there any specific challenges or hurdles you faced when deciding to go back to school for your master's degree, and how did you overcome them?** I started pursuing OT school in 2011, at this time, because of expiration timeframes, I needed re-take multiple prerequisites prior to applying. I did this for about a year, then my personal life put this on hold as we welcome 2 beautiful kids. In 2018 I started my pursuit again, by this time there were weekend bridge programs available! This is exactly what I needed in order to manage 2 kids in school and sports and my husband and I both working full time. In 2019 I was accepted into Bay Path University. In 2020 I was working in a SNF, because of my experience, I was on the COVID unit which caused me to feel increasingly stressed, over worked, heart broken, and fearful. On the home front my children's school was shut down and as mandated employees my husband and I continued working fulltime in person, and I continued with my schooling. With no local family support, my husband and I were forced to work opposite shifts. I was home during the day, navigating 3 academic schedules and then working second shift as a CNA. Often my nights continued after work to finish my assignments. The stress of this time lead to multiple health issues, broken teeth, strained eyes and my face and body swelling. This presented like an systemic allergic reaction, leading to multiple ER visits and specialists. The findings...stress. At this time, I just prayed I was going to make it out alive. I integrated exercise, even if it was just a walk, took vitamins and made a mindful decision to spend a couple minutes alone daily in order to decompress.



**“If I know more, I can do more for my patients.”**

**What was the biggest adjustment for you when transitioning from being a practicing COTA to a student again?** As a practicing COTA, I needed to be mindful to keep work and school separate until I graduated. It was difficult to not apply what I was learning to my daily job.

**How did you balance your work and academic responsibilities? Do you have any tips for others considering a similar path?** Get an agenda book, write out EVERYTHING, from meals, exercise/walks, assignments, and appointments. I put a time on each agenda items, color coordinated it, and stuck to it! It was so important to plan ahead, stick to the plan and put your head down to push through! There was no time for getting off track.

**Did you find that your background as a COTA gave you a unique perspective in your coursework or fieldwork during your master's program?** My background as a COTA was a huge advantage, I knew enough to ask deeper questions and bridge the gap of book knowledge and real life experience. Additionally, the comfort of starting fieldwork was less anxiety inducing as I felt comfortable building a rapport with caregivers and patients.

**What advice would you give to COTAs considering advancing their education and career in OT?** I would do your best to pursue within the first 5 years. This will save you time and money by avoiding retaking your prerequisites. No one can ever take away your education.

**How did you decide what was the best program to meet your personal and educational needs?** I needed a school close to home so I can still be mom. Bay Path University was able to meet and exceed those expectations with a weekend program.

**How has your role evolved since transitioning from a COTA to an Occupational Therapist?** My role evolved from only providing interventions to now creating and developing creative solutions for clients to age in place. Empowering and developing a relationship with COTAs, more insightfully, to have a clear understanding as to why I choose certain assessments and build a plan of care to meet the clients goals. When COTAs understand my why, they are more interested and motivated to ask questions and to challenge themselves and the client. As an OTR, I have the opportunity to understand the research, provide an education, and evidence base practices.

**What are some of the most rewarding moments you've experienced in your career so far?** I get the opportunity to give clients the chance to stay home for as long as possible, getting them involved in community resources, adapting their homes and building a means of transportation when they thought they were going to be home bound.

**What is your current unique practice setting, and how did you enter this role?** Currently I am working in mobile outpatient setting. We travel all over CT to bring OT/PT/SLP services to the home, ALF or daycare. In this setting we do not have to stay in the walls of the building or home. I have completed treatment in stores, restaurants, and public transportation to increase independence in the community. I have also been able to work closely with PCP and home health agencies to develop a continuum of care to prevent hospitalization.

# Our New Positions



## Stefanie Seanor, EdD, MBA, OTR/L, ABDA

Stefanie, ConnOTA's new SIS Co-Chair, has nearly 25 years of experience in pediatric and adolescent care across school and private practice settings. She has led inter-professional workshops, mentored practitioners, and advanced pediatric mental health interventions. Stefanie is a full-time assistant professor at Sacred Heart University and holds an EdD, MBA, and a Certificate in Interprofessional Leadership in Healthcare.



## Rhonda Schneider, COTA/L

As ConnOTA's Public Affairs Coordinator, Rhonda Schneider, COTA/L, promotes the association's mission by managing communications, marketing, and programs like job shadowing and mentorship. A 2024 graduate of CT State Manchester, she began her career in acute care at Hartford Hospital and is passionate about using purposeful activity to enhance well-being.



## Gus Schlegel, PhD, MPS, OTR/L, CHES, CAPS

As ConnOTA's Vice President, Gus leverages his extensive leadership experience and dedication to global healthcare advocacy to support strategic planning, policy development, and program growth. His years of service in Haiti—co-leading learning trips, fundraising for clinics, and consulting on community programs—deeply inform his work, including training new board members and strengthening ConnOTA's mission.



## **Building Advocacy Together: How Occupational Therapy Professionals Can Drive Change**

Over the past few months, ConnOTA's Government Affairs has been actively working to raise awareness of the value of occupational therapy in Connecticut. From public hearings and fieldwork collaborations to tracking key bills on scope of practice, licensing fees, and mental health services, we've used every opportunity to advocate for our profession. Whether bills advance or face setbacks, each step is an opportunity to educate lawmakers, build relationships, and shape the future of occupational therapy.

## **An Update from the Government Affairs Team**

Joyce E Rioux, Co-chair  
Government Affairs

Latasha Dionne, Co-chair  
Government Affairs

Andy Markowski, ConnOTA  
Lobbyist

Although SB 1052, An Act Concerning the Scope of Practice for Occupational Therapists and Occupational Therapy Assistants, will not be moving forward out of the Public Health Committee this year, this setback isn't the end of the road. It's a call to action. We must continue to strategize, plan, and build momentum for the bill next year. Advocacy doesn't stop when the legislative session ends—we must keep pushing year-round. This means engaging with lawmakers, strengthening ties with the Connecticut Department of Public Health, and raising awareness about the urgent need to modernize our scope of practice language. Sharing your impact stories about barriers to accessing OT services due to outdated language will help make a powerful case for change.

Here's how you can stay involved and help move our advocacy efforts forward:

- 1. Join Us at the Capitol:** Celebrate OT Month with ConnOTA on April 25th. Register for the event & show your support for the profession through advocacy.
- 2. Help Plan the Legislative Breakfast:** Be part of the team organizing our Fall event where OT practitioners and students can meet with lawmakers to discuss the critical role of OT in Connecticut.
- 3. Share Your Stories:** Your experiences are vital to our efforts. Share how barriers to OT services impact your clients. Your voice makes a difference!
- 4. Stay Informed:** Visit the ConnOTA Advocacy Center to stay up-to-date on efforts to modernize our scope of practice and track key legislative actions that affect our profession.
- 5. Access Key Resources in our Practice Center:**  
**Mental Health SIS & Advocacy Pathways:** Read the document shared at the 4/16 Mental Health CoP aimed to explore ways to advance OT's role in mental and behavioral health.
- Updated OT Guidelines for Connecticut Schools:** Review the latest draft of OT guidelines for Connecticut schools and stay current with best practices.
- 6. Learn About Advocacy Successes:** Check out page 6 of [April's OT Practice](#) to discover how ConnOTA and AOTA's collaboration led to major advocacy victories. These successes help us continue building momentum for the profession.

**7. Be an Advocate in Your Everyday Practice:** Every day is an opportunity to advocate for OT. By providing high-quality care and educating your colleagues, clients, and community about the value of OT, you're contributing to the cause. Don't hesitate to reach out when you encounter barriers to access.

**8. Maintain your ConnOTA Membership:** Your membership strengthens the collective voice of occupational therapy in Connecticut. By staying a member, you enable ConnOTA to amplify our advocacy efforts and continue making a significant impact on policy and practice.

**Want to get involved or have questions?**

Email us at [govaffairs@connota.org](mailto:govaffairs@connota.org) — we'd love to hear from you!

Every step counts. Whether you attend an event, share your story, or provide great care, you're helping strengthen occupational therapy in Connecticut. Together, we can keep advocating and making a difference.

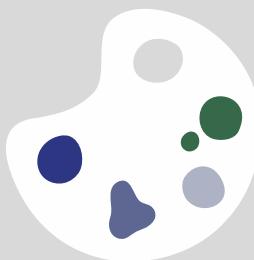


 **ADVOCACY AT THE  
capitol**

Date: April 25, 2025  
Time: 10:00am-2:00pm

Learn more and register  
[@connota.org](http://@connota.org)

# Paint Night



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APRIL 23, 2025 6:30PM-8:30PM

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FALL 2025

## 2025 FALL CONFERENCE

It is in the works!! More information coming soon!



ConnOTA is on Social Media!

