Occupational Therapy and Mental Health: The profession of occupational therapy was founded in public psychiatric hospitals over a century ago. Today, occupational therapy practitioners are highly trained health care professionals who work with clients across the lifespan, and whose education and expertise allow them to address many of the functional, social, sensory-motor and cognitive aspects of behavioral health disorders. Occupational therapy helps individuals live as independently as possible and to engage in meaningful and productive life roles. For example, barriers to achieving independence for someone who has experienced long-term mental illness can include difficulty with activities of daily living (self-care, medication management, etc.), instrumental activities of daily living (community mobility, cooking, grocery shopping, etc.), and the ability to structure their time in a way that promotes positive mental health. Occupational therapy practitioners are specifically trained to address these barriers to independence.

Shortage of Mental Health Practitioners: According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in 2018 nearly one in five adults in the United States experienced a mental or behavioral health problem. Additionally, approximately 21% of youth aged 13 to 18 experience a severe mental disorder at some point in their life; for children aged 8 to 15, the estimate is 13%. Untreated mental health disorders can lead to a host of adverse consequences, including homelessness, academic failure, unemployment, and contact with the criminal or juvenile justice system. Approximately 105.7 million Americans live in a federally designated mental health professional shortage area, and there is a severe shortage of mental health professionals across almost all specialties, particularly in rural areas. A 2016 report from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) projected the supply of personnel in selected behavioral and mental health fields to be 250,000 workers short of the projected demand in 2025.

Given these statistics, it is time Congress helps to assure access to timely, appropriate, and effective mental health treatment so individuals with mental and behavioral health conditions can obtain the services they need to thrive.

Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan Repayment Act (HR 2431): HR 2431, introduced by Rep. Grace Napolitano (D-CA) and Rep. John Katko (R-NY) would help increase the number of mental heal professionals working in underserved areas. The bill would provide loan forgiveness to mental health professionals, including occupational therapists, who practice in underserved areas.

Please cosponsor the Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan Repayment Act (HR 2431) in the House, or support introduction in the Senate. This bill would help to address the nation’s shortage of mental health professionals and improve access to mental health treatment across the life span.