

Testimony for HB 2432
House Committee on Health Care
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My name is Sally Giles, and I am a registered and board certified art therapist as well as a licensed counselor. I have been practicing art therapy since 2002 with a broad range of clients, though the majority of my work has been with older adults in long-term care settings.

Art therapy is particularly powerful for many of the concerns facing older adults. Because art therapy combines verbal counseling with non-verbal expression, it is possible to do deep and profound work on topics that are difficult to put into words. Mortality is difficult to put into words. Losing loved ones, experiencing terminal illnesses, enduring chronic pain, and facing existential questions are all difficult to put into words. Yet time and again, the individualized creative self-expression possible through art therapy has allowed clients I've worked with to gain insight, find meaning in pain and confusion, become more engaged in their lives, and find healing and peace.

Creative self-expression through art therapy not only draws on the strengths of clients, it also can help them build new ones, and helps others see them in new ways. In the context of aging and physical decline, art therapy uniquely offers clients an area in which to improve, to gain new skills and create visual evidence for it. People who are losing control of their health and daily activities can gain control of art materials and assert their individuality and independence. The artwork made in art therapy sessions is often treasured by surviving family members as a legacy of the strengths their loved ones had and the meaning they were making of their lives. Sometimes these art pieces are even a surprise to friends, family, and caregivers, challenging pervasive negative stereotypes of aging.

Art therapy is tremendously helpful for people experiencing memory loss due to neurocognitive impairments such as Alzheimer's disease. These illnesses rob people of their ability to understand the world or express themselves clearly. A skilled art therapist can help find the materials and processes that are comfortable and natural for each individual, drawing on their remaining strengths. In this way, individuals can express their thoughts and feelings about the frightening experience of memory loss and be understood by others. The relief and excitement I've experienced from clients when we find good alternatives or supplements to verbal communication count among my most meaningful life experiences.

In the field of care and services for older adults, art programming is becoming more prevalent. There are art classes taught by professional artists, intergenerational arts programming, and craft groups offered in assisted living and nursing care settings. This increase in opportunities for older adults to be creative is positive and exciting. Art therapists are in favor of the arts for everyone!

However, this increase in arts opportunities also leads to some confusion over what is art therapy and what is not. When I first became familiar with the retirement community I work for now, I saw that art therapy was offered weekly to residents as a part of the activity calendar of events. This was exciting to learn, but I was disappointed to find out the group was led by a person who did not have a Master's degree in art therapy and who was simply offering a craft project in which each participant created the same standardized object. Participants enjoyed the social time together as well as the satisfaction of completing a finished piece and the friendliness of the facilitator. However, this was not art therapy.

Art therapy is conducted by an art therapist who has been trained at the Master's level or higher. Art therapists obtain informed consent, evaluate the strengths and needs of those they work with to create a treatment plan, and encourage meaningful self-expression rather than uniform projects. Art therapists use their training with a wide range of art materials and processes to sensitively individualize their interventions. Art therapists combine counseling skills and knowledge of the evocative properties of different art materials to maintain therapeutic safety. Finally, art therapists can elicit creative engagement from individuals who do not identify as artists and who might not otherwise seek out beneficial creative opportunities.

In conclusion, art therapy is a distinct profession that offers unique mental health and wellness benefits for a wide range of populations, including older adults and those experiencing memory loss. An art therapy license will help protect the public by clarifying the difference between art therapy and other arts programming. Recognition with a state license will also help increase awareness and availability of this valuable profession to those who can benefit from it most.

Thank you.