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Implementation of a Service Learning Occupational Therapy Program in Nicaragua

Context: Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, with many people living in poverty (Tropez-Arceneaux et al., 2017). Individuals that experience poverty can have a wide range of limitations that affect their daily lives such as lack of healthcare services, resources and healthcare education. A needs assessment was conducted to discover services needed in Nicaragua for the implementation of a service learning project at SUNY Downstate.

Methods: An online questionnaire was distributed to 16 occupational therapy students and practitioners who traveled to Nicaragua between 2013-2020 through Circle of Empowerment. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions addressing services occupational therapy students and practitioners provided, the population worked with, materials brought, and services and materials that were needed.

Results: Responses suggest that the majority of participants provided services related to physical disability, hand therapy, splinting, and pain management for adults and pediatrics. The main materials identified as being needed included splinting materials, orthoses, hand strengthening devices, ace wrap, school and art supplies, and pediatric wheelchairs. Barriers such as language, limited transportation, and difficulty in carryover were encountered.

Conclusion: Findings suggest that occupational therapists can provide support in areas such as physical disability, splinting, and pain management in Nicaragua. Information gathered will be utilized to create a program through SUNY Downstate where occupational therapy students will provide relevant services. The study indicates that establishing a service learning project in Nicaragua could be beneficial.

Additional contributors to this project:

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