

Hippotherapy and Occupational Therapy at Westonwood Ranch

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BACKGROUND

Westonwood Ranch is a non-profit educational organization in Freeport, Florida with a mission to support adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in developing life and job skills. Westonwood Ranch offers an educational day program founded in Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) using the Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS) curriculum for learners twelve and older. In addition to the day program, Westonwood Ranch offers an after-school therapeutic riding to children of all ages. Westonwood Ranch's vision for the future consists of the addition of therapy services to include occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, and hippotherapy. Westonwood Ranch has initiatives to grow their micro-business enterprises and offer onsite semi-independent housing to facilitate and support their learners in their occupational goals.

PROGRAM DETAILS

Hippotherapy is defined as “the purposeful manipulation of equine movement as a therapy tool to engage sensory, neuromotor, and cognitive systems to promote functional outcomes” (AmericanHippotherapyAssociation.org). Hippotherapy services are intended to be delivered as an additional intervention in the child's plan of care and must be delivered by a licensed physical, occupational, or speech therapy professional with special training in equine-assisted therapy services (AmericanHippotherapyAssociation.org).

The plan for a hippotherapy program at Westonwood Ranch with the inclusion of occupational therapy services is designed to support learners in the day program and after-school programs alike. This program will be delivered by a part-time contracted occupational therapist certified to provide hippotherapy services. The OT will be responsible for conducting all screenings and assessments, using at least one objective measure to monitor progress, and sharing results and updates with client families. Additionally, the OT will train the associated volunteers and conduct quarterly volunteer training refresher courses and quarterly quality review surveys of volunteer and client/family experiences. This OT will work with the Equine Director to manage the care needs of the horses associated with the hippotherapy program.

FOCUSED QUESTION

Does hippotherapy increase engagement in ADLs and IADLs in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

METHODS

A literature review matrix and Critically-Appraised Topic Paper (CAT) was conducted to examine the evidence supporting hippotherapy for individuals with ASD. Evidence was collected and reviewed through a thorough systematic search of the EBSCO CINHAL database. Key terms used in the search included “hippotherapy, equine-assisted therapy, Autism spectrum disorder, ADL, IADL, and horse therapy.”

In creating the program proposal, a needs assessment was completed to understand the current assets, competition, and potential for growth of Westonwood Ranch's program. To obtain information for the needs assessment, meetings were conducted with key executive leaders, I was cross-trained in ABA, conducted sessions as a behavioral therapist, volunteered in the therapeutic riding sessions, and led a weekly OT-focused group on emotional wellness.

Additionally, I researched similar hippotherapy programs to understand payment models, intake paperwork, volunteer requirements, and marketing. I researched and demoed various billing services and researched required certifications to develop a novel hippotherapy program.

To prepare for the hiring process, I drafted a job description for the position at Westonwood Ranch. This position outlines the duties of the OT to include hippotherapy, individual, and group therapy sessions in Westonwood's programming. I compared online job postings and created a draft of a potential listing that could be used to hire an OT. Finally, I met with occupational and physical therapists from the community to share our visions for the program and discuss their potential interest in employment.

After completing the CAT and program proposal, I created associated Powerpoint presentations and a handout to be used to share information about the aspects of the program with key leaders at Westonwood Ranch and community partners.

After sharing the results with the executive director of Westonwood Ranch, I made the appropriate revisions and disseminated the final draft to be used in Westonwood's future programming.



RESULTS

The literature appraised in the development of the CAT suggested that hippotherapy is an effective tool to increase engagement, postural stability, motivation, and receptive communication (Ajzenman, Standeven, Shurtleff, 2013). Although the results did not show a direct and consistent application to improved participation in ADLs, it can be inferred that ADLs could be improved over time with the continued development of pre-requisite skills through hippotherapy (Llambias, Magill-Evans, Smith, Warren, 2016). Additionally, it is important to note that few articles were available examining hippotherapy exclusively with the ASD population. Of the articles that were appraised, most had very small sample sizes.

The market research for the hippotherapy program identified a significant unmet need in the community. There is an absence of hippotherapy services in Northwest Florida, with only therapeutic riding services being currently offered. Westonwood Ranch's hippotherapy program would be the only service equipped to support the needs of those otherwise unable to access equine-assisted therapies.

The program is structured in 8-week terms, with weekly 1:1 60 minute sessions. Payment will be received through insurance billing, locally-available scholarship funding, and private pay. A team of specially-trained volunteers will assist as horse handlers and side walkers to maximize the safety of the client.

The needs assessment determined the required tools that would need to be obtained for the hippotherapy program include a ramp for assisted mounting of the horse, a surcingle, a bareback pad, and a safety waist belt.

To bill for services, the company Balents was selected as an outsourcing service. The anticipated contract with Balents will establish the necessary insurance credentialing, provide a documentation platform, and complete all billing certifications, claims, and follow-up correspondence.



BOTTOM LINE FOR OT

Occupational therapy services have been shown to increase independence in ADLs and IADLs for children and adolescents with ASD. The research shows that the use of a horse as a modality in the delivery of occupational therapy services, such as in hippotherapy, can improve individuals' motivation, participation, posturing, and social skills which may make therapeutic activities more effective (Llambias, Magill-Evans, Smith, Warren, 2016). More research is imperative in determining the application of the positive outcomes of hippotherapy services to improvement in ADL and IADL participation.

Westonwood Ranch's vision for helping adolescents with ASD learn job and life skills in a ranch setting would be supported by the inclusion of occupational therapy and hippotherapy services in the program. Providing hippotherapy services would allow participants the opportunity to develop new skills which could allow them to access meaningful activities in their daily lives, in the community, and in Westonwood's programming. Additionally, there are not any other hippotherapy providers in Northwest Florida, creating a true opportunity to meet an unmet need in the community. It is beneficial for Westonwood Ranch to develop and implement an occupational therapy program with a hippotherapy component to support learners in lifelong success.

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Images: Westonwood.org