

## **“European Year of Volunteering 2011”**

A position paper from the Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries (COTEC)

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Year 2011 was designated by the European Commission the “*European Year of Volunteering*” (EYV). The European Commission through The European Year of Volunteering wants to praise the altruistic efforts of a great number of European citizens who are making changes in our society through volunteering.

Volunteers work in their communities during their free time without being paid, for example in hospitals and sports clubs, providing social services and helping people in need and society in general. Through civic participation, which is a foundation for volunteering, we are taking care of the needs of the disadvantaged, facilitating the active participation of all groups in society and/or developing a socio-cultural aspect of community. The benefits of volunteering for each individual active citizen, for the society as a whole and even for the economy, are immensely high. Getting a sense of solidarity and community spirit, a sense of usefulness as well as achieving new social and professional skills and greater confidence, are some of the reasons why millions of people engage in volunteer work. It also offers a way of meeting new people, making new friends and creating social networks, a very important contribution to social cohesion.

Activities around the European Union throughout 2011 will *enable and facilitate an environment for volunteering, empower volunteer organizations and improve the quality of volunteering, recognize and reward volunteer activities and celebrate the commitment of millions of people – raising awareness of the value and importance of volunteer work.* [http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/focus/focus840\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/focus/focus840_en.htm)

### **THE COTEC POSITION – A PREFERRED FUTURE**

The Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries (COTEC) position on Volunteering is that the potential impact of this kind of active citizenship can facilitate social cohesion and inclusion, as well as increase the social capital of community.

### **OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY AND VOLUNTEERING – RAISING AWARENESS OF A STRONG EU-OT COMMUNITY FOR BUILDING A STRONG EUROPE**

The key role of Occupational Therapy is to enable individuals and groups to actively participate in daily occupations by reducing barriers to participation.

Occupational therapists understand the human need to support and enable other people to maximize their potential and recognize the challenges and rewards of volunteering. The core principles of occupational therapy support individuals to actively participate in activities. Using the rich resource of volunteers, there is enormous potential for occupational therapists to promote the wellbeing of individuals and groups by bringing the skills of volunteers into the therapeutic setting and using volunteering as part of the process to enable individuals to overcome their challenges to participate in the community.

In recent years occupational therapists have increasingly understood the benefits of working with volunteers in communities facing a wide range of social issues. This has led occupational therapists to develop successful strategies to facilitate and establish effective partnerships within communities. These partnerships have enabled communities to use and develop their resources and capacities. Occupational therapy is practised in a wide range of community settings, including hospitals, health centres, homes, workplaces, schools and specialised housing. Occupational therapists work with people whose participation is restricted by their limitations in activities of self care, productivity and leisure due to physical or mental health issues such as injury, learning difficulties, or social circumstances, to enable them to live their lives to the full.

Occupational therapists are involved in various volunteer projects such as with:

- refugees
- elderly people
- families at risk
- socially excluded people
- people with mental health issues

Volunteering is a powerful way of engaging citizens in tackling contextual challenges in society. The past has shown us the great economic, social and political contributions of volunteering. **Occupational therapists encourage people to do volunteer work, both to enable others and to enable themselves.**