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FIELD WORK IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS FOR THE DEAF

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I am a first year student at the University of Maryland Graduate School of Social Work, Baltimore, Maryland with a current semester load of six hours of classroom work, plus ten credit hours of field work studies. Field work is basically training under supervision in a social agency. My placement this semester is with the National Association of the Deaf.

A deaf person as a social worker is a new concept difficult for many social work educators and practitioners to accept. Social work has traditionally placed very heavy emphasis on fluency in communication. Verbal communication as well as writing skills are thought to be the two most important forms of communication. These standards when used without regard to the unique cultural and social heritage of deaf people serve to discriminate against the deaf. I feel that these standards must be rearranged to be more flexible in regard to deaf people.

With the aid of an interpreter I have been able to share in about 60 or 70 per cent of class room discussion. I feel that an interpreter is very important, but the uses to which an interpreter can be put are limited. Without an interpreter I would not have understood anything and my participation in classroom discussion would have been impossible. An interpreter does not lessen the isolation that a deaf person experiences in his relationship to hearing student. The feeling of aloneness is very strong.

My major is Social Strategy which includes theories from many of the different social work concentrations, but community organization theory is the most predominant. My work is with people who have combined themselves into groups, organizations, institutions and with the various sectors of society itself. The goal of Social Strategy is to change society by making these social systems more representative of the desires and expectations of the people whom they serve.

I work 30 hours a week for the National Association of the Deaf where I am involved in planning for the possible construction of a retirement complex for the deaf. The planning that I have done has involved the

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assessing of the feasibility of the retirement complex and developing a questionnaire for the elderly deaf in which they are asked to express their feelings about the complex. At present I have sent out three hundred of these questionnaires. From this limited sampling I hope to gain a general understanding of the needs of elderly deaf people that will enable us to determine the demand for, and at the same time, assess the feasibility of this project.

Also I have been in contact with the various branches of the government both at the State and Federal level to obtain information and to sound them out concerning the idea of the complex.

One of the major difficulties which I have had to face in planning this project has been the lack of past research on the elderly deaf. While I know a great deal about the problems of the aged in relationship to housing, medical, social and rehabilitative needs, I know very little about how deaf people experience the same problems. What has been written in the past has been basically individual observations of what people surmise to be the case. We need concrete research data and observations growing out of direct experience with the elderly deaf. My goal at the National Association of the Deaf is to obtain this data and put it to use in planning services to elderly deaf people.

The final outcome of my work, as I view it myself, will be a policy on aging deaf people. This policy will emerge once we have an understanding of the people we want to serve, of existing services and services that can be modified to aid the deaf. It means using all resources that are available to the general population of the aged and developing new ones to meet the special needs of deaf individuals. The logical conclusion is change in deaf society and also within those hearing groups directly affected—it means an entire rethinking of an old problem and finally arriving at new and unique solutions.

Finally we come to the question of how do I view my future role. I feel that the institutions and organizations involved with the deaf have traditionally suffered because of a lack of planning and a slowness to adapt to changes. I feel that social workers are badly needed within state schools and that deaf social workers can be especially effective in helping the school age deaf population and in changing the environment of the schools to make them a better place in which to live and study. Deaf social workers can influence important change within hearing society in the way they view deaf people.

For this reason as well as for professional status, deaf social workers should be active within hearing society as well as deaf society. I feel that deaf social workers in their contact with deaf people should emphasize habilitation and should make it their major goal in their work with deaf society.

I believe that the social work profession is one of the most flexible professions. As a social worker, I am dedicated to making the institutions

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within society more representative of the people they serve, and thus stronger. Physical science views change as the major law of the universe, something from which nothing or no individual is immune. I have the same feeling about change but instead of just change, I would prefer "Planned Change". With this I conclude my speech.