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PROBLEMS THE DEAF CONSUMER MEETS

By BETTY HICKS, Graduate Student, Western Maryland College

My contact with vocational rehabilitation began when I was a senior at the Arkansas School for the Deaf. I was grateful when I learned that the Arkansas Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would split the cost of my college education with my parents. The vocational rehabilitation agency would pay for my tuition and books while my parents would be paying for my room and board and, of course, provide my allowance. This seemed like a fair deal until I arrived at Gallaudet and discovered that students from California were receiving much more. Everything was paid for by their state, and this included monthly allowances! I was, however, grateful for whatever help I could get. As I said before, vocational rehabilitation covered my book expenses, but this did not include supplies such as notebooks, pens, pencils, and so forth. I'll share with you a secret. I made a deal with a luckier student. I charged to my vocational rehabilitation account a \$5.00 book that he needed, whereas he charged an extra \$5.00 worth of supplies on his vocational rehabilitation account. Then we swapped the book and the supplies and everyone was happy, me with my supplies, and he for doing me a good turn!

Looking back to my undergraduate days, I feel that it would be more fair to everyone concerned if vocational rehabilitation would standardize coverage.

The biggest expense for my college education was room and board and this is still true. In my case, my parents paid for it, but in many cases, vocational rehabilitation footed the bill. Looking back, I know that what was true of me, was true of many others. I am sure you all remember how terrible the food was in your college days. As a result, many of us ended up buying food in the snack bar instead of eating in the cafeteria, even though the food there was already paid for. Moreover, about half of the students did not eat breakfast. The Gallaudet food service gained \$1.25 every morning when your client did not eat breakfast. This meant much money spent for board went down the drain. For the states that do cover room and board, some other type of arrangement for food service might be better.

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After my graduation from Gallaudet College in 1969 with a Bachelor of Arts in English, I decided to go on to graduate school. I was determined, however, to be on my own. My parents had had a hard enough time putting me through college and another two years seemed an intolerable imposition. I was fortunate enough to get full support from the District of Columbia Department of Vocational Rehabilitation for tuition, books, room and board making it possible for me to enter graduate school at Gallaudet. I withdrew in the second semester and went to work at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for six months.

When I decided to resume graduate work in the fall of 1970, I discovered, to my dismay, that I no longer qualified for support from the District vocational rehabilitation agency because I was residing in Maryland. I had moved to Frederick planning to transfer to Western Maryland College and study full-time. However, the Maryland vocational rehabilitation agency took care of my tuition and books. But, I was back to where I started – the problem of room and board. In fact, the problem was magnified. Western Maryland College has no housing for graduate women. Fortunately I found two roommates with whom I shared rent and food expenses as well as dish-washing chores! Dr. David Denton, Superintendent of the Maryland School for the Deaf, was kind enough to put up with my irregular hours to enable me to be a part-time teacher aide and full-time student. Things rolled smoothly financially until the second semester began when I had to practice-teach. There was no way I could practice-teach full-time and be a teacher aide at the same time. It was beginning to look as if I would have to work full-time as an aide and postpone my practice teaching and other studies for a while. Mr. Howard Watson, my vocational rehabilitation counselor at the time, came to my rescue. He contacted Miss Miriam Hooper, president of the International Quota Club, who in turn got in touch with several chapters of the Quota Club in nearby areas and they donated \$200 a month in scholarship funds to cover my second semester expenses. This aid from the Quota Club was a life-saver. It enabled me to devote my time to my studies and research work for my thesis. The Quota Club and other similar service organizations are good sources of financial aid in just such dire emergencies.

I have now completed all the course requirements for my Masters from Western Maryland College. All I have to do now is complete my thesis. I am hoping to make it this June!

The greatest problem in graduate school at Western Maryland was obtaining funds for interpreting services. It was absolutely necessary to have the services of an interpreter to get full benefit of the courses. One-third of the requirements for a master's degree are outside the area of specialization which in my case was, of course, education of the deaf. Naturally, these classes are taught by professors who do not know sign language, and the college does not have the funds for interpreting fees.

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We contacted many people inside and outside vocational rehabilitation for help with paying interpreting fees. In spite of all our efforts, we were given the runaround. It was, "See this or that person," only to find ourselves back with the very same person who had said there were no funds available. We later learned of one individual who had received funds for interpreting services while he was attending graduate school. In contrast, eight deaf graduate students at Western Maryland College were being left "high and dry". They were unable to get funds from any of the many sources they contacted. They received the same old excuse, "We have no funds available for interpreters at this time." Perhaps this more fortunate individual was able to get these funds because he had the advantage of being a "VIP" which gave him more "pull" than the average person. I am not suggesting that he should not have received the funds, but I am suggesting that assistance in obtaining interpreter service should be available to every deaf person who is working to advance professionally and/or academically. It seems to me that a group of eight should have had a better chance of receiving financial aid.

To me, the solution seems to be the creation, on the state level, of the position of Commissioner to the Deaf. One of the responsibilities of this official would be coordinating interpreting services including screening requests for the services and seeing that the requests are not duplicated. By this I mean seeing that several agencies do not end up paying the same interpreter for services rendered to a particular deaf person or persons. I feel, however, that the choice of interpreter should rest with the person using the services. Fees for the interpreter should be determined in compliance with the standards set by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

If the problem of interpreting services were solved, training for deaf persons would be a much easier matter. This, I feel, is an area that needs early attention and improvement.