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Letter to the Editor

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I strongly recommend serious consideration be directed to the establishment of a Research and Training Center, or a federal initiative that would include a strong focus on substance abuse and deafness. As the Director of the Minnesota Chemical Dependency Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals, I would like to express my concern about the reluctance of professionals in our field to recognize the critical issues of substance abuse within deaf and hard of hearing communities. The omission of a priority on a national level in this area has extreme ramifications for deaf and hard of hearing populations in this country. While we have increased our knowledge and expertise within the field of mental health counseling, there is no professional licensure or certification programs for teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and other professionals within the field of deafness that offers in-depth training in the area of substance abuse. College curriculums for professionals in our field seldom require course work related to alcohol/drug education. This is alarming considering the increase of chemical dependency throughout the country.

Since our program opened in 1989, we have worked with over 200 deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Approximately 90% of these individuals come to us after the age of 21 and by that time have begun to experience legal/family consequences. Although, for some reason, intervention doesn't seem to be happening until after the age of 21, this same group reports using alcohol/chemicals since early adolescence. However, in the 3 and a half years we have been in operation, less than 1% of our population has been below the age of 19. There seems to be denial and resistance on the part of service providers (including schools for the deaf) to identify and deal with substance abuse issues. Historically, some of this denial has been related to the lack of services available when a person is identified as needing intervention. However, as more services have become available, the reluctance to address these issues continues.

There is a tremendous lack of trained professionals in this area as evidenced by the difficulty we have in hiring deaf or hearing individuals fluent in sign language and knowledgeable about substance abuse. There has been little research, and therefore, meager statistical data available in this area. Without research data, the struggle to fund prevention, intervention, and treatment programs reaps little success.

Substance abuse issues specific to deaf and hard of hearing persons and their families do exist and without research and training efforts specifically targeted towards this underserved population, we will be unable to develop innovative methods and materials to effectively address existing needs. Unchecked, chemical dependency will continue to take its toll on the physical, mental and spiritual resources of these deaf and hard of hearing communities.

Families, professionals and consumers throughout the country are all struggling with the issues related to the lack of general resources, prevention and treatment materials, community resources, programs, and research in the area of substance abuse. We need to establish a resource and training center or some other means to coordinate and centralize efforts in this area. This center could serve as a model in providing information and guidance in this much needed effort. I would appreciate your support in making this issue a priority.

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