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VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAMS AND PROBLEMS

DON PETTINGILL

Speaking or writing on a subject such as deaf people has the discouraging tendency to mushroom! Every time you think you have something nailed down right and proper, two or three other "programs and problems" tap you on the shoulder. This has become especially true in the last decade of vastly increased government activity in vocational rehabilitation, education, welfare and anti-poverty fields. Mushroom? The word should be: "Exploding!"

In many ways all the programs are gratifying. But frankly, I am becoming a bit apprehensive over the problems being created that didn't use to be so obvious! Are we losing sight of the ultimate goal that should *never* change: that of sound habilitation, or at least rehabilitation, of the deaf to good, substantial, self-respecting, well-adjusted *independent* individuals? Or am I just losing my perspective? Becoming project-happy?

More and more highly planned programs for the deaf are being conceived by men far removed from the day-by-day life of deaf people. More and more highly trained counselors who have never had insight into the "programs and problems" of the average deaf are coming into the field. More and more money is being poured into comprehensive training centers, community centers, and just plain centers. It appears to me that more and more emphasis is being placed on making a big showing through impressive caseload

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figures in order to justify and further expand more and more services to the deaf. I call such tactics the "numbers racket."

To be sure, numbers are important, but it looks to me like we are encouraging our deaf citizens, from the cradle to the grave, to turn their rightful share of normal problems in life over to professional counselors in the schools, VRA, community centers and what have you?

The following are a few statistics from my May, 1967, caseload and casework report. These figures have been fairly consistent, percentage-wise, in recent months. One hundred and two persons were seen by the Callier Counseling Division during May: 3 new clients, 27 reactivated, 42 continuous and 30 non-case information interviews. Thirty-eight were seen in my office, 16 at my home, 19 at the client's home and 12 at his place of employment. Nineteen interviews were handled by phone.

A total of 235 interviews, consultations and contacts were made with and for these 102 persons. Forty-five needed help finding employment. Eight of those were placed on jobs, the rest either could not be placed immediately or needed evaluation and more counseling. Fifteen had problems of adjustment in their present jobs, 23 had personal-family adjustment problems, 36 came with miscellaneous problems such as the need for an interpreter, traffic ticket, repossessed cars, or fights with the wife or neighbors. Twenty-four wanted information and instructions more than anything.

One hundred and seven consultations were held with other agencies, companies or individuals. Five were with our own Callier staff, 14 with VRA, 5 with the employment commission, 16 with welfare, 2 with Social Security, and 15 with various companies or individuals such as attorneys or personnel men.

The above points out some basic needs of the rank and file deaf; that of personal and social adjustment, information, interpreting, and all-around counseling rather than simply training or job placement.

Of the many who come to my office or corner me elsewhere, I detect quite a few who do not need help at all but have fallen into the habit of running to someone every time he has a minor crisis.

Where and how do we draw the line? Could part of the answer lie in charging our clients for our services? Would that help them

understand the value of our time and money, and just how serious their problems really are? Should we keep on "wet-nursing" them indefinitely, or start teaching them to stand on their own feet and pay for what they get? Charging clients would also take care of the "numbers racket."

I have heard a lot of criticism of the "numbers racket," but no one seems to be doing anything about it. In fact I have a few instances here that will show you it is indeed becoming an unfortunate fact.

A letter recently came from another center in another city asking me to find a job for a man who wanted to move. He had 14 years experience as a welder. He just wanted a change! No complaints over money or working conditions were voiced. He wanted the same type of work with comparable benefits. I could not help feeling this was going too far. I wondered if, in his eagerness to build up his caseload, the counselor was taking in people he had no business monkeying with. There are enough deaf people genuinely in need of help without encouraging all of them to become unweaned!

In spite of all the talk in the schools and in VRA against the dangers of stereotyping the deaf, that is still a universal weakness. It is much easier to use accepted and established trends than to try to come up with something new and different. To "ride the wave" of pressure from people who have seen their friends "make" it in a certain trade and who want to try that, too, rather than to treat each one as an individual, is the path of least resistance. It is also more profitable for the "numbers racket" because the clients come back again and again.

We all know key punch is a good field for the deaf . . . *but not all of them!* A few years ago the Internal Revenue service opened a new regional tax processing center and needed key punch operators. Fortunately, or maybe I should say, unfortunately, they were well aware of the capabilities of the deaf, and contacted the school for the deaf and the local VRA counselor. I swear the whole outfit went crazy and trained everything they could get their hands on in the art of key punch. Thirty-three deaf persons ended up working for the center and the counselor was awarded a regional honor for his "outstanding" work. What isn't so well known is that a year or so later, only 11 remained. Most of the rest were released as not competent.

One frustrated young man stands out in my mind. He had been trained in key punch, and out of school for a couple of years, unable to hold on to one job for long. Talking to him, it struck me that he was possibly very good material for drafting. He was good in math, had a beautiful hand-printing style, and had always been interested in drafting. This boy was placed on a key punch job with the promise that it would be arranged for him to go to drafting school if possible. Although I had to talk to his employer a couple of times in the beginning, he had been under this arrangement for over a year, paying his own tuition in the drafting school, when I had an opportunity to talk to the authorities at the school for the deaf about him. As usual, I was admonished, "Watch that boy. He's a tough one, a drifter!" I was pleased to be able to reply that he was not at all . . . not anymore.

Every once in a while I come across a deaf youth a year or so out of school who is working, perhaps buying a car, and is very happy. I cannot resist asking him all about himself. When I inquire who helped him find his job, he looks surprised at such a question and says, "Nobody. I found it myself." How? Well, he watched the papers and talked to employed friends and relatives. Then when he found what he wanted, he just went and applied. It never entered his mind that he should ask someone else to find a job for him. He had the minimum skills needed and he knew what was expected of him.

Those are the kind of young people I love to meet. There used to be a lot of them around, before they began to discover there were people to do these things for them. There are probably still a lot of them around, and the best we can do is to leave them alone!

There is also the ambitious, well-motivated young fellow with ample training who willingly beats the streets in search of suitable employment. It is only after a long series of fruitless attempts, traced to his deafness, that he finally appeals for a bit of help, or "pull." A well-placed phone call or personal introduction to employers by a sensible counselor is usually sufficient. Beware of doing too much for this type of client. He *will* find work eventually in spite of you or me, but it does help lessen his discouragement and speed things up a bit if you give him a good lead or two or set up an appointment for him.

I feel that we are missing the boat in our approach. In my experi-

ence in working with the deaf, I have found their problems of finding and holding jobs due more to their insecurity and inability to adjust rather than to their lack of comprehensive training, and to the picture the public seems to have in general. What we need more than anything is a strong program to teach the deaf to "grow up," to shake off the "gimmee" attitudes they seem to develop in schools for the deaf. We need to educate the public to our abilities, not our disabilities.

Now let's go back and discuss habilitation. Proper early training is far more effective and less expensive and heart-breaking than rehabilitation. Want to argue? I know you are sick and tired of hearing about schools failing the deaf, but you have to admit somebody is letting them down and, in view of the value of proper early training, who else is responsible besides parents and the schools?

I remember when I was in school, each kid had certain responsibilities, duties and chores—and we did them, or else! We were expected to make up our own beds, and keep our rooms clean. Then we had extra duties such as keeping the halls clean, washing windows once a month, or keeping the grounds free of debris. Today it seems students are given hotel service. This, of course, is partly due to misguided parents who are unwilling to allow "little Johnny" to be a slave. Actually it taught us responsibility.

Schools for the deaf should take a new look and their programs and start to specialize in some preventive medicine. Every effort should be made to see that the kids grow up to be responsible adults. They should learn that it is a tough, cold world before they have to find out the hard way. They should be taught not to expect people to do things for them, but to do things for themselves and on their own as much as possible. Every effort should be made to expose them to desirable, responsible work habits. In fact, I feel all this is so important that they should be graded on it. This personal and social adjustment responsibility, initiative and motivation will pay a lot more dividends than, say, a course in Shakespeare—which they don't understand anyway.

Gallaudet prospects are given all the encouragement they need. The same should be true of the other, much larger percent of the student body who need that encouragement far more. Every effort should be made to expose the vocational student to a desirable

trade as he approaches the last few years of his schooling. The art of earning a living should be stressed. Just as Gallaudet prospects are encouraged and prepared for further education, so should these students be prepared to go on to learn some skills and not jump on the first "two bit" job they can find. Until this is successfully done, all the fancy training centers in the world will do no good.

While still in school, the pupils should be taken on tours through the many and varied places of business: factories, print shops, lens grinding, dental labs, and the countless other trades especially fitted to the deaf, to give the student a realistic picture of the world of work and help him make up his mind what he wants. Then, if the trade he desires is not available in his school, he should be encouraged to pursue that trade just as soon as possible after he leaves school.

Parents should be included in this planning for post-school training so they, too, will understand and encourage the youth to accept more training in the trade he wishes, as soon as he can. It is important that he do this before he seriously enters the labor market, for once he has a wife and family, he is almost doomed to an unskilled job and second class citizenship if he doesn't have that training.

On a research and demonstration project in Indiana in the summer of 1964, I found, to my chagrin, that the seniors—even the certificate grads—weren't about to accept any more schooling or training.

Of the 24 trainees in the program, only five were from that year's senior class, and those five weren't very cooperative when they found they weren't getting paid for the "work" they were doing. This convinced me that if we expect young deaf adults to accept our post-school training facilities, we should start to prepare them for it long before they leave school.

The upper-average deaf do not necessarily need special segregated training schools, to my way of thinking. Neither do I think that lack of special training facilities is the main problem of the deaf. Training can be had or purchased practically anywhere: in public vocational high schools, technical schools for the hearing, and on-the-job training situations. I have always felt that if a deaf person expects to make his way successfully in, say, the printing field, he should be able to learn how to be a printer in a situation

similar to that under which he will work. He doesn't stop learning when he leaves the school but continues to grow on his first job and every one thereafter. He should learn, in training, how to get along with hearing teachers (employers), fellow students (employees), and be able to hold his own if he expects to hold down a technical job. If he has the proper foundation of good habits, he should not have any serious problems.

Perhaps the new NTID will solve many things. I believe in integrating the older deaf student with hearing students in order to give him a more normal, better-balanced outlook. I also believe an integrated technical center will fill the needs of the segment of the deaf who are not quite good enough to make Gallaudet, but too good to be stuck with anything but the best training. Let's hope that here, too, we don't lose sight of the ultimate goal, a *technical* institute, rather than another liberal arts college like Gallaudet.

The prevailing theory in schools and VRA is that a student should be given, say, six months of one trade, then nine months of another. This is based on the assumption that it will show him he can learn anything if he wants to and tries hard enough, but is not sound in my opinion—especially during the last two or three years of his schooling. First you have to teach him to want to, and to try! And to understand that elusive theory. If I can't understand it how do you expect a deaf kid to?

Rather, I think this system teaches the youth irresponsibility: that it is right and proper for him to drift from one job to another as he sees fit. I have talked to enough boys and girls to get the distinct impression that they are mixed up and frustrated from all the shifting around, disappointed that they have no specific skills, wants, or even any idea of what they do want. So, they drift because they haven't been taught anything of lasting value.

The Indiana project also convinced me that, on the whole, only the "marginal one-third" need comprehensive training centers. Since then, what I have observed of the centers we do have, and their inability to attract sufficient trainees to justify their existence, serves to support my belief. Furthermore, such centers should have counselors with empathy and understanding plus classes, courses, lectures, movies, and every other possible approach in teaching the client personal and social adjustment. Until they do, I doubt if end

results will improve much. And until teachers and counselors, trainers of teachers and counselors, and trainers' trainers are fully exposed to the adult deaf, they will never understand what they are up against, or what they are really supposed to accomplish.

For the limited deaf, I see nothing wrong with sheltered workshops such as Goodwill Industries. There, these people learn to work, get along with others, and learn simple trades. They learn to adjust in real life situations, to ride the busses, manage their own money, rent, food, clothing and leisure time. And regardless of what the dreamers tell you, that is about the maximum you can expect from the "marginal one-third!" In these situations, too, funds should be provided for that all-important personal and social adjustment counseling.

I would like very much to see some sheltered *factories* established for this segment of the deaf rather than more expensive but practically useless training centers. A certain percentage of our deaf population will never be gainfully employed and we all know it. Private enterprise simply will not hire them, except as dishwashers, car washers or janitors, at starvation wages and man-killing hours.

The government spends billions on contracts with private industry for countless things—electronics parts, for instance. The government also spends millions trying to rehabilitate this segment of the deaf, so they can become dishwashers, car washers or janitors. Nobody cares about the number of hours they have to work to earn the slave wages they do, as long as they are "employed," and the conscience of society is eased.

Wouldn't it be feasible and desirable to establish a few sheltered factories around the country to employ these multiply-handicapped individuals? Couldn't some of those lucrative contracts be assigned to such factories? At least we could assure those people some security and a bit of self-respect. I know it could become a monster out of control, but the problems involved would be no more, and probably far less than those we face in trying to rehabilitate them, and at a far lower cost.

How about a workshop to study this idea?

In conclusion, I cannot emphasize too strongly that we must *not* try to do any more for the adult deaf than is absolutely necessary. Rather, we should start in the schools, for it is easier to train the kids right than to try to train them over. We should bear

in mind the dangers of stereotyping the deaf. We should redouble our efforts at good public relations to educate the hearing world to our abilities, not disabilities. The people who actually work with the deaf adult should be required to prove that they have true understanding of the problems involved rather than be allowed to qualify simply on academic accomplishments. Empathy cannot be learned from books.

I want to summarize my thinking with this little story. I have used it before to emphasize a point in connection with schools grinding out so many "mistakes." Today, in view of the exploding picture of services to the adult deaf, it takes on new meaning.

A young couple was very much in love and wanted to get married. However, the divorce statistics of the country disturbed them and made them hesitate. One day the boy told the girl, "Honey, I have a theory. Why don't we just live together a year and then if we find out it is a mistake, we can each go our own way with no hard feelings." The girl replied, "But what will we do with the mistakes?"

The point seems to have hit home—too well. It looks like too much attention is now being focused on correcting all plain and fancied mistakes rather than to prevent them. Well meaning but often misinformed people seem to be getting hold of good programs and good deaf people and making mistakes out of them, too!

We must watch this and control the tendency to build up impressive but questionable statistics which show the great pressing need of more and better services to the deaf. We cannot correct one mistake by making others.

Have we forgotten the fine deaf people who made out very well *sans* speech, VRA counselors or community centers? I, for one, still value the friendships of many such people and am continually amazed at their wisdom and self reliance. Isn't there danger in our eagerness to cash in on governmental largesse?

A "Quotable Quote" in the Reader Digest the other day fits my mood: "Any man who thinks he is going to be happy and prosperous by letting the government take care of him should take a closer look at the American Indian."