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CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

BOYCE R. WILLIAMS

Professional rehabilitation workers for the adult deaf are rapidly becoming aware of the tremendous challenges to them that are inherent in Public Law 89-333, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1965. Moreover, they are as quickly recognizing that at last long cherished opportunities for service in depth to their deaf clients are now possible. The law provides a solid legal base and authorizations for adequate funds that are necessary to realize appropriate service opportunities for severely handicapped deaf people.

The challenges to professional workers have their roots in the relatively overwhelming needs of deaf adults. Although these needs are many, varied, overlapping, and complex, they can be conveniently grouped in four broad classifications: (1) Personnel, (2) Facilities, (3) Services, and (4) Community Development.

In the following pages, I shall offer some thoughts on each of these classifications. However, first it may be appropriate to share with you some guiding principles about those whom we would serve. These principles relate directly to our main responsibility as professional rehabilitation workers for the adult deaf, specifically reduction of the pervasive problem of their *underemployment*.

THE DEAF POPULATION

Our 250,000 deaf people have very complex problems. Many of them are without useful speech despite years of training. Many have limited language skills. They receive messages principally through their eyes. They send messages by combinations of signs, gestures, speech,

and writing. Most of them have normal strength, mobility, and intelligence. They strive for achievement within the limitations society imposes in the face of their inadequate verbal communication. This is the handicapping base of their disability. It is primarily psychosocial. It manifests itself in many ways: underinvolvement in the main stream of community life; limited sharing with fellowmen; lack of acceptance among neighbors, employers, and fellow employees; severe underemployment. It seldom yields at all to medical intervention such as drugs, surgery, or prosthesis. It does yield, in approximate ratio to their availability in quality and depth, to training and adjustment services that stem from comprehensive, expert diagnosis that may involve the disciplines of psychology, audiology, medicine, and education, and to public relations activities that stress the deaf person's strengths.

Deep-seated problem areas for vocational rehabilitation exist with respect to deaf people. First, the most basic and achievable need of the deaf person, specifically skill in reading and writing, is insufficiently emphasized in childhood training. Formal training has generally so heavily emphasized the development of speech skills in the deaf child that speech has erroneously assumed the position of being the equivalent of rather than a vehicle for language. To put it another way, teachers of the deaf have focused disproportionate time and energy upon an outlet (speech) for language rather than on power in language itself. Language and speech are referred to interchangeably, confusing professional and lay workers alike. Hence, the handicapping aspects of deafness are often intensified by a needless wall of language deficiency.

Second, an incorrect image of the deaf person's potential in verbal communication skills stems from this heavy emphasis on speech and the frequently unrealistic publicity that generates from it. These together create everywhere an expectancy in oral communication performance which very few deaf people can fulfill. Employers and others are, thus, not conditioned to look beyond the poor speech for the hidden, often rich human resources.

The public in general also has little correct knowledge about the handicapping aspects of the disability. The communication barrier appears overly formidable in the face of this lack of knowledge and experience. Consequently, rich manpower resources lie dormant in many deaf persons for want of opportunities for appropriate public services and jobs. In addition, many professional workers with the deaf have low aspiration levels as to what deaf people can achieve.

A third important reason for the underemployment of the deaf is

the underservice of programs that should serve them. The unique nature of early, profound deafness requires special knowledge and skills, which are scarce, in order to extend services to deaf people effectively. Since most programs are devoid of such skills, their routine cumulative contributions to suitable employment for normally hearing people do not operate for the deaf. Consequently, many programs seriously underserve deaf people, thereby contributing to their under-employment.

Fourth, to find social satisfaction, deaf people group in a subsociety of deaf peers where in-group and individual communication problems are resolved. Their isolation is thus intensified. They share and grow with each other within the seriously limited group experience, but fail to achieve a fair role in the more rapidly evolving experiences and services of society at large. The impacts of undertraining, underservice, and inadequate image development are thus reinforced with consequent further deterioration in prospects for suitable employment.

Finally, deaf people are often isolated in the family circle. They fail to benefit from family strengths and opportunities because the family does not communicate freely with them. An example is the job which many normally hearing people obtain through family connections. The limited sharing of many deaf people in family planning and goals due to the communication problem seriously curbs their proper job placement.

PERSONNEL

The peculiar needs of deaf people for services from workers who are specifically trained to overcome the communication barrier has intensified growing manpower problems. Effective vocational rehabilitation programs for the deaf cannot be mounted in the face of a lack of qualified psychologists, social workers, teachers, counselors. Hence, all diagnostic, evaluative, adjustment, and special vocational training aims are in jeopardy until qualified staff are found. Accordingly, the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration has emphasized recruitment and training of professional workers for the deaf. Productive training programs that provide experience and opportunity for expertness on deafness are in operation at eight universities. Two more are in early prospect and five more within the next three years. Recruitment accelerates somewhat with new training programs, but is still a serious problem needing special treatment.

State vocational rehabilitation agencies now have about 100 counselors who have from good to fair skills in serving deaf clients. Some

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states have several, many have none. VRA urges that each small state have at least one such counselor statewide and that the larger states have at least one in each metropolitan area. Public Law 89-333 enables the states to plan much more boldly than heretofore to meet the needs of the severely disabled. Several states have plans for as many as twenty counselors able to serve the deaf.

By the time Public Law 89-333 is ten years old, as many as 500 trained, skilled counselors and many qualified psychologists, social workers, audiologists, speech therapists, psychiatrists, and adjustment teachers should be available to serve deaf clients in the state agencies and supporting facilities.

FACILITIES

A principal manifestation of the handicap of deafness is severe language limitation, bordering on functional illiteracy for many so afflicted. The implications for vocational rehabilitation are great. The normal strength, mobility, and intelligence of deaf people render them highly employable in many kinds of jobs. Frequently vocational rehabilitation counselors, lacking manpower and other resources able to serve the deaf, have routinely provided to the less severely handicapped a service featuring vocational training and placement. Rarely have they been able to attack the handicapping aspects of the disability or program effectively for the more severely handicapped, nor can they do so in a vacuum of people and places to do the job as it must be done.

Accordingly, VRA has given major attention for many years to the establishment of centers especially for the deaf. Centers at schools for the deaf, sheltered workshops, comprehensive rehabilitation centers, and in-institutional programs represent successful experiences in a small way in the face of the huge responsibility stemming from Public Law 89-333.

Broad new concepts of vocational rehabilitation service to deaf people that aim at reducing the handicapping aspects of deafness are now taking root. Facilities are only a degree less critical to a proper program than personnel.

Communications centers to help deaf people maintain and improve their speech, to improve their language skills, and to reduce the isolation of deafness by teaching manual communication to family, professional workers, and friends are urgently needed. Highly specialized regional centers similar to the VRA demonstration in Lansing to pro-

part — possibly 25 per cent of the 80 per cent who do not qualify for post-secondary education — are urgently needed. Community coordinating, referral, and supportive counseling centers are in process of demonstration in several metropolitan areas with a view to showing how deaf people can be brought to use the many health and welfare services that they now miss.

Extension of VRA demonstrated psychiatric service for mentally ill deaf people is also under way.

With the authorizations we now have we can and will reach a status in which the achievable training and treatment needs of all deaf persons will be conveniently available. The speed with which we reach this necessary service level rests with the degree of our individual commitment and ingenuity in resolving facility and personnel deficiencies.

NEW CONCEPTS OF SERVICE

The old concepts of circumscribed vocational rehabilitation service to deaf people had their roots at least partially in personnel and facility shortages which, in turn, arose partly from limited funds. These negatives inevitably come within treatment tolerances under Public Law 89-333. Accordingly, new concepts of service are feasible and desirable. Most important may be recognition that rehabilitation of most deaf persons is a long-term expensive process involving intensive treatment of their core problem, specifically communication impairment which seriously delimits, depreciates, and demobilizes deaf people in their efforts to attain self-fulfillment. A specific priority target is reduction of the pervasive language limitation that is characteristic of so many of them. Ongoing refinement and extension of sign language as already demonstrated with severely handicapped deaf persons is promising. Likewise, moves to provide speech development and conservation services offer much. Of overriding significance is the growing recognition that very technical and unique long-term training is required in meeting the demands of daily living, in interrelating to people and situations.

Another new concept is to provide deaf people with as many training *choices* as possible through new, unique opportunities such as the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, through special centers for the 80 per cent who do not qualify for post-secondary training, and through increased use of vocational and technical schools for normally hearing persons.

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 Regarding use of schools for the normally hearing, the special attach-

tion given in Public Law 89-333 to interpreting services for deaf clients is very significant. Moreover, to help the states maximally, VRA is giving major attention to the development of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, in standards of performance for interpreters, and in the training of more and better interpreters.

The common nonfeasibility finding of so many seriously handicapped deaf people under earlier vocational rehabilitation programs is incongruous with the 6-to-18-month evaluation process authorized in Public Law 89-333. Accordingly, professional rehabilitation workers are searching for definitions of proper evaluation of deaf persons, for identification of the components of the process, and for qualified places and evaluators. Our lacks are glaring, the product of both years of ignorance of true needs and a limited legal base. As this concept of evaluation service to all of the 50,000 or more severely handicapped deaf persons gains recognition, resolution of personnel and facility deficiencies should accelerate significantly.

Job development for deaf people is not a new concept by any means. However, under Public Law 89-333, greater impetus, focus, and progress are possible. For example, exciting exploration of the legitimate theater as a source of employment for well-trained deaf people is now being undertaken by the Eugene O'Neill Foundation. Opportunities in computer programming are also being expanded.

As we gain experience and understanding of the challenge and opportunities of Public Law 89-333, other new concepts of service will be recognized and implemented.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

For many reasons, the deaf community is unaware of and accordingly unresponsive to public programs of special interest and significance to their members. A public service such as vocational rehabilitation is seriously hampered in mounting a proper program in the face of such circumstances. Our experience in similar but less severe situations in other areas is that our mission is much more effectively accomplished as we find means to reduce the apparent problems and increase the strengths. In order to improve our interaction with the deaf community and thus provide a firmer base for building a stronger vocational rehabilitation program for our deaf clients, we have engaged the National Health Council to study and make recommendations regarding the establishment of an American Council of Organizations of and for the Deaf. We are confident that a favorable report and methodology will

soon be available. The long-standing, pervasive problem of unawareness and unresponsiveness will then be in hand.

Parallel to the foregoing in rationale, but separate in its own right is the development of an organization of professional people interested in and skilled in handling the problems of the deaf — the Professional Rehabilitation Workers with the Adult Deaf. For many years education has been the only profession having organizations in the deaf area. No other disciplines have had an arena since they are not eligible for membership in educational organizations. The new organization came into being in May of 1966. It is open to psychologists, social workers, teachers, audiologists, speech therapists, religious workers, counselors.

The foregoing is only a limited discussion of our great challenges to provide equal and abundant opportunities for our deaf clients under the Vocational Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1965. I hope it will stimulate thinking, excite determination, and precipitate action among all who are proud to be professional rehabilitation workers for the adult deaf.