

ROLE OF THE PARAPROFESSIONAL IN INNER CITY SERVICES TO DEAF PERSONS

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It is indeed a pleasure to be here today as part of this panel on problems of black deaf persons. The PRWAD Board of Directors has shown sensitivity and insight in selecting this long-neglected topic for special emphasis at its fifth national convention.

We are facing two huge problems here today. One is providing significant services for the often-overlooked population of "disadvantaged" deaf persons. The second is acquiring sorely-needed research-based knowledge about this population so as better to meet their needs.

What little research we now have indicates gross undereducation, severe underemployment, high unemployment, marked social isolation, and restricted communication abilities among many black deaf persons. The same few research studies indicate that we have been largely unsuccessful in reaching and serving these persons (Furfey and Harte, 1968; Hairston and Bachman, 1967; Lunde and Bigman, 1959; Schein, 1968; Smith, 1971).

Paradoxically, at the very moment when our awareness of the needs of this population is highest, and our desire to serve them strongest, we face a crippling manpower shortage which severely limits our efforts.

Another apparent roadblock is the seeming lack of demand by these persons for services. This phenomenon appears to have at least two causes: poor communication skills among many of these persons due to their inadequate education, and a mistrust of "government," especially "white government" among persons responsible for or interested in these deaf persons.

We are, then, faced with two primary tasks. The first is finding and training the necessary manpower. The second is finding and training black deaf residents of the inner city.

These problems do not lend themselves to pat solutions. Yet we have to start somewhere. One logical place to begin is by exploring the possible utilization of paraprofessionals in inner city services to deaf persons.

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By the term "paraprofessionals" we usually mean supportive personnel who act as aides in areas for which they have received specific training. They are often drawn from the service area and are themselves members of the target population (Pearl and Reissman, 1965).

The use of paraprofessionals has several apparent benefits. First, by employing persons from the target area, we help to ease the high unemployment and severe underemployment among the population to be served. Second, because they reside in the target area and are members of the target group, these paraprofessionals can serve as a link between the agency and the clients. This is especially valuable in services to black deaf inner city residents. Paraprofessionals can help alleviate the distrust of "government" and can help draw potential clients to the agency. Finally, a reliable, supervised aide can relieve the rehabilitation counselor of a large share of his more mundane duties, freeing him to function more effectively doing the things only he is qualified to do (Patterson, 1968). A project in Wyoming suggests that aides might enable a counselor to double his caseload and improve the timing of events in the rehabilitation process (Galloway and Kelso, 1966).

Having suggested the use of paraprofessionals in inner city services to deaf persons, I must include the caveat that this approach is not without potential hazards (Peth, 1971). At times the agency may experience a personal relationship problem between an insecure counselor and his aides (Denham and Shatz, 1968). If the agency carefully delineates their respective roles and makes clear that the paraprofessional does not represent a threat to the professional rehabilitation counselor to the deaf (RCD), this problem should be minimized (Weber and Palmer, 1969).

A second potential difficulty involves the possible lack of confidentiality on the part of the paraprofessionals. Again, with appropriate training, this should not be a major problem.

A great deal of work remains to be done to test the feasibility of this approach and to implement plans to use paraprofessionals in inner city services to deaf persons. We must study the role and function of the RCD in order to identify tasks which do not require the extensive training a professional counselor must receive. From a list of such tasks, we must select those that could be performed by deaf persons with short-term training. Training programs must then be designed and implemented. Evaluation of the performance of the trainees must follow.

I have posed some questions and suggested some possible answers. At this point the questions far outweigh the answers. The questions will remain topheavy until you, the professional rehabilitation workers with the adult deaf, move to provide the answers.

Thank you.

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