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THE MANPOWER NEEDS OF THE DEAF

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Mr. Chairman, Fellow Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf, Ladies and Gentlemen: Until a short time ago most deaf professionals were afraid to speak out critically. I do not mean griping about vocational rehabilitation and education. I am talking about the real issues of life for a deaf person trying to function as a professional person. They were reluctant to speak out because the results of such an action sometimes meant disaster not only for the deaf person himself, but for many other deaf persons as well. A few years ago in one of the Western States such an incident occurred. Because of a complaint against the superintendent of the State school for the deaf by a deaf person, a legislative investigation was launched. Before it was concluded, every deaf person who worked at the school was fired, even though they had done nothing to warrant such treatment. Another example concerns several former teachers who are at present members of our organization, all deaf and all blackballed from teaching positions at schools for the deaf, because they chose to speak out against injustices. Probably the primary need for manpower at the local level is for understanding, sympathetic people to help the deaf help themselves without letting prejudices or preconceived ideas about needs to get in the way. For a long time hearing people either did not recognize this as a problem or failed to condemn it. One man has been speaking out at every opportunity. He is Dr. McCay Vernon of Western Maryland University. All of us in PRWAD need to follow his example and speak out ourselves, encouraging the deaf to do likewise, and supporting them when they do. This holds when their criticism may be about us because we probably deserve it.

You are familiar with the article, "The Basic Needs of Deaf People", by Boyce Williams. Over the years these needs have been amplified, but they are basically the same. My purpose today is not to restate these basic needs, but from the point of view of the counselor for the deaf at the district office level, to discuss the manpower needs of the deaf. I will then attempt to cover problems, possible solutions and some ideas about innovative programs.

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The second basic need is a counselor on the district level who can really communicate with the deaf person. A couple of years ago Terrence O'Rourke spoke to a meeting in my home State. He had just come from a meeting of experts in the field of linguistics. He told us that the consensus of opinion at that meeting was that for a person to become expert enough to communicate effectively in a foreign language, the person must be completely immersed in that language for at least four years. At this meeting the linguistic experts also decided that sign language was a foreign language. If you accept Terry's report from this conference as a correct one, then the conclusion is inescapable. If you really expect to be able to communicate with a deaf person in sign language, you must have at least four years experience fully immersed in it. The four years experience then becomes the primary requisite for a counselor for the deaf. It must not be merely exposure on a casual basis for four years, but daily experience communicating with deaf people. The idea that we can counsel a client without really communicating with him in his own language is ludicrous, and counseling through a third person is almost equally impossible, although during a training period it might be necessary.

The third great need is a redefinition and expansion of the role of the counselor for the deaf. After you have the counselor who can communicate with the deaf and he has been on the job long enough to be well known in the deaf community, a subtle change begins to take place in his work. From regular vocational rehabilitation work it expands into the area of social or community service work. The longer he is on the job the greater the demands on his time for non-rehabilitation work. If legislation is ever passed to establish a bureau of the deaf similar to the Bureau of the Blind, redefinition of his role may be easy, but if it fails, then the problem may be difficult to resolve.

A fourth area of great need is for counselors who are deaf themselves, not hard-of-hearing, but deaf. These counselors should be chosen not for their ability to speak, but preferably for their inability to do so. Several things can be accomplished by this. First, we can give deaf boys and girls a professional other than teachers to serve as a model. We can provide counseling services to parents of newly diagnosed deaf children through a counselor who has been there himself. In cases where the regular counselor for the deaf does not have the necessary communication skills for true counseling, the deaf person can assist. He can also be a great asset in communication training and with the program development which would result from his efforts. It probably would be necessary to hire a combination secretary-interpreter for the deaf counselor. It would be also necessary to break down the built-in prejudice concerning the effectiveness of the deaf person in what has been, prior to now, a speaking, hearing job. Possibly, the only way this could be accomplished is for the Federal government to provide 100 percent financing for these staff positions for a few years until their value could be recognized. A mandatory reporting system is also

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needed so that deaf children can be identified quickly enough and counseling services for the parents offered soon enough to do the most good.

Hopefully, this could help to solve one of the greatest problems of vocational rehabilitation. When both the parents and the school fail the deaf child, we in rehabilitation are faced with an almost insoluble problem. We can help to some extent, but never completely. The only real answer seems to be prevention. The deaf counselor helping the family to adjust to deafness, in time, should help to solve the first part of the problem. The second part is more complex. The education of children is a sensitive area, as our politicians are finding out, because many educational decisions are made from emotion rather than from logic. Probably the soundest approach would be to try to remove the schools for the deaf from politics as much as possible by changing their operating boards from political appointees to people with a real interest in improving the education of the deaf. Perhaps a board composed of one-third deaf people, one-third educators of the deaf and one-third rehabilitation people would be able to direct the educational process in such a way as to help overcome the deficiencies which now handicap the deaf person.

Each of the needs and problems which I have discussed has been followed by a tentative solution except for one. I suggest that the counselor for the deaf should have four years experience in sign language as a prerequisite for employment, but suggest no way for accomplishing this objective. A way must be found to recruit qualified people or to recruit people with the potential. If necessary, training programs must be established so that counselors can be trained on the job. They should be trained to minimum standards, but trained to communicate well. The program could be placed under the guidance of the National Association of the Deaf Communicative Skills Program with certification for competence in manual communication. Salary differentials would probably be necessary to retain the specialization counselor and to compensate for a lack of promotional possibilities. The same would be true for deaf counselors since the key to a successful program is the recruitment of competent people and, most important of all, holding them on the counseling job. The position of counselor for the deaf should be recognized as a career position and salary steps should be outlined so that qualified individuals can be recruited and serve long enough to help in accomplishing program objectives.

The needs, problems and solutions may be different in your States. I come from a State where the director understands the problem fully and is more concerned with services to the deaf than is the average State director. My statement might be even more positive except that I am not familiar with the program for the deaf in every State agency. When our director has a spare minute, he studies sign language. He gives speeches in sign language to deaf groups. And since 1966, Florida has been concentrating on improving the counseling staff by taking advantage of all opportunities for training of counselors in working with the deaf. We have established guidelines for

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improvement of services to the deaf and we think we are in the forefront in improvement of the delivery of these services. But, to me there seems to be much yet to be done.

If we are to determine the manpower needs of the deaf, we must consult the deaf. It does not follow that we know their needs merely because we have worked with them for a long time. Sometimes we are part of the problem. A good friend of mine who is deaf sums up the situation much better than I can. She says the greatest handicap of the deaf is the stupidity of hearing people.