

SOME GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF STATE PRWAD CHAPTERS

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INTRODUCTION

PRWAD is a comparatively young organization which was created out of an identified need for a medium which would provide a common meeting ground for those concerned with adult deaf persons. This, the fifth Biennial Conference, is visible testimony to support the judgment of those instrumental in founding PRWAD. The tangible evidence of PRWAD's success is perhaps best seen in the successful publication of the Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf and the Deafness Annual, as well as the planning and implementation of five national conferences which have drawn attendance from throughout the United States to consider issues relevant to the betterment of deaf persons in our society. Less tangible, but perhaps even more important, is what PRWAD has accomplished in providing its membership a sense of identity and common purpose. Many a person concerned with adult deaf persons found himself working in isolation with a small minority group about which society knew little. Sometimes the effort was frustrating and the challenges seemingly too much to contend with alone. PRWAD has enabled its members to join hands and gain a greater sense of confidence in their united effort.

The organization of PRWAD was also a recognition of the ongoing needs of deaf persons as they moved into adulthood. It represented the first professional organization which focused on the adult deaf person and his total life experience. PRWAD was, in fact, picking up the ball when others were presuming that the ball game was over because the deaf person had become an adult. The PRWAD has drawn together, in its membership, those concerned with the end products of programs for the deaf child and in so doing has served to bring out a greater awareness of the deficiencies in preparing deaf children for successful achievement as adults.

In the evolutionary process of its development, PRWAD is currently undertaking some self-examination of its place in the continuum of services to deaf persons. There seems to be an increasing recognition that possible changes might be in order to better facilitate the kind of coordinated effort that will most successfully meet the needs of deaf persons. One hears discussion about the need to broaden the base of membership in PRWAD to more accurately reflect the variables that have influence on the welfare of the adult deaf person. Other workshops within this conference will no doubt expand on these possible changes within PRWAD and it is therefore inappropriate to dwell too long on it in this paper. It is mentioned, however, to place

the discussion of state chapters in the context of the historical development of PRWAD.

It will be the intent of this paper to offer some rationale for the establishment of State PRWAD Chapters, to suggest ways that such chapters might be organized and to consider some problem areas that might be encountered in the formation of a successful state chapter.

Rationale for State Chapters

The rationale to be considered here should not be viewed as an all-inclusive list of reasons to support the concept of state chapters. Neither should the order of the rationale offered be construed as a ranking of importance. These are offered only to stimulate some thought regarding the feasibility and value of state chapters.

1. *To more effectively meet local needs.* Here we have the recognition that states may have unique priorities which can better be identified and met through the activities of a state PRWAD chapter.
2. *To foster support for the National organization of PRWAD.* The recent cutbacks of federal support for PRWAD make it essential that the National PRWAD have a broad base of membership support in order to carry out its program effort. This membership growth can be much enhanced by the establishment of state chapters.
3. *To provide a structure for action on the local level.* Currently, the PRWAD has no specific channel by which it can carry its program effort to the local level. State chapters could provide this type of organizational channel.
4. *To provide the National PRWAD feedback on local needs.* Again, state chapters could provide the channel to keep the national office closely in tune with activities taking place on the local level as well as an ongoing identification of local needs.
5. *To provide greater visibility for PRWAD.* A state chapter, with good leadership and an active program, will increase public awareness of the needs of the adult deaf person and will foster a better appreciation of the contribution of the National PRWAD.
6. *To unite and coordinate the various groups concerned with deafness.* State chapters may be in a more advantageous position to bring together the various interest groups such as parents, deaf adults and professionals in order to foster a greater cooperative effort to achieve desired goals for improving service to deaf persons.

Methods for Organizing State Chapters

It is important to remember that it is easier to organize motivated people than it is to organize and try to motivate interest. National PRWAD was organized out of the Casework Standards Conference in St. Louis after a group with common interest was pulled together. Thus, it would seem important to get various groups interested in deaf persons together and exchanging views. Out of such a meeting will come a greater awareness of their common interest and it then becomes easier to pull them together organizationally.

It would seem logical that formation of a state chapter would begin with the existing PRWAD members within the state. From this nucleus group, the state chapter can then expand its membership through an intensive membership effort. In some states, however, the PRWAD membership is exceedingly small and in such instances it may be that membership recruitment needs to become part of the organizational effort to establish a chapter. In such instances, it is well to lay groundwork for organizing a state chapter by contacting leaders of key interest groups to gain their support. Deaf leadership, parent group leaders, key professional persons, agency directors, etc., can be critical in lending support and encouraging the development of a state chapter.

It is desirable that the state chapter have as much visibility as possible in the early stages. It may be effective to tie the organizational effort in with already established organizations. Participation in established annual conventions permits the gathering of sizeable numbers of persons who can then be invited to participate in the organizational effort of the state chapter. This offers immediate visibility and can get the state chapter well established while enthusiasm is high.

It is well to remember that the ongoing success of a state chapter will be dependent on an active and steady membership effort. The goals of the state chapter will need to be kept constantly before potential members. Membership solicitation is demanding work requiring constant attention, but it is critical to the success of any organization.

Finally, it is recommended that organizational efforts for state chapters should draw heavily upon the support and counsel of the National PRWAD office. The National office of PRWAD can be very helpful in provision of materials, information, speakers, etc., to help the state chapter through its formative stages.

Some Barriers and Boosters to Successfully Starting a State Chapter

Many organizations exist already. People are somewhat guarded about joining another organization. Therefore it will be essential to make a strong case for what PRWAD can offer that is not presently available. In my view, one of the chief advantages offered can be the coordinating of varied interest groups in deafness for common purpose.

It is critical to establish early in the formation of a state chapter a common goal around which the membership can rally. It is not enough to organize just to talk together. Members will want to have a sense of purpose, of accomplishment. Therefore, a viable local project can serve to bring the group into united effort for common cause and will help to get the chapter solidly established.

Every effort should be made to focus on initial projects which have common appeal to the broad interests represented in your membership. The state chapter must be action oriented. Parents, in particular, are weary of talking about their frustration. They want to do something to change things. If the initial project efforts are too narrow in scope or are too unreachable because of their complexity, apathy will soon set in and the state chapter will flounder.

There are serious challenges in organizing various interest groups under one organization. If the state chapter seeks to mix lay persons (the adult deaf, parents) with professionals (rehab counselors, educators, audiologists), it must strive even harder for common purpose. The potential for conflict exists in this mix. The consumers of service (adult deaf, parents) can raise issues which may put the providers of service (professionals) on the defensive or at least create discomfort and disharmony. By the same token, professionals may err in the direction of dominating the state chapter and thereby lose the support and contribution of the lay persons. This mix can be very healthy and productive, but the potential for conflict should not be overlooked.

Thus, the most important principle is to focus, as much as possible, on common goals which will not constitute a divisive threat to group membership. Once the chapter is solidly established as a working unit, it can then begin to take on more controversial issues.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to make a case for the value of establishing state chapters as a further extension of the PRWAD. Time limitations prevent treatment of the subject in full depth, but it is felt that sufficient ideas have been introduced to provide a basis for possible consideration by various states as to the feasibility of beginning such a state PRWAD chapter.