

# THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 (Section 504): IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR DEAF ADULTS

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Judith Harkins, M.Ed., M.A.

As project coordinator of a statewide feasibility study of postsecondary education for deaf people in Maryland, I have had an opportunity to view the regulations of Section 504 from the perspective of an advocate of the rights of deaf taxpayers and as a consultant to community colleges and adult education programs. Among other things, the feasibility study found that there is a great need among deaf adults for occupational education such as community colleges and adult education programs offer.

Since community colleges and adult education programs have open admissions policies, they must serve all adults in the community who desire services. Under such qualifications, virtually all disabled students fit the term "qualified". These institutions and agencies are dedicated in varying degrees to serving educationally disadvantaged students. All of these factors are advantageous to deaf adults who need occupational education.

However, there are intervening factors which change this very promising picture. The average deaf adult of normal intelli-

gence has a reading level of fourth to fifth grade. This large educational gap is caused by the impact of hearing loss in acquiring the English language. Deaf people, in effect, must learn English as a foreign language, without the benefit of hearing the words of that language. Again, it is important to remember that the intelligence of deaf people is distributed in the same way that it is distributed among the general population.

Because of this educational gap, which is a very real part of the handicap, the average deaf person in a community college needs more support than just an interpreter. A notetaker must provide copies of class notes so that the deaf student can attend visually to the interpreter and instructor. Tutors and counselors who are fluent in sign language are needed. Limited special class instruction in reading and writing skills will require an instructor experienced in teaching English language to deaf people. These support services, and others, are characteristic of approximately 40 of the nation's community colleges which are dedicated to meeting the needs of deaf students in an integrated setting.

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Ms. Harkins is Project Coordinator, Feasibility Study of Postsecondary Education for Deaf Students, Howard Community College, Columbia, Maryland.

Deafness is a low incidence handicap with a prevalence rate of about two deaf persons per 1,000 persons in the general population. Most community colleges and adult education programs will not be able to provide in-depth services for the few deaf adults in their respective communities. At least in the early stages of the implementation of the 504 regulations, the test for reasonableness might not extend to all of the services mentioned above.

Some college officials have expressed the concern that if they invest funds in more comprehensive services for one group of handicapped citizens, they will serve other groups less well, and therefore jeopardize their compliance with Section 504. The initial implementation of Section 504 will probably see post-secondary institutions providing a minimal level of services in an effort to comply. For many handicapped people, this result is sufficient.

For deaf people with high reading levels, coping under these circumstances (for example, with only an interpreter) will not be so great a problem. For the average deaf citizen, however, this level of service is likely to result in failure and an unnecessary low self-image.

The focus of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the severely disabled person. It would be at best unfortunate if the result of the 504 regulations would be to serve only the academic cream of the crop.

For these reasons, I support the provision of the federal appropriations to assist institutions of higher education in serving severely disabled students. However, postsecondary institutions should first be able to show that they have shifted priorities and, to the best of their abilities, allocated resources for the elimination of discriminatory practices in their institutions.

### REFERENCES

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