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CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT AS A CONTINGENT TO THE SUCCESS OF A TELECOMMUNICATIONS PROJECT

Ms. Betty Broecker

This is a report about what deaf persons can do when provided with the time, the opportunity, and the means to an acquisition of self-confidence that enable these persons to fully utilize and express their creative ideas and working talents.

In early 1976, when the Nevil Foundation of Philadelphia was contemplating funding the Nevil Telecommunications Project in that city, the Community Service Center for the Deaf at Community College of Philadelphia was approached as the ideal vehicle with which to initially implement the mechanics of such a program. With approval of funding a virtual certainty in June of that year, the Service Center began laying the ground work for the operation of the program out of the Center. The proposal to be finally approved included provisions for the Service Center to carry out three basic functions:

1. Locate deaf persons who wished to secure Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf equipment;
2. Ascertain the individuals mechanical ability and psychological readiness to effectively use such equipment;
3. Provide classroom instruction where needed and then certify the individual as ready to receive the equipment of his/her choice.

To begin the Consumer involvement process, prior to the June approval of the Project, a team was formed to develop the curriculum for the class room instruction component. This

team was formed in such a way that there would be both professional expertise and strong consumer involvement. Therefore the Service Center hired, with payment to be made from funds included in the Nevil Proposal for Curriculum Development, two experienced teachers of the deaf and two deaf consumers who were members of the Delaware Valley Telecommunications for the Deaf organization, a local consumer group. These two original deaf employees remain with the Project to this day.

The Curriculum Development team started out in what I will call a "typical fashion." That is, the two hearing teachers appeared to indicate that they had considerably more "know-how" than the two deaf consumers. The two deaf consumers more or less acquiesced to this established formula of operation. One deaf person could speak English quite well; the other used only American Sign Language. In time, the deaf person who used English became quite vocal, but the individual who used American Sign Language declined to speak up, although it would be this individual's views that would be of primary importance, since the project was seeking to serve a community composed largely of those who use American Sign Language. One of the hearing teachers who was serving as the chairperson of the group began to encourage and seek out the opinions of both deaf persons, but most especially those of the individual who used American Sign Language. It was soon evident that the American Sign Language-skilled per-

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son was becoming a functioning member of the team. After about two months of work, the team developed the curriculum that would be used throughout the Project.

This curriculum includes the following classes:

1. **Orientation to Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf**

Instruction in use of the Telephone, use of the communication machines, and special abbreviations in common usage. Duration is three (3) weeks for two hours twice a week.

2. **Brief Typing**

A short typing course that provides instruction in the correct finger position needed for effective typing. Duration is seven (7) weeks for three hours once a week, or as long as the instructor feels student needs the class. Never longer than seven weeks.

3. **Language for Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf**

Assists individuals in developing a feeling of comfortableness with the use of language on a TDD. Duration is eight (8) weeks for an hour and half twice a week.

Once the Project was approved for funding, things moved rapidly. The Communications Room was set up in the Service Center. This room was especially designed for the Center by United Pennsylvania Telecommunications for the Deaf, Incorporated. It is composed of five teletypewriters set in a circle with one master machine and a master control box. All machines are connected to an electrical loop and can communicate with each other, as well as be used to make actual outside telephone calls with the two telephones set up in the room. In the Communications Room there is also set up all the telecommunications equipment that is presently on the market such as the MCM, the TV Phone and Magsat.

The deaf individual would have the opportunity to try all equipment and then make his or her decision about the equipment most suited to that individual's needs. The Nevil Foundation provided a grant of up to \$250.00

off toward the equipment of the individual's choice. In the Philadelphia area, the cost of telecommunications equipment runs from \$256.50 to \$872.60 for equipment completely set up in the home. An evaluation was developed by the staff for the purpose of ascertaining which individuals needed which classes, or possibly none at all.

The new position in the Service Center of Administration Assistant for the Nevil Project was given to the person on the Curriculum Development Team who used American Sign Language as a primary language. This individual's potential for growth was extremely high. The only drawback was that time had to be allowed for this individual to further develop the confidence and skills that were originally brought forth in the Curriculum Development team. Time was allowed for this and professional interpreters for the deaf utilized for any work that involved the changing of English to American Sign Language or the reverse, including any written correspondence. This individual presently does all the recruitment, evaluation, placement in classes, scheduling of classes and all necessary paper work needed to carry out the smooth functioning of the entire program on a daily work-a-day basis under the supervision of the coordinator of the Center. This individual is a graduate of the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf and has had no further professional training at this time.

She is now planning to continue her education with part-time college work.

The teachers of all classes in the Communications Room are deaf. One of them is the other former member of the Curriculum Development team who has turned out to be an outstanding teacher. A hearing teacher is used to teach the Brief Typing class as it was planned that the deaf community learn to use professional interpreters as a prelude to the beginning of a full-scale Continuing Education for the Deaf program at the Service Center. The Nevil Project provided the ideal beginning vehicle for Continuing Education efforts in the Philadelphia area as the community discovered that going back to school could be a pleasant