

## EDUCATION WITH IMPACT: A MODEL FOR RRCEP-VR PARTNERSHIP

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For the past several years professionals in the field of deafness have enjoyed a great many advances of both a technical and programmatic nature. This professional sophistication has helped catapult the field into new areas of communications technology, human services, job development, and education. Not only has the field reached new heights, it has also achieved new dimensions of depth in the unique sense of rooting itself in common purpose, organization, and knowledge.

This article will describe one of these new areas of development as an example of the field's programmatic sophistication. It is a model for continuing education in deafness which not only sits on the cutting edge of progress, but also helps determine the direction and intensity of that progress. The model does this by showing how the developing of a multi-state network of continuing education can generate information and ideas from national levels and distant places and transmit them to state and local communities so they may be interpreted into meaningful, workable actions. The article will briefly delineate the concept of this educational model and offer evidence of its long range impact. Similar programs may easily be replicated in other geographic or programmatic areas with similar results.

### **Problems With Impact**

Historically, educational programs in the human services field have not succeeded to any great degree in measuring the organizational results or outcomes of training. Admit-

tedly, it is difficult, particularly in training programs in deafness which address such conceptual issues as "professionalism", "legislation", or "communications". Indeed, when conducting training of a conference nature, involving many people from many areas with many needs, the problems of effecting a legitimate impact are even more complex.

Because of the difficulty with impact evaluation, most programs turn their attention instead to more tangible, easy to measure aspects of education. This practice is often superficial, sometimes deceptive, and can even be dangerous in that it can delude trainees into a false sense of satisfaction with training and minimize the rightful and long-term respect for results.

To address this problem, an innovative strategy has recently been designed and implemented which does, in fact, allow conceptual ideas and knowledge to be translated into observable results. This strategy is itself the result of a developing relationship between vocational rehabilitation agency state coordinators for the deaf (SCD's) and the Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (RRCEP-DRS) of Federal Region III. Joining forces and resources, the SCD's and RRCEP-DRS, with the guidance and support of the Region III Rehabilitation Services Administration have been able to produce a relevant and high quality educational program and strategy which has tangible impact in all of the six states of Region III.

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### The Model Concept and Program

The "Model Continuing Education Program in Deafness", as it is called, was designed to meet several needs. First, there was a need to share ideas, resources, and energy among state programs in Region III. Second, there was a need to provide an environment for learning; a stage for the most notable leaders, educators, and innovators in the field to share their combined expertise with front-line practitioners. Third, there was a recognized need to go beyond the conventional thinking of an "annual conference", which by design must limit the audience and generalize the content, and to provide a strategy for follow-up and specificity for state and community concerns.

The evolution of the plan to meet these needs resulted in a unique conceptual model of education. Supported by a modest short-term discretionary grant from the Region III Rehabilitation Service Administration, a year-long series of seven training events was formulated. This included a Region-wide educational conference and followed up by six state-specific workshops focused on action and implementation.

Using a dual approach the Model sought to incorporate education and business. It was a chance to both learn and work in an environment which brought hundreds of people together for the first time, yet fostered individuality and specificity for the work setting.

The first event, the Regional Conference, was presented in October 1978 in Wilmington, Delaware. The Conference theme, "Deafness: The Law and Mental Health", attracted many of the pioneers and leaders in this field. The Conference design focused not only on the messages from nationally prominent speakers, but also allowed for related special interest groups, large and small group discussions, and statewide planning meetings. These planning meetings were, in many instances, the birthplaces of future action programs addressed to the presented issues.

At the conclusion of the three-day Conference, the 125 participants, representing groups of parents, consumers, and profession-

als at all levels, had a wealth of facts, new ideas, and new challenges to face them. More than this, however, they had new support systems to turn their ideas and challenges into reality. New coalitions and task forces had been formed. New relationships had been nurtured. New educational materials had been developed from the Conference (videotapes, proceedings, discussion notes, handouts, bibliographies, pamphlets, etc.). Plans were well underway by the Conference's end for further meetings and organizational actions aimed at improving the mental health and legal service delivery systems to deaf individuals in Region III.

From that point on, RRCEP-DRS devoted its technical expertise and support to developing the six state "follow-up conferences" which were planned as a way of taking the message of the Regional event to a wider audience and with more meaningful application. Working closely with the VR State Coordinators for the Deaf, a series of six state-specific conferences were planned throughout 1979. Each state used the regional conference's basic format (i.e., small group discussions, special interest groups, and planning meetings) highlighted by major speakers, many of whom had attended the regional event. Thus, the theme was carried through to reach the ultimate benefactors with challenge-oriented speakers, subject-oriented discussions, and action-oriented professional meetings.

Over 800 people actually took part in the year-long project, most of whom were participating in "localized" versions of the regional conference. In all, seven conferences were presented which consistently focused on specific and relevant issues and involved most of the actual constituents with whom the conference participants related on a daily basis. Because of this concept of diversification, the substantive issues had far more potential for eventual action than would have been possible in more generalized conferences with nominal or token representation by participants.

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### Results and Outcomes

What makes this Model Continuing Education Program so unique? The most significant dimension is its impact. The strategy which has made this program successful has tended to move simultaneously in two directions, upward and downward, toward effective, observable, demonstrable results. In one respect, general awareness of the issues and concerns regarding the law and mental health in the field of deafness has obviously been heightened. By all reports it has been shown that people are better educated and, by sharing a common knowledge base, are better able to relate in more productive and more purposeful ways.

Beyond this gain in knowledge is also a heightened sense of motivation and enthusiasm. People are asked to encounter each other on a face-to-face basis and wrestle with the real issues of local resources, politics, funding, or each other. Thus participants develop more meaningful and productive alliances and develop a sense of commitment and responsibility to their own programs and to the larger programs of which they are a part.

Conversely, the Model program strategy has helped to move the field downward toward a deepening sense of fulfillment and stability. It has done this by building into its system the mechanisms necessary to enact change at the local and state levels of service delivery.

The following examples stand as testimony of the ultimate value and impact of this educational strategy. It can be shown that the Region III Model Continuing Education Program in Deafness was directly responsible for the establishment of the Committee on Mental Health and Deafness in West Virginia. This is a multi-agency, community based group who, themselves, advocate in many ways for mental health programs and services. Furthermore, state agencies such as welfare, education, health rehabilitation, and the governor's office, working together for the first time, established a statewide TTY hotline and helped legislate

the placement of 55 TTY's throughout the state for emergency purposes.

In Washington, D. C., the District-wide follow-up conference uncovered such a multitude of needs in the service delivery system that provisions for future program evaluation, needs assessments, and training were built into the Vocational Rehabilitation agency's State Plan for services to deaf clients. Similar provisions were also made in other VR agency programs.

Pennsylvania groups were able, through their state-wide conference, to assist in the creation of a new deaf advisory committee to serve the VR agency. Moreover, processes are now underway to formalize relationships with specific programs between the rehabilitation agency and the state department of mental health. Deaf citizens and other practitioners in the field are also aggressively seeking out responsibilities and duties in other areas of the service delivery network since now, for the first time, they actually know each other on a first name basis. Again, the Model Continuing Education Program was instrumental in bringing together for a united purpose this heretofore fragmented system of special interests.

Finally, in Delaware, the state department of mental health has moved to set up a program within the department to meet the special needs of mentally ill and emotionally disturbed deaf clients. Part of this program will include sign language training for staff and future areas of progress may include specialized staffing, funding, and more formalized relationships with other state agencies.

The gains for the state VR agency programs in deafness have been substantial. Enjoying a visibility and achievement record rarely felt in other departments of the VR agency, services to deaf persons have increasingly gained attention, respect, and the resulting support and cooperation that will generally accompany such respect.

### Conclusions

It has been stated and documented that the Model Continuing Education Program

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in Deafness has a formidable impact on state agency service delivery systems for deaf citizens. It has also served to energize the professional community with a sense of uniformity, continuity, and cooperation.

The impact does not end, however, with a statement of results. The impact will continue to send ripples of change throughout

the field due to the increased maturity of the deaf programs within the VR agency.

The snowballing effect is likely to continue. Doors have now been opened. People are now shaking hands in friendships. The work of the Model Continuing Education Program in Deafness is just now beginning to feel the dividends of its impact.

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