

A MODEL PROGRAM TO DETERMINE THE NEEDS OF DEAF-BLIND PERSONS

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The Deaf Resource and Communication Center, together with the Lighthouse for the Blind in New Orleans, prepared a program to enable deaf-blind persons to investigate techniques for increased community participation. With cooperation from the Independent Living Center and the Louisiana Acadiana Deaf-Blind Citizens, this program became a course titled "Successful Self-Reliance - Making the Most of Yourself."

The first step was to identify deaf-blind persons residing in the metropolitan New Orleans area. It was determined that there were twenty individuals who were deaf and blind or significantly visually impaired and whose primary means of communication was American Sign Language. These individuals were informed of the course and invited to participate.

The Deaf Resource and Communication Center then provided in-service training to prepare Lighthouse staff members for serving deaf-blind persons. Instruction included proper use of sign language interpreters. Blind staff members experienced by touch the process of communicating through American Sign Language.

Jointly, the Lighthouse and the Deaf Resource and Communication Center devised a pre-test questionnaire to determine participants' knowledge of specific areas including mobility, Braille, living skills, resources, and coping procedures. This test was repeated at the end of the six weekly seminars to gauge progress made.

The Lighthouse provided both location and basic training staff to conduct classes in mobility, Braille, and living skills. The Independent Living Center handled the topic of resources. The Louisiana Acadiana Deaf-Blind Citizens dealt with the topic of coping and problem solving skills. All class materials were provided in large print or Braille format prepared by the Lighthouse.

Deaf-blind participants received one-to-one, in-hand American Sign Language interpreting. Voice interpreters were provided for blind Lighthouse staff members. Everyone, therefore, had total communication access. Some of the one-to-one interpreters were deaf persons, a system that offered the additional benefit of interaction between deaf and deaf-blind persons. These interpreters were provided by the Deaf Resource and Communication Center through an Adult Education grant for the State of Louisiana, Department of Education.

This project involved six weekly seminars approximately 90 minutes in length. In addition to the above mentioned topics, participants discovered Braille, Braille writers, slate and stylus, Braille labelers, and tactily marked appliances for cooking, etc. Question and answer sessions were provided near the end of each class throughout which participants learned to make full use of sign language interpreters within group discussions. A coffee social was held after each session, providing a great deal of interaction and sharing among all participants.

A maximum of five deaf-blind persons participated in this pilot program. Their interest and enthusiasm was most encouraging and gratifying. Factors reducing participation are believed to be lack of transportation combined with reluctance on the part of deaf-blind individuals to participate in community activities which are typically communication inaccessible to deaf-blind persons.

Where do we go from here? Plans are being made to offer the program again in the fall, and to offer follow-up classes in the specific areas indicated on pre- and post-test questionnaires. There was interest in all topics with two areas of special note: Class activities found to be most helpful were sessions on mobility and sharing coping experiences.

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Suggestions for future classes were:

1. Have deaf blind-persons explain about their own life experiences.
2. Provide simulation activities to learn how to control eating, walking, talking, etc., while blindfolded.
3. Provide training lessons in travel, cooking, crafts, sewing, Braille. Also, provide training in use of Braille typewriters and in Braille writing.
4. Deaf-blind people need to learn to use the TDD in event of emergencies – such as to contact the Fire Department.
5. Provide more activity than talk/lecture.
6. Lectures and information should be presented slowly in order for deaf-blind persons to follow one-to-one interpreters.

As the word is spread within the deaf-blind community, it is felt that this program will see an increase in attendance. Deaf-blind persons

represent an all too often neglected segment of our community. It is hoped that with accessible, cooperative learning opportunities, deaf-blind individuals will enjoy increasingly successful active, informed, and self-reliant community participation.

For a copy of the pre-/post-test questionnaire or additional information, contact:

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