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ROLE OF THE STATE REHABILITATION AGENCY IN SERVICE TO DEAF PEOPLE IN THE SEVENTIES

CRAIG MILLS

We need strong, creative, and outspoken people to plan and work for bold new approaches in the rehabilitation of deaf people. We must recognize what needs to be done and then do it, even if it requires that sometimes we be less than nice. We must decide if we want to save feelings or lives. This Convention is providing us with the opportunity to get together and plan an action strategy for the future. Are we ready for the challenge? Are we ready to commit ourselves personally and professionally to common goals? I believe we are. Let's work together so that the job can be done as it should be done. Then the 1970's can become a decade of services in depth for deaf people.

The only fair way to approach a challenging subject like this is to be completely honest at the outset, and say that I don't know what the role will be for State Rehabilitation agencies in services for deaf people in the seventies. I have no special insight into the future that makes it possible to predict the role. The things that I have observed in the past few years do not establish any firm pattern or trend. It would even be difficult to describe the role of state agencies right now because we see such a varied pattern across the nation. We might be pessimistic and predict that this variety of levels of service from state to state will continue, and that there will be no consistent pattern nor uniform role for state agencies in the decade of the seventies.

But I would much prefer to be optimistic and say that perhaps we can help to create the role for state agencies in serving deaf

people in the seventies, by talking about what it can be or what we would hope that it might be. For surely much of the great progress during the sixties came about as a result of the dreams and hopes of people like Mary Switzer, Jim Garrett, Boyce Williams and so many of you who are leaders in making services available to deaf people.

It is difficult to give priorities to the things we might hope for, but I think I would first hope for a basic commitment from all of us in state rehabilitation agencies, a commitment that we need to do something significant in improving our services to deaf people. I think this might best be expressed in a statement of philosophy that rehabilitation workers would understand. We might say it this way:

The role of State Rehabilitation Agencies in serving deaf people in the Seventies is to find deaf people where they are and as they are and to do whatever it takes to see that deaf people get the maximum opportunity for personal and vocational achievement.

We might make this further statement:

Deaf children, youths and adults as individuals and as citizens, deserve every right, privilege, freedom, opportunity to achieve, and every responsibility of any other citizen; and because of their unique characteristic of deafness in addition to their other capacities or handicaps, deserve all the specialized services and technology necessary to compete fairly and to contribute fully to life in our society.

Now you may object to some portions of that statement or you may be able to improve on it from your experience. Some of you may feel that it is just so many idle words. But I am just optimistic enough to believe that it just might stir a spark of hope if Vocational Rehabilitation people really were committed to that philosophy and if all the deaf people in America could believe that the people in rehabilitation agencies felt that way about them.

Now to make a positive approach and to help create the role we want for state rehabilitation agencies, let's consider some things that might be recommended for each state if they have not already been done.

1. First it seems essential to assign specific responsibility in the agency for the rehabilitation services for the deaf. In most of

the State agencies this ought to be a full-time person who can devote full attention to program development. It should be a staff person who can communicate with deaf people and who knows rehabilitation and who understands the needs of deaf people. This staff person should be delegated sufficient authority to organize a statewide program of rehabilitation services for the deaf.

2. The second essential step is the recruitment and development of an adequate staff of counselors for the deaf to reach and serve the deaf population in the state. There must be a fundamental understanding that the job cannot be done by general caseload counselors who have no skills in communicating with the deaf and who have large caseloads of other clients. This is still our greatest problem. This calls for recruitment of counselors who already have special skills in working with deaf people or providing training for counselors who have a genuine interest in working with the deaf. Many states have employed-qualified deaf counselors. Full-time counselors are needed in most metropolitan areas. Itinerant counselors may be needed in sparsely settled rural areas. But an essential role of the state agency is to provide an adequate and competent counselor staff to serve the deaf.

3. State agencies must assume the role of establishing an adequate liaison with the state school for the deaf. This is also essential to any long-term program of rehabilitation for the deaf. A substantial segment of the deaf population of the state will be available to the rehabilitation agency for three to five years at the junior-senior high school level at the school. It should be the role of both the rehabilitation agency and the state school for the deaf to insure that every young person who leaves the school has had adequate counseling, guidance and planning for continued services. This period should be used to establish a friendly relationship with the student, his family and the rehabilitation staff in his home district. This can be accomplished through liaison counselors at the school, by periodic visits to the school by district counselors for the deaf, through summer work-experience programs in the home district, and by full communication between counselors at the school and counselors in the home district. Both should be involved in planning with the student to insure realistic plans and to avoid an interruption in services upon leaving the school.

Many states have developed cooperative programs which are jointly funded and which utilize the excellent resources of the school

for evaluation, personal adjustment training and vocational training. Some are developing job-experience programs and experimental living facilities to break the pattern of dependency on institutional living arrangements.

While this kind of effort calls for full cooperation by both the school and the rehabilitation agency, we can urge the rehabilitation agency to help develop this role and to give vigorous leadership to such a program.

4. The fourth important role for state agencies is the development of adequate liaison with the deaf community. Many state rehabilitation programs have good contacts with the state association for the deaf and with the private and volunteer agencies who serve the deaf. But to achieve what we hope to do in the seventies, it seems to me that state rehabilitation agencies must join hands with all organizations for the deaf in going far beyond anything we have yet done together. We need to help develop an effective lobby for the deaf in every state. We need better communications and better publications. We need an effective voice for the deaf in the state legislature. We need to bring a stronger influence to bear on city, county and state merit systems and regulatory bodies who set the requirements for licenses or admission to certain fields of work. We need to reach the disadvantaged deaf in central cities and rural areas and in racial and ethnic groups. We need to promote a greater involvement in recreational and socialization activities for deaf people.

All these activities will represent a new and different role for many state rehabilitation agencies. They will require more staff and a different kind of staff function from that which most state agencies have provided.

5. There is critical need in most states for a competent and professional life-time counseling and referral service for deaf people and their families. This function is performed well by private and volunteer organizations in many large cities. But there is no governmental agency that fills this role throughout the country. For the decade of the seventies state rehabilitation agencies may need to assume this role and seek whatever statutory authority and financial support may be needed to carry it out. As

competent counselors for the deaf are developed in state rehabilitation agencies, with their network of district offices, they should be in the best position of any governmental agency to provide advice and referral information to parents of deaf children, deaf youth and adults seeking help on problems of education, legal advice, vocational training, job placement and a variety of other needed information. It should be the role of the state agency to be the place where deaf people can always find someone who can communicate with them and give them competent counseling and information.

6. In connection with the information and referral role, state agencies should accept the role of being the permanent census agency for the deaf. Every effort should be made to obtain the name and address of every deaf person in the state through every means available to the agency. This should be true of children and adults, employed and unemployed. This should include deaf people in tuberculosis hospitals, mental hospitals, facilities for the mentally retarded, juvenile offenders and correctional facilities. Every deaf person and his family represents a valuable resource to other deaf people and to counselors serving the deaf.

We can never get the resources we need to serve all deaf people until we know who they are, where they are and what their needs may be. The state rehabilitation agency could provide this role and function if given the resources to do so. This ought to be one of our goals for the seventies.

7. We have made great progress in in the sixties in the development of workshops and facilities for handicapped people. These have brought about a new dimension in work evaluation and in personal adjustment training. State agencies need to take the leadership in making a sufficient number of these facilities available to their deaf clients. Many low-achieving deaf people could benefit by these programs, and some of these programs could be opened to deaf clients if staff could be trained or employed who could communicate with the deaf or if interpreters could be employed to work with deaf clients. State agencies could promote the development of such programs by employing interpreters or by agreeing to pay for interpreter services provided by the facilities.

8. State agencies need to develop a similar role with Junior Colleges, with Area Vocational Technical Schools and with Adult

Education Programs. The projects at Delgado, Seattle and St. Paul have indicated the effectiveness of adapting vocational-technical programs to serve the deaf. Other states have followed suit by placing interpreters and other staff support in these settings to assist deaf clients.

9. Finally, I think the greatest challenge facing state rehabilitation agencies in serving deaf clients in the seventies is in developing an effective working relationship with public school and day-school programs for the deaf. Many states are moving toward a mandatory special education program for all handicapped children. This may be a great thing for the orthopedically handicapped, the mentally retarded, and even the blind. But I have grave concern about how it will develop for the deaf. In metropolitan areas parents seem to be demanding day-school programs of education for their deaf children in preference to the residential school. When such children have not received total communication instruction and when parents and family members have not been able to learn to communicate with deaf children, real adjustment problems develop. The task of state rehabilitation agencies in serving these deaf youths will be much greater if this trend continues.

To help avoid this problem state agencies and their staff members need to bring their influence to bear with local school boards, with parent organizations and other groups to foster realistic educational programs and foster community programs in communication skills.

Summary

In the last half of the decade of the sixties we witnessed a substantial increase in the interest in rehabilitation services for deaf people. The Las Cruces Conference in 1967 was a real milestone in bringing together State Directors of Vocational Rehabilitation, Superintendents of Schools for the Deaf, Educators of the Deaf, and many Deaf leaders. The follow-up conferences in regions and states have done much to keep the spirit of Las Cruces alive and to foster cooperation in developing programs for deaf people.

The organization of the Professional Rehabilitation Workers with Adult Deaf has served to bring together the leaders in the rehabilitation movement who serve the deaf. You are a respected voice in the field of rehabilitation and you can exert a professional influence in the role of state agencies in serving the deaf. I hope you will exert all your collective influence to making this role a realistic expression of our philosophy.