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THE CRISES FACED BY VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION: TWO RADICAL SOLUTIONS

McCay Vernon and Ethan A. Seidel

Two major changes over the past four years have drastically reduced the capacity of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and rehabilitation counselors to serve deaf clients.

The first of these is the huge upswing in unemployment. For years joblessness had hovered near the four percent rate that economists consider full employment. Until the recent recession the unemployment rate had not exceeded 6 percent since 1961; and as recently as 1969, the unemployment rate dropped to 3.5 percent (*Federal Reserve Bulletin*, 1975, p. A52). However, for the last two years, unemployment has risen as high as nine percent and has remained at over eight percent. Thus, during the last two years joblessness has been double the rate of the previous decade. Not since the Great Depression have we experienced a rate of unemployment of this magnitude (*Historical Chart Book*, 1974, p. 78). The evidence is rather conclusive that this situation will continue for the foreseeable future.

Trying to place the typical deaf client on a job in the face of such high unemployment rates is difficult and sometimes impossible. The problem is even more serious than these data indicate because in manufacturing, printing and goods-producing industries where deaf people have historically been concentrated, the jobless rate is far higher than for the economy as a whole. In manufacturing, for example, employment fell by ten percent from 1974 to 1975. This translates into a loss of nearly two million jobs in the past year (*Economic Indicators*, 1975, p. 13).

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A second major recent change having negative implications for deaf clients and their rehabilitation counselors is the huge cut in client service monies. Adding to these cuts are the almost total elimination of money for research and demonstration projects. In the past many of these, such as the Arkansas Project for the Multiply Handicapped and Jewish Vocational Services (St. Louis and Chicago), supplemented client services monies and offered varied training opportunities for deaf clients.

Inflation has also been a factor in that services have become increasingly expensive. Since 1970, wholesale prices have risen 59 percent and consumer prices close to 40 percent (*Federal Reserve Bulletin*, 1975, p. A53). This means that a 1975 budget dollar is worth roughly 70 cents when compared to a dollar in the 1970 budget. Hence the purchasing power of reduced Division of Vocational Rehabilitation budgets is even further eroded.

THE EFFECTS ON DEAF CLIENTS AND REHABILITATION COUNSELORS

As a result of these two major changes, higher national rates of unemployment and less real government money invested in the training, many counselors and their deaf clients feel that the situation is desperate. With employers having their choice of many hearing applicants, how can a counselor place an untrained person who has the communication problems of deafness plus an often inadequate educational achievement level? The situation has become so desperate that some counselors may have even altered records in order to get the needed closures to keep their jobs.

Very clearly many of the basic rehabilitation approaches that had worked until the recent past are no longer effective enough to do the job. Personal observation based on work for Maryland, Delaware, and Washington Divisions of Vocational Rehabilitation and discussions with counselors and deaf people across the United States indicates an unemployment rate near 20 percent among deaf youth. In order to meet the crises posed by the combination of high unemployment rates and reduced client services monies, a drastic change of Division of Vocational Rehabilitation policy is needed. As it is now, counselors are sitting in their offices faced with deaf clients they cannot place on jobs, clients for whom they lack the money to train to employable levels. The result is that in many ways they are paralyzed—their hands are tied. Even more importantly, deaf clients in need are getting neither jobs nor training.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Most counselors of deaf clients have reacted to the problem by increasing their placement efforts, trying to help get their clients on SSI, and attempting other alternatives. However, these approaches are not solving the basic

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dilemma. What follows are two suggestions for dealing with the issue, at least one of which would involve a fundamental reconceptualization of the counselor's role and that of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AND THE ROLE OF THE DIVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Section 503 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 says that any employer having a federal contract of over \$2,500 must have an affirmative action clause in it for the employment of handicapped people. Over 50 percent of the nation's corporations are included by this criterion (Krents, 1975). These businesses are required to submit plans describing specific actions they are taking to employ deaf and other handicapped persons. This is of particular benefit to deaf people because research indicates that employers see them as among the most preferred of all handicapped workers (Tringo, 1971). Thus, when faced with the requirement to employ a given percent of handicapped persons among their work force, it is probable that they will turn to deaf applicants in preference to other handicapped groups.

Despite the passage of Section 503 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 almost three years ago, there has been no implementation. No test cases have been brought forth and industry has not submitted affirmative action plans. In other words nothing has been done. Needy deaf people have neither the resources nor the sophistication to demand the enforcement of the Act.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and its counselors have a responsibility to fill this advocacy role. Such a role would represent a drastic change in policy for the Agency. Under this proposed approach rehabilitation counselors' roles would be greatly altered. They would be responsible for identifying all local companies having contracts of \$2,500 or more with the federal government. Then they would have to get from the government the affirmative action plans of these companies. If such plans had not been submitted, not implemented, or were not satisfactory, then counselors would be free to use client services monies to engage legal counsel for deaf clients who applied to the business covered by Section 503.

In other words the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would become an advocacy agency in some respects similar to Common Cause. Instead of begging industry to hire a token number of deaf people, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would insure through legal advocacy that corporations do what they are by law obligated to do for deaf job seekers. Rather than following the traditional pattern exemplified by sponsoring "Hire the Handicapped" luncheons to which local industries send low-level people in their personnel office who then espouse inspirational euphemisms about hiring the handicapped being good business, an advocacy role by the Division

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of Vocational Rehabilitation would pressure industry to demonstrate genuine concern about training and placing a fair percent of deaf people.

Granted, such a drastic change in policy would have serious political overtones. It means that the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation has to be willing to stand hard on the basic principle of the right of deaf people to a fair chance of a job. In a full advocacy role the Agency cannot act simply on the bases of political expediency or Pollyanna-like proclamations. Instead of being in many respects an innocuous agency which industry essentially ignores, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would have to be willing to fight and to be fought on occasion by the major money interests of the community. For an agency historically characterized by basically good intentions couched in relatively passive-submissive politics, the change would not be easy. Administrators and counselors would be filling new and different functions.

An advocacy role by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would be in the interest of deaf people and all handicapped groups. The need is there. The Agency's response could be interpreted as a measure of the extent to which handicapped people are their primary concern.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY NOISE POLLUTION STANDARDS

The second major proposal suggested here to meet the current crises posed by high employment rates and reduced funds for vocational rehabilitation is related to new state government rules on noise pollution and current federal proposals that at this time have passed one house of Congress. It is estimated that the cost to industry of meeting the proposed new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards will be between 11.7 and 31.6 billion dollars over the next ten years (Frankhauser and Katsarkas, 1975; Ross, 1975). These costs threaten to put some companies out of business and they represent a huge expense to many major industries such as steel manufacturing, printing, and textiles.

One way industry can circumvent such expenses is to hire deaf workers, some of whom are immune to noise destroying their hearing. The Samsonite Luggage Factory has deaf operators on certain very loud stamp presses. *The Washington Post* recently faced a strike by printers if the noise levels of certain presses were not reduced. The cost to the paper would have been exorbitant, yet there are enough deaf printers at the *Post* to have completely staffed these presses and the work areas in which they were located. Throughout the printing industry noise pollution control represents an awesome expense. Many deaf persons are trained for work in printing. They could be hired to

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work around the noisy machinery at a tremendous savings to the publishing business. Some forms of profound hearing loss leave the individual with an inability to tolerate loud noises. These persons obviously would not be able to work in such environments.

The generality that derives from the specific situations of Samsonite and the *Post* is that the hiring of deaf workers in certain jobs involving exposure to excessive noise could be attractive alternatives to employers who otherwise face tremendously expensive machine and plant renovation. Unfortunately, no effort has been made to capitalize on this opportunity. No research has been done on the type of jobs or the kind of training which are involved in noise-related employment. This lack of research data is a gross deficiency because the employer who, by hiring deaf people, could save thousands of dollars of industrial noise reduction costs while simultaneously meeting affirmative action demands, would have every reason to be receptive to deaf applicants. Delaware's consultant to the deaf and hard of hearing, Simpson, has begun a research study with Western Maryland College to find out how many jobs there are in her state which involve noise levels above those acceptable according to the proposed new EPA standard. Efforts will be made to place deaf people in these jobs.

There would be deaf persons with certain types of hearing losses or with significant residual hearing who would not be immune to noise pollution. However, these individuals are easily identified by audiological tests. For the remaining deaf population, a significant number of new and varied job opportunities would be opened by placement in noise-related work.

For the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation the task is simple. "Noise polluted" positions can be identified by sending all companies having over one hundred employees a simple survey type question or two on a self-addressed return postage paid postcard. Those industries whose response indicated they had jobs where noise pollution was a problem would be followed up with a detailed investigation of the number and nature of the jobs. Deaf clients would then be trained for these positions. Industry would save millions or even billions of dollars and deaf people would get jobs (Frankhauser & Katsarkas, 1975; Ross, 1975).

With regard to advocacy, the same problem is posed by enforcement of noise pollution standards that exists with regard to Section 503 of the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act. Noise pollution standards are not being enforced. In order to open up noisy jobs for deaf people, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would have to actively advocate enforcement of the EPA standards. This is properly within the purview of the Division (and EPA officials) because it represents a prevention of the handicap of deafness, i.e. the prevention of the addition of hearing-impaired workers to the Division's rolls.

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SUMMARY

Two recent economic changes have had a major negative impact on deaf job seekers. One is the massive increase in the unemployment rate over the last few years. The other is the drastic cut in money available to train deaf clients. These two factors have literally tied the hands of rehabilitation counselors trying to serve deaf clients. As a result the unemployment rate among deaf persons is higher than at anytime since the depression. Both counselors and clients face a difficult, terribly discouraging problem.

Two solutions are proposed. The first is that the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation act as an advocate for the deaf person by assuring that Section 503 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is enforced. This Act requires the same affirmative action for handicapped workers that has been so valuable to ethnic minorities in obtaining employment.

The second proposal is that the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation work with industry relative to the new Environmental Protection Agency noise pollution standards. Instead of industry spending an estimated 11 to 31 billion dollars between now and 1985 to reduce noise levels to acceptable standards, they should place deaf workers in many of the noise-related jobs. For this to happen, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation must locate the jobs and use EPA standards as leverage in showing employers the advantage of deaf employees in these jobs.

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The *Journal* publishes theoretical articles, program descriptions, experimental reports, review articles, and book reviews. The primary substantive criterion used in considering a submitted paper for publication is practical and direct relevance to readers of the *Journal*. The author must have something original to say about improving services with deaf people. The comments s/he makes should have more than local or regional significance. Thus, an article describing the client population served by a facility is more likely to be accepted for publication if the author relates his/her observations to the general field than if s/he restricts the discussion to one program. Similarly, a research report is greatly enhanced when the author takes care to delineate the limitations to generalizability of the findings.

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