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## Aging and Deafness

Donna Johnson

*Special Assistant to the Director to the Director of the Governor's Commission on Aging, Austin, Texas*

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## AGING AND DEAFNESS

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**Donna Johnson**

The philosophy undergirding the cooperative work of the Texas Commission for the Deaf and the Governor's Committee on Aging is the one most important single factor influencing our three years of joint effort. It is a philosophy of commitment to the principal that social services for the elderly means exactly that — *the elderly*. An all inclusive term *the elderly* — means all older persons — ambulant, infirm, able, disabled, deaf, hearing, blind, sighted, etc.

It is a philosophy rooted in the experiences of two state agencies — unique in that they are both pioneers in a sense in Texas, at any rate, in the development of services for two distinct target groups of individuals — the deaf — and the elderly. There is a point at which our target groups lose their distinctiveness and, in fact, intersect and it is this point of intersection that precipitated our productive three year working relationship.

Deafness and advancing age are two conditions which pose unique problems to social service delivery systems for elderly persons. The Older Americans Act, a federal piece of legislation administered by the Governor's Committee on Aging, mandates the Committee to structure and deliver programs in such a way that the *isolated* elderly are reached. The elderly deaf individuals are perhaps the most isolated of all older persons from the mainstream of life in their communities. This isolation also includes a lack of access and understanding of social, rehabilitative, financial and health services to which elderly deaf people are lawfully entitled.

The initial purpose of our cooperative program was to improve or initiate the utilization of human services for elderly deaf persons. Our task created by this goal was to catalyze the successful interaction of two separate groups: (a) the prelingually deaf Texan over 55 years of age, and (b) the federal, state and local human service systems for older persons.

The first year of work followed a basic five-step plan:

1. Identification of social service resources available for elderly persons.

The Governor's Committee on Aging supports a multitude of social service systems throughout its 26 Planning and Service Areas. Currently the Committee maintains 18 Area Agencies on Aging and 8 Regional Offices on Aging. The task of identifying the resources available for elderly individuals will be systematically coordinated through each of these 26 Planning and Service Areas.

2. Dissemination of basic information about specific needs of deaf persons to these social service resource agencies.

The project staff will function as a resource and training center for the 26 Planning and Service Areas of the Governor's Committee on Aging. A coordinator from each area will participate in sessions conducted by the project staff on the needs of deaf people and will maintain contact with this central resource for specific needs of that Area Agency on Aging or Regional Office on Aging.

3. Coordination of various services by existing resources for deaf individuals with these services provided for the elderly normal-hearing person.

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Ms. Johnson is Special Assistant to the Director of the Governor's Commission on Aging, Austin, Texas.

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A number of services are made available by the Governor's Committee on Aging for normal-hearing elderly individuals. In many areas of Texas, small facilities serving all ages of the deaf are being maintained. In those areas that do not have a formalized service, the service of a person with sign language skills must be obtained. These resources will then be formally utilized to bridge the communication barrier which exists between resources for the elderly normal-hearing person and resources for the elderly deaf person.

4. Ongoing outreach program for continued referrals of elderly deaf people.

A program implemented through the 26 Planning and Service Areas will establish communication with churches, public agencies, and the media for continued referrals of elderly deaf individuals to the existing expanded services.

5. Program of ongoing evaluation to determine the degree to which elderly deaf persons have increased their use of available services.

Records which reflect the number of elderly deaf individuals utilizing agency services will indicate the effectiveness of this project as well as the increased effectiveness of the service delivery system in each Planning and Service Area.

During the first year efforts were concentrated in eight different planning and service areas of the state in order to develop and refine a model service delivery system that could then be implemented in all areas of the state.

In addition to the direct services provided by the service Development Project in these eight areas, numerous other staff positions and services have been "generated" in answer to the needs of the deaf that the Service Development Project found through research in each Planning and Service area. Although no exact monetary figure can be affixed to these spin-off services, it is estimated that at least \$100,000 worth of direct services for the deaf has been created in the state through a project that was originally conceived as a research and demonstration effort.

The impetus for the generation of these services was the initial "training" that was given to each Planning and Service area as an informal introduction to the *needs* of the elderly

deaf. The awareness of these needs did not previously exist in the areas because the deaf are not "verbal" in expression and were not included in needs assessment studies or service development planning.

In each of the demonstration areas it was found that once some knowledge of the elderly deaf community was obtained by those who implement services, the remaining tasks of involving the deaf in the services included removing the communication barrier and creating the desire to provide services.

The experience in each of the demonstration projects provided knowledge of the implementation problems which are inherent in new programs, and allowed for identification of practical solutions to these problems.

Workshops were held throughout the state. More than 1,000 community service providers attended the workshops. During the 2nd the project staff began to consider and plan for a community based structure that would hopefully provide for a continuity of services to the elderly deaf. From contacts made in the deaf community while planning and conducting the workshops the Texas Commission for the Deaf has been able to assist in several areas of the state in developing Community Councils for the deaf. These Councils provided that necessary link for continuity of services.

In the year ahead plans call for establishment of 19 local Community Councils for the Deaf. Each will have an Elderly Deaf Services Coordinator receiving a part-time salary. The Commission staff will work with the councils in selecting older deaf persons who are still active, have an automobile, and are known in the deaf communities. The Commission will provide for inservice training and general supervision and stimulation of the program.

As the Elderly Deaf Services Coordinators are employed they are receiving inservice training provided by the Commission staff. They are trained to conduct effective outreach services to the deaf population in their areas.

In all instances an appropriate bridging of these services are being made with the 28 Area Agencies on Aging now serving the entire state. The Area Agency Director is invited to assign a member of the Area Agency on Aging

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Advisory Council to serve on the Community Council for the Deaf. Frequent contact is maintained. Area Agency personnel are invited to attend regional training sessions.

Information materials and guidelines are developed by the Commission staff to assist the new coordinators. Copies of such materials are made available to the Area Agencies on Aging. The Commission staff is also available insofar as possible to assist in training sessions conducted by the Area Agency on Aging for their sub-contractors.

A sub-contract is developed with each community council outlining duties and responsibilities of the recipient. The relationship of the appropriate Area Agency on Aging will be emphasized in this sub-contract. The Commission worked with the Governor's Committee on Aging staff to develop these sub-contracts in order to maximize support of the basic intent of the Older Americans Act as interpreted implemented by the Area Agency on Aging.

Each council is responsible for recording

activities and accomplishments and a monthly report filed with the Commission. Copies are forwarded to the Governor's Committee on Aging.

We have reason to view positively our three years of cooperative struggle. Our human service systems have evolved and changed in answer to the needs expressed by "people". Although the idea simplifies the development of policies and programs it creates a large gap in the equality of services to persons with communication problems or lack of social impact necessary for effective communication. The history of services to deaf persons is that of a turbulent struggle. We hope in Texas at any rate that we have lessened that gap and made the struggles less turbulent. But with our increased understanding of the complexity of the problems that deaf persons face in this society coupled with those faced by elderly persons in this society it is imperative that each minor victory against the isolation of our aged deaf be viewed with pride but not complacency.