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VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES AND THE BLACK DEAF

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To set a perspective for this paper, it is necessary to restate what James F. Garrett said in his keynote address to the 1970 PRWAD convention:

The deaf who have been served thus far, whether we like to accept or not, are not the deaf who are the most in need. Our problem and our challenge in the next ten years is to do a job and to do as good a job on those deaf who are most in need as we have been doing with others that we have been serving. The deaf who are poor, who are hidden away in our inner cities, and in our ghettos, and particularly the black deaf, are individuals who need service and who must be given equal opportunities to enjoy the fruits of everything we have learned.

Current trends in Federal and State legislation, in rehabilitation policy, and decision making indicate that rehabilitation services are moving in the direction of greater involvement with the disadvantaged blacks. State agencies are recruiting more black counselors to work in the inner cities. Programs and services are being established with the Department of Social Services, the public schools, and non-profit organizations, such as the Urban League. In comparison, rehabilitation services for the deaf blacks are just beginning to come into the fold.

The deaf blacks can be described as a group of individuals who live in a "hearing and color-conscious" society. They are a group of individuals oppressed because of the racist attitudes that govern the people and institutions of this society, and they are handicapped because of their deafness and the resultant communication problems. Frank Bowe in his article, "Non-White Deaf Persons: Educational, Psychological, and Occupational Considerations," stated:

In view of the often staggering problems faced by this group, it is somewhat surprising to discover that no major research study focusing primarily upon this segment of the deaf population has been published. Basic questions remain unanswered. For example, how many non-white deaf are there in the country today? What are their achievement levels? Communication scores? Intellectual levels? Social functioning abilities? Occupations? Earnings? Psychological adjustment? Secondary handicaps? Generally, what is the effect, if any, of the additional minority group status upon these deaf persons? These are several factors to consider if we are to serve the deaf blacks effectively.

Ayers states the main factor explicitly, "I feel that the greatest single variable influencing the role of counselors in working with black clients is their attitude." Attitude can be defined as feelings, emotions, and behavior formulated and developed through knowledge and experiences. They are significantly influenced by the environment in which the individual lives. We have to rid ourselves of the racist attitudes that exist in our institutional systems and society in general. We can do this in the rehabilitation counselor training programs in the following ways:

1. Exposure to life and services in the ghetto and to racism that prevails.
2. Exposure to the abundance of literature on black people, their history and culture.
3. Sensitivity training to develop understanding of the psycho-social aspects of cultural deprivation.
4. Extensive communication with the deaf blacks in informal settings.

A second factor is not only the need to encourage more research in the areas of educational, psycho-social, and occupational aspects of the deaf blacks, but there is a need to demand more of it. Education and rehabilitation personnel serving the deaf are sorely in need of knowledge and skills to work effectively with the black deaf population. Presently, no professional training programs are preparing them for service to this group.

Available data seems to show that the black deaf population in our urban communities is larger than we think. For instance, 285 deaf and hard of hearing pupils are currently registered in the Detroit public school system. Approximately 60 percent of them are black. Of the 150 deaf cases presently being served by the Detroit vocational rehabilitation agency, over 50 percent are black. In the summary report of the special meeting on problems of identifying black deaf persons by Schein and Ries in 1970, it was noted that in Memphis, Tennessee, one-half of the school-age population was black with the same ratio applying to the city day school programs for the deaf. According to a review of the literature done by Bowe (1971), the Babbidge report listed 13 States having separate schools for deaf black children. The last state to integrate its residential schools was North Carolina.

It is imperative that more black professionals be recruited. Black deaf students in our college programs such as Gallaudet, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and others must be made aware that they are needed in education and rehabilitation service to black deaf people. The sight of a professional black deaf person is a tremendous boost to the dignity of the deaf black community.

A final important consideration in improving service to black deaf and hard of hearing persons involves the establishment of community service centers. There is a great need for such centers to be part of a multi-dimensional service approach whereby early identification of deafness, parent counseling, preschool training, education, professional consultant, and mental health services may assist the black deaf person in achieving more favorable rehabilitation outcome.

So I say, right on with the work we have to do.

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