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A Model for the External Evaluation of State Vocational Rehabilitation Programs for Hearing Impaired Persons

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A MODEL FOR THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAMS FOR HEARING IMPAIRED PERSONS

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I. Introduction

Recent changes in state and federal philosophy and legislation have served to create a new emphasis on the statewide provision of services for hearing impaired persons. As a result, a need has arisen to create a system of state level program evaluation which will specifically address itself to the complexities involved in the delivery of services to this severely disabled population. This need is apparent at several levels. First, there is a need for each state to evaluate and define the present status. Although agencies must maintain careful records of the number and type of clients served, few have completely assessed the nature and needs of the deaf population within each state. Without such an overview, it is impossible to determine such critical dimensions as percentage of population currently served, target population groups, and geographic needs for future services.

Second, a comprehensive state level evaluation holds great utility for the statewide planning of services for hearing impaired persons. As the Model State Plan for the Vocational Rehabilitation of Hearing Impaired Persons clearly states, there is a need for each state to articulate clear and measurable objectives which will enable the state to formulate

dynamic planning for this population. Without a clear assessment of services as they currently exist, problem areas cannot be defined and planning for future needs cannot be undertaken.

Third, the current means of analysis employed by many states do not fulfill the specific needs to which this model is addressed. Although most state vocational rehabilitation agencies have highly sophisticated systems of program evaluation, such systems do not fully provide the type of data necessary to accurately plan services for hearing impaired persons. Many such systems are highly structured in the classification of data of all types of handicapped clients and may or may not address specific concerns unique to the hearing impaired population. As such, the addition of an external evaluation of services to this population would augment existing program evaluation systems and add expertise in the area of deafness as well as providing a more comprehensive overview of the network of services throughout the state. Since it would be virtually impossible to survey all state-level agencies which provide services to hearing impaired persons, this model focuses on the state rehabilitation agency. While the initial application of this model was conducted within a vocational

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rehabilitation agency, the model could easily be applied to any state level program which wished to better define the impact of its service delivery program with regard to hearing impaired persons. The agency which sponsors the survey is not as important as the analysis of all interrelating systems which interact with the target agency.

II. The Model: Six Basic Areas for Investigation

The purpose of this article is to suggest a viable third party evaluation model for use in assessing, defining, and planning for services for hearing impaired persons within a given state. The third party evaluation approach is most desirable as it removes possible biases or preconceived attitudes of the agency being evaluated. This approach also fosters more accurate reporting by the persons interviewed as there is less concern of reprisal for providing factual information that may not reflect well on agency policy. It is necessary that the evaluation team selected be knowledgeable in the field of deafness rehabilitation and that the evaluators possess appropriate sign language skills as well as a comprehensive knowledge of the vocational rehabilitation process and the dynamics of agency operation. Six basic areas should be investigated in this proposed model.

Population Assessment

The first task of the evaluation team should be a determination of whether an adequate evaluation of the state's hearing impaired population has been undertaken. The evaluation team should investigate categorical classifications of hearing impaired persons within the state, determining the number of post-vocationally (after the age of 19), pre-vocationally (prior to the age of 19), and prelingually (prior to the age of 3) deaf persons as well as the number of hard of hearing persons within the state. Next, an investigation of the distribution of hearing impaired persons within the state should be undertaken. Finally, the evaluation team should collect data as to the number of hearing impaired clients currently receiving services from all existing agencies, in-

cluding the state vocational rehabilitation agency.

Assessment of the Delivery of Vocational Rehabilitation Services to Hearing Impaired Persons

The evaluation team should next focus its efforts on a thorough analysis of the state vocational rehabilitation agency and its delivery of services to hearing impaired persons. This examination should involve an analysis of the state director's policy toward services for hearing impaired clients as well as an examination of the role of the state coordinator of services for the deaf within the structure of the agency. Further, the evaluation team should study rehabilitation counselors for the deaf's training, communication skills, and caseload. If the state has a state advisory committee on deafness, it will be important to analyze the function of the committee in relation to the agency as a whole. Further, a complex analysis of the relationships among the state director, state coordinator of services for the deaf, rehabilitation counselors for the deaf, and agency supervisors should be undertaken.

In addition, the evaluation team will need to investigate the specific operation of the vocational rehabilitation system with respect to the delivery of services to hearing impaired clients. Specifically, the evaluators should examine the case finding and referral process, determination of eligibility, the diagnostic and evaluation process, and the resources available for each. Further, the evaluators should investigate the process of referring hearing impaired clients to the state agency and the agency's relationships with hearing and speech centers, hearing aid dealers, otologists, schools, parent groups, and other potential referral sources.

Continuing with an investigation of the state vocational rehabilitation agency delivery system, the evaluators will want to determine work adjustment, training, post secondary education, and placement options for hearing impaired clients. Budgetary appropriations for serving hearing impaired clients should also be examined, including agency policies on maintenance, transportation, and interpreting services. Finally, the agency's rapport and rela-

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tionship with the deaf community should be investigated, including relationships of the agency with major deaf organizations.

Analysis of Existing Service Delivery Network

In addition to a thorough analysis of the state agency, it is essential that the external evaluation team examine the wider service delivery network employed by the state agency. This particular phase of the evaluation should involve a careful examination of exactly what facilities and services are available to deaf persons seeking rehabilitation assistance. The following types of programs should be reviewed: coordinating, referral and counseling services, diagnostic and evaluation centers, adjustment programs, sheltered workshops, mental health facilities, training centers, post-secondary educational programs, and interpreting services. The evaluation team should focus on what types of programs are available to hearing impaired persons, how well equipped and staffed programs are to deal with this population, and the nature of the referral process between the various service delivery components and the state agency.

Analysis of Interagency Cooperation and Accessibility of Services to Deaf Persons

After an analysis of the state agency and those programs which the agency makes use of in delivering rehabilitation services to hearing impaired clients, the evaluation team should then turn their efforts to an examination of the more global service delivery network. This examination should include an overview of non-rehabilitation-oriented services including Social Security, Public Aid, state and community mental health services, state employment agencies, Legal Aid, United Fund affiliates, adult education, hospitals and other medical services, police, fire, and other emergency services, and TTY networks. Although it will not be possible for the evaluation team to review each of the above services in depth, an overview of what type of programs are meeting or could potentially meet the range of needs which hearing impaired persons may encounter during their lifetime is

essential to obtaining a comprehensive overview of the individual state's service delivery network.

Analysis of the Relationship of the State Deaf Education Program to the Vocational Rehabilitation Process

The educational process as it relates to deaf children and their parents is rarely considered as a component of a state-level evaluation of rehabilitation services, and yet it is this process which provides the cornerstone upon which the rehabilitation process must build. Therefore, it is most appropriate that a state-level evaluation include such elements as an analysis of the policy and attitude of the state coordinator of special education, an overview of information and counseling services, and an analysis of the relationships of the state residential school for the deaf to the vocational rehabilitation process, including an assessment of the referral process. In short, an overview of the educational process and its relationship to vocational rehabilitation can well serve to provide a glimpse of the potential for continuity of services for hearing impaired persons from cradle to grave.

Training Opportunities and Needs

The final area of assessment upon which the comprehensive evaluation should focus lies in the area of training needs and opportunities. Inservice training programs and/or workshops which better enable counselors to serve hearing impaired clients should be investigated. Further, deaf community development and leadership training programs, where they exist, should be analyzed and follow-up interviews with individuals who have attended existing programs should be conducted whenever possible in an attempt to better assess the impact of our existing training programs. Finally, the evaluation should include an assessment of current and future training needs in the area of deafness.

III. Methodology

The comprehensive nature of the above categories of investigation emphasizes the need

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for such a state evaluation to be an ongoing process which builds upon the information provided by an initial assessment of the entire system which serves hearing impaired persons in the state. The following discussion will attempt to outline five major categories which might constitute the initial assessment performed by the evaluation team.

A. Interviews

Following the general systems type of approach outlined in this evaluation model, it is important that in-depth interviews be conducted with key individuals both within and outside of the state agency. Within the state agency, interviews should be arranged with the State Director of Vocational Rehabilitation, the State Coordinator of Services for the Deaf, and several Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf. In addition, both clients who are currently receiving services and those who have received services in the past and whose cases are now closed should be interviewed as should the chairperson of the state advisory council on deafness if such a committee exists in the given state.

In addition to these agency personnel, interviews should also be conducted with key individuals representing other segments of the overall system. Within the realm of education, interviews should be arranged with the state Coordinator of Special Education as well as the superintendent of the state residential school. The president of the state association for the deaf should also be interviewed as should other leaders and members of the deaf community. Representatives from the state chapter of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, local chapter of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, and various parent groups would be additional sources of helpful information.

It should be further noted that all interviews should be conducted in person by a team of evaluators who are skilled in interviewing techniques and who have carefully prepared areas of investigation upon which the interview will be based. It is imperative that the evaluators guarantee confidentiality to all respondents and that interviews be scheduled at a

time and place convenient to and appropriate for such discussion. For example, interviews with members of the deaf community might be better conducted in the evening after working hours in the home of one of the members of the community rather than in the state office building during times when many potentially helpful individuals are engaged in daily employment.

B. Site Visits

In addition to personal interviews, site visits should be arranged at various facilities in order to provide a more comprehensive overview of service delivery facilities and programs. Recommended possibilities for site visits might include the state school for the deaf, several public day school programs, diagnostic, evaluation, and adjustment facilities serving this population. Further, sheltered workshops, half-way houses, and/or mental health programs serving the hearing impaired population might also be informative sites to visit.

C. Statistical Methodology

In addition to personal interviews and site visits, statistical data should also be gathered and analyzed in an attempt to provide a clearer picture of services provided by the state agency to hearing impaired clients. An analysis should be conducted of all hearing impaired clients served by the state agency within the past five-year period. This analysis should entail an examination of the geographic distribution of those clients within the state, the types and ratio of closures for this population, and an overview of the percentage of the state agency budget appropriated for the delivery of services to hearing impaired clients during the past five years. Further, the above categories of analysis should also be applied to the current hearing impaired caseload and trends noted.

D. Survey of Counselors Serving Hearing Impaired Clients

A fourth area which should be included in the external evaluation involves a survey of counselors within the agency who serve hearing impaired clients. The survey should ask the

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counselor to describe his or her caseload, including the average number of hearing impaired clients per year and the types of clients served, e.g., deaf without speech, deaf with speech, hard of hearing, multiply disabled. The survey should further attempt to ascertain the level of training which each counselor has received in the area of deafness and the counselor's self-rating of their communication skills. Finally, the survey should provide an opportunity for the counselor to describe the major problems he or she encounters in providing rehabilitation services to hearing impaired clients.

E. Reporting Results

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, provisions should be made for reporting the results of the initial evaluation to state agency personnel. The dissemination of this information should be accomplished in several different fashions so as to insure the utility of the information presented for the agency. First, the evaluation team should provide in-person reporting of their results so as to provide an opportunity for two-way communication. Second, the results of the evaluation should be contained in a formal written report including the recommendations of the team. Finally, a follow-up procedure should be arranged so as to insure implementation and allow for the creation of an ongoing system of evaluation.

IV. Conclusion

From this cursory description of a model for the external evaluation of state level programs for hearing impaired clients, it can be noted that this model is distinguished from existing evaluation programs in its reliance upon general systems theory as an approach to program evaluation. This model supports the basic premise of systems theory, that in order to fully understand the operation of an entity, it must be viewed as a system of interdependent parts functioning as a whole for some purpose. This model assumes that the delivery of services to deaf persons is a system of which

the vocational rehabilitation process, and the state agency specifically, is but one of the functioning elements. Thus, in order to fully understand, evaluate, and develop planning for the state agency, it is necessary to take into account the larger system and the environment in which the agency operates.

As with any model, there are both advantages and disadvantages inherent in the type of external evaluation which we have proposed. At first glance, this model would appear to be excessively costly and time-consuming. It might also prove difficult to find evaluators with appropriate experience and training in evaluation and deafness and interviews with the wide range of key individuals specified in this model may be difficult to arrange. It has, however, been our experience that these problems are not insurmountable and that the information gathered by such an evaluation appears to outweigh the difficulties which might be encountered in arranging for such an in-depth analysis. Further, we have found that the initial evaluation can be conducted within approximately a six month period of time with perhaps two five-day visits by the evaluation team.

The advantages of such an approach appear to extend beyond the obvious utility of the information gathered for assessment and planning purposes. The very process of initiating such an evaluation appears to have potential for creating a viable means of bettering inter-agency and intra-agency relationships by demonstrating a positive commitment on the part of the state agency on behalf of improved services for hearing impaired persons. Such a commitment is also quickly recognized by the deaf community and may serve as a positive demonstration of good will and intentions. As such, this model is to be viewed as an investment on the part of the state agency—an investment of time, energy, and resources on behalf of an improved assessment of current services, better communication among agencies, and ultimately, improved planning and services for hearing impaired persons.

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