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BRIDGING THE GAP WITH DEAF PARAPROFESSIONALS

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A GAP IN SERVICE

A gap exists between the agencies and institutions that serve the deaf and the deaf community. The gap can be labeled as “unresponsiveness” in delivering services to deaf persons. A way to help bridge the gap would be to utilize the expertise of deaf paraprofessionals.

There are numerous complaints from the deaf community about the way professional services are being delivered in the fields of education, mental health, the courts, and vocational areas. In order to place into perspective the complaints about inadequate services often made by deaf persons, the treatment process has to be broken down into the elements of unresponsiveness in agencies coupled with the peculiar limiting characteristics of a large number of unreached deaf clients. For reasons of simplicity, these client limitations are listed below:

1. Serious Communication Problems
 - a. Hearing
 - b. Speaking
 - c. Reading and Writing
2. Unsophistication
 - a. Confused by Bureaucratic Complexities
 - b. Ignorance of Professional Role Behavior
 - c. Inadequate Formal Education
3. Fear of Exploitation by Hearing Persons

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4. Self-Segregation (Sussman & Stewart, 1971)
5. Over-Dependency on:
 - a. Helpers (e.g. interpreters)
 - b. Relatives
 - c. Deaf Leaders
6. Low Economic Status
7. Under-Aspiring in:
 - a. Vocational Areas (Vernon, 1970)
 - b. Educational field (Vernon, 1970)
 - c. Social spheres

The delivery system should be designed to meet the particular needs of these unreached deaf clients. However, agencies have elements which are inadvertently designed for hearing clients. This point is illustrated in the list presented next.

The common agencies serving the deaf are: Speech and Hearing Centers, Public Schools, Universities, State Hospitals, the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation and others. Although these agencies and institutions vary in their effectiveness in delivering quality care, certain elements of unresponsiveness are often found operating in them all at one time or another. For convenience, these deficiencies are listed below:

1. Emphasis on Middle-Class Communication Skills
 - a. Professional Vocabulary
 - b. Facilitating Hearing Personnel
 - c. Under-utilization of Trained Interpreters
2. Inadequate Client Handling
 - a. Lack of Effective Public Relations (Vernon, 1970)
 - b. Superficial Client Orientation
 - c. Insufficient Follow-up
3. Underdeveloped Rapport with the Deaf Person
4. Little Outreach to Isolated Deaf
5. Paternalism (Sussman & Stewart, 1971)

It is time consuming to involve the client in the decision making process, thus the efficiency of bureaucratic delivery systems perpetuates the dependency of some deaf clients.

6. Nine-to-Five Scheduling, Weekdays.
7. Fragmentary Treatment

Little time to spend on assessing the needs of the whole individual who has unique problems that require extensive re-motivation help.

As a result of the above listed elements of unresponsiveness there is a large number of unreached deaf clients who have specific needs that could be met by the various agencies serving the deaf if programs were designed to bridge the gaps that presently exist.

UTILIZING THE DEAF PARAPROFESSIONAL

There is already ample evidence of the successful utilization of the paraprofessional to overcome agency unresponsiveness in areas other than deafness. (E.g. rehabilitation, drug addiction, alcoholism, inner city programs, etc.) However, in reviewing the literature on these programs using the paraprofessional, readers can find they can be applied to meeting the needs of the deaf.

Some of the unique advantages of using the paraprofessional within rehabilitation programs have been:

- a. Ready availability of such personnel.
- b. Special skills and capacities that many had to offer, including an emphasis on indigenous experience.
- c. Marked enthusiasm, particularly in regard to humanistic goals and values.
- d. The more efficient use of higher skills of more highly trained personnel.
- e. The more expeditious delivery of services in response to the pressing needs of disabled people resulting in increases in production.
- f. The more imaginative and innovative responses of personnel less conditioned by traditional, professional, or institutional structure (*Serving More Disabled People Better through New Careers in Rehabilitation*).

Considering the advantages of using the paraprofessional in other fields, the deaf paraprofessional could be used in bridging the gap in deaf services. It has been stated earlier that a large population of the deaf community have a serious communication problem, which in turn becomes a barrier when a service of the community at large is needed. In most cases, the professionals that staff agencies serving the deaf are not equipped to overcome that barrier. The hearing professional (even though he may have taken lessons in sign language) will have difficulties in communicating his values and specialized technical jargon to deaf persons who have limited backgrounds.

On the other hand, the deaf paraprofessional who lives within the deaf community is more apt to have the necessary communication skills to overcome this communication barrier. More than likely, he is not only knowledgeable in comprehending the language of signs or American Sign Language used by the deaf client, but has a knowledge of the English language. Also, he could be trained to have a working knowledge of the special vocabulary of the field that is represented in his agency.

As a result of an inadequate formal education, the unreached deaf client is often confused by bureaucracies and ignorant of the role of the professional. Therefore, it is necessary that agencies providing services to the deaf have an effective public relations program that would include educating the deaf community of the agency's functions, orientation of new clients and

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follow-up on cases until they obtain satisfactory closings. Often the agency fails on one or more of these steps in handling deaf clients.

The deaf paraprofessional can alleviate these elements of unresponsiveness. He can familiarize the deaf community of the services available by giving speeches at gatherings of the deaf, accompany the professional and introduce him to the community at various functions, advise the agency of media serving the deaf and in general promote favorable public relations between the agency and the deaf community.

Upon a deaf client's application for a needed service, the deaf paraprofessional can act as a guide for the client, taking him through the necessary and often tedious preliminary steps to obtain service. A deaf client can not make a telephone call for an appointment and in many cases will not realize an appointment is necessary. He may not realize the function of a receptionist. He may not realize that the professional usually has a large number of clients to serve in addition to him, limiting the professional's time and mobility. Very often the professional not only handles clients, but has administrative functions to perform. The deaf client may perceive delay as an unwillingness on the part of the professional to work with him as fully as the client had expected. Due to the varied responsibilities of the professional, insufficient follow-up of the client often occurs. The deaf paraprofessional can inform and help educate the client to the multiple roles of the professional and assist in following up the case. Since the deaf paraprofessional is a member of the community he is serving, his involvement with a client would be on-going, permitting the important function of follow-up to be carried to a successful closing.

The role of the deaf paraprofessional as a community liaison can not be over emphasized. Although not always expressed, the fear of exploitation by hearing persons, exists among a large number of deaf people. This can become magnified by the impersonal attitude of some of the agencies.

Here the deaf paraprofessional can fulfill a very important role, that of a liaison person between the client and the agency. The successful deaf paraprofessional already has the rapport with the deaf community and can become an extension of the agency to the deaf community. His opinions would be motivating factors in overcoming the fear of exploitation.

Because of the aforementioned limitations of the unreached deaf client, he will tend to be in touch with the "hearing world" only to the extent that it is imperative to his survival. Therefore, when a problem or crisis arises in his life, he may not be able to reach out for professional assistance.

One effective way to establish an outreach program to the self-segregated deaf client is through another deaf person. Through normal fraternization, the deaf paraprofessional would be in a position to know of the client's problem or crisis. The client would be more apt to appeal to the deaf paraprofessional first for help. The deaf paraprofessional would not only be able to locate these clients, but could overcome their fear, provide supportive measures and encourage the client to seek the expertise of the professional.

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In attempting to operate an efficient service to many deaf clients, intentionally or unintentionally, agencies perpetuate paternalism in an already over-dependent deaf client. The agencies fail to educate their clients by involving them in the decision making process that would enable them in the future to become somewhat independent in handling their affairs.

Although a certain amount of dependency is necessary and even desirable in our social structure, the deaf paraprofessional can devote the additional time that is required to acquaint the client with procedures for attaining a degree of self sufficiency in tackling problems by including the client in the decision making process.

Institutions and agencies are geared to operate their facilities in an efficient manner. This includes setting specific working hours to attain maximum results with a minimum of effort and expense. It is not practical to operate an institution or agency in shifts the way industry does.

This places an additional burden on the deaf client, who is usually in the low economic strata of society. Due to the nine-to-five scheduling of office hours, the deaf client is confronted with the anxieties of loss of wages for time off to go to an agency and the fear that he may lose his job if he is required to take too much time off.

Here the trained paraprofessional can be utilized in a very innovative way. He would not be restricted by nine-to-five scheduling. Scheduling could be made accordingly to meet the needs of the client. The comparative cost of using the paraprofessional would be minimal compared to the cost of maintaining a staff member that works within a structure, requiring utilities, office equipment and secretarial assistance. In fact, if properly trained, he could perform the functions of orientating the client, obtaining case histories, relate the problem to the agency, refer the client if necessary to another agency and do the follow-up work that is required, all at the convenience of the client.

The deaf paraprofessional can assist the professional in becoming more knowledgeable about the whole individual and his needs. The professional with his expertise, can assist the deaf paraprofessional to remotivate the client. Since the deaf paraprofessional lives and socializes in the same community as the client they share an on-going relationship, whereas the professional's involvement with the client usually terminates when the agency meets the need that brought the professional and the client together.

IMPLICATIONS

It appears that the deaf paraprofessional can be used to bridge some of the gaps between the unreached deaf client and the agencies. This leads to the question of how and where the agencies can obtain the services of the deaf paraprofessional.

There are at least three avenues open to the agencies in locating and utilizing the skills of the deaf paraprofessional. The first would be to consider

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using deaf persons as volunteers in some areas to improve the responsiveness of services. Some agencies are presently doing this in the form of an Advisory Board made up of both hearing and deaf members. Another way would be to use volunteers when the need arises to act as an escort when referring clients to another agency; or as a person to orient the agency to the deaf community and the deaf community to the agency.

A second avenue would be to tap deaf organizations that are presently working on various problem areas within the community. These organizations have within them a wealth of experienced people who have been working within the community over a long period of time in areas such as Adult Education, Interpreting, Communications, Insurance, the Law and the Courts.

A third avenue would be to engage the deaf paraprofessional in agency service through hiring one or more deaf paraprofessionals as full or part-time staff members. As a paid staff member he (they) could perform the duties that the agency itself has to enrich and provide a more comprehensive service to the community it serves.

Although the deaf paraprofessional can certainly bridge many gaps between the unreached deaf client and the agencies, it would be remiss not to consider some of the problems that may arise from this situation. It is possible that an interpersonal conflict could occur between the paraprofessional and the professional (*Training and Supervision of New Careerists in Rehabilitation*). This could happen through insufficient knowledge of each person's role.

insufficient knowledge of each person's role. Another conflict could occur between the client and the paraprofessional on the issue of confidentiality. The client must have complete faith in his ability to relate his problems to the paraprofessional without the fear of his problems being "aired" among other individuals within the community.

Frustration on the part of the paraprofessional could result if he is given unimportant job tasks at the beginning of his employment without the hope or opportunity for working his way up to assuming more responsible roles in the future. The New Careers literature is especially helpful in providing guidelines to overcome these problems.

Although the degree of unresponsiveness in institutions and agencies serving the deaf community varies, certain elements of unresponsiveness can be found in almost all of the institutions and agencies. The inability for the agencies to overcome these deficiencies seems to persist, despite the dedication of many professionals in the field, due to the bureaucratic system they have been established on. Therefore, it is the contention of this paper that the professionals can overcome many of these deficiencies by tapping the already available abundant source of manpower at a minimum of cost by utilizing the unique and indigenous skills of the deaf paraprofessional to bridge the gaps presently existing between the unreached deaf client and the institution or agency supplying services.

HOW A SPECIAL COLLEGE SERVES THE DEAF

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