

Improving Rehabilitation and Employment Outcomes for Postsecondary Students Identified as Deaf and Low Functioning (LFD)

Douglas Watson

University of Arkansas, Little Rock

Terrye Fish

North Carolina Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Raleigh, NC

Patty Conway

Kentucky Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, Frankfort, KY

Steve Sligar

Center for Sight and Hearing, Rockford, IL

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of newly published national guidelines for improving rehabilitation and employment training services for non-college bound students who are deaf, particularly those described as “Low Functioning.” The overview starts with a brief description of the population and the problems these individuals present to postsecondary training efforts on their behalf. Ways and means for improving school to work transition services, employment training, and placement efforts are then presented. The need for hiring skilled and knowledgeable personnel and the importance of planning and implementing statewide postsecondary employment training and service delivery systems for “LFD” and other non-college bound individuals are highlighted. The paper concludes with a series of programmatic recommendations encouraging PEPNet programs and personnel in the various states and regions to foster collaboration among state VR agencies and postsecondary training and education programs in order to better provide employment preparation training for non-college bound and “LFD” individuals.

Federal/State VR Program’s Institute on Rehabilitation Issues

Each year, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) program within the federal Office for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), funds three Institutes on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI). These institutes are conducted through

grants to RSA Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Programs (RRCEPs). During 1998-1999, one of the three designated topics for the 25th IRI was entitled: “Improving Rehabilitation Services and Employment Outcomes for Individuals who are Deaf and Low Functioning (LFD).” A national ‘Prime Study Group’ of experts drawn from the Federal/State VR agencies and the field of deafness rehabilitation were convened to collaborate in the development, writing, and dissemination of guidelines describing ways and means that the states can address major issues confronting the rehabilitation community in their efforts to serve deaf individuals described as “LFD.”

In this paper, key members of the “LFD IRI Prime Study Group” present an overview of the materials and recommendations generated by the LFD study group. The focus of the paper is to provide an overview of the published 25th IRI report (Dew, 2000) and encourage PEPNet programs and personnel in the various states to become active players in shaping ways and means that their own state VR agency implements the recommendations developed by the “LFD IRI Prime Study Group.” A national call for improving postsecondary education and training efforts on behalf of “LFD” and other non-college bound deaf persons is an integral part of the report’s recommendations.

Readers who are not familiar with the “IRI” program need to know that: the State/Federal VR program uses the annual “IRI” process to lay out programmatic expectation for state VR agencies to utilize as a document to guide their efforts to improve the delivery of rehabilitation

services and programs for persons in their respective states. Contemporary issues and challenges related to rehabilitation efforts on behalf of “LFD” persons will obviously impact upon and shape the way the rehabilitation field goes about the business of serving persons with multiple and severe disabilities, including those individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and have been identified as “LFD.”

The goal, accordingly, was to provide a forum in PEPNet 2000 which would provide the information that educators and rehabilitation personnel involved in postsecondary education and training programs designed for students who are deaf or hard of hearing need in order to be informed of the issues and processes involved. In other words, the goal was to empower deaf education and rehabilitation professional and consumer representatives to play productive roles in the process of defining and implementing meaningful changes to improve the nation’s rehabilitation system for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, especially in the areas of postsecondary education, training, and related employment preparation services.

Organization of the “25th IRI for LFD Persons”

The 25th IRI guidelines for improving vocational rehabilitation efforts with deaf persons described as low functioning are organized into six chapters. These include:

- 1) Understanding Individuals who are Deaf and Low Functioning,
- 2) Assessment and Casefinding,
- 3) School-to-Work Transition,
- 4) Achieving employment Outcomes for the LFD Population,
- 5) Human Resource Management, and
- 6) Assessing Services and Making a Commitment.

Time and space constraints limit us to providing only an overview of selected highlights from the 25th IRI on LFD. We will focus our presentation on describing the population and reviewing selected challenges these individuals present to the states as they attempt to plan and implement programmatic service delivery and postsecondary training programs for LFD individuals. Recommendations are

then provided for ways and means that the states and nation might better approach the postsecondary training and employment training for these individuals. The interested reader is encouraged to access the actual IRI publication (Dew, 2000) which is available in both print and electronic format from various sources listed in the References section of this paper (e.g., an electronic PDF file from the University of Arkansas at <www.uark.edu/deaftrc>, or the Oklahoma Clearinghouse at <www.nchtrm.okstate.edu/>).

Characteristics of the Population

Deaf people who are eventually described as “low functioning” are identified as such because of a diagnosed secondary disability or because of problems in behavior, academic achievement, language use, development of independent living skills, employment, or some other major life functioning with no known etiology. Research and practice have identified and agreed on six characteristics that seem to describe persons who are LFD. These include, but are not limited to (Dew, 2000, pp 3-4):

1. Inadequate communication skills due to inadequate education and limited family support. Presenting poor skills in interpersonal and social communication interactions, many of these individuals experience difficulty expressing themselves and understanding others, whether through sign language, speech and speech reading, or reading and writing.
2. Vocational deficiencies due to inadequate educational training experiences during the developmental years and changes in personal and work situations during adulthood. Presenting an underdeveloped image of self as a worker, many exhibit a lack of basic work attitudes and work habits as well as a lack of job skills and/or work goals.
3. Deficiencies in behavioral, emotional, and social adjustment. Presenting a poorly developed sense of autonomy, many exhibit low self-esteem, have a low frustration tolerance, and have problems of impulse control that

may lead to mistrust of others and pose a danger to self and others. Because they experience difficulty in normal social interactions, many are avoided or rejected either because of socially unacceptable behaviors or because of societal attitudes and discriminatory actions toward them.

4. Independent living skills deficiencies. Many of these individuals experience difficulty living independently, lack basic money management skills, lack personal hygiene skills, cannot manage use of free time, don't know how to access health care or maintain proper nutrition, and have poor parenting skills.

5. Educational and transitional deficiencies. Most read at or below a fourth-grade level and have been poorly served by the educational system, are frequently misdiagnosed and misplaced, lack a supportive home environment, are often discouraged in school and drop out, and are not prepared for post-school life and work. Approximately 60% of those deaf students who leave high school cannot read at the fourth-grade level.

6. Health, mental, and physical limitations. Many have no secondary physical disabilities, but a large number have two, three, and sometimes more disabilities in addition to that of deafness. In fact, 30% of deaf high school leavers had an educationally significant additional disability. These secondary disabilities range from organic brain dysfunction to visual defects. These problems are further compounded in many instances by a lack of knowledge on how to access health care and/or self-care.

In addition, the IRI Task Force estimated that approximately 25-30 percent of the nations' deaf population has other disabilities in addition to deafness. The combination of these set of six significant factors often result in significant educational deficits among many deaf students. There is also a consensus that 'inadequate communica-

tion and language skills' are among the defining characteristics and directly hinder educational and rehabilitation efforts on their behalf.

Unfortunately, the bulk of our nation's postsecondary training resources for students who are deaf are best suited to the college-bound student. As a result, many of the non-college bound students (which include LFD) exiting secondary educational programs each year are not receiving the attention and resources (e.g., on-the-job training, job coaching, and related community-based employment training) they need for obtaining other types of postsecondary job training and assistance in preparing for employment. Yet, a look at recent national statistics available from the Rehabilitation Services Administration for Fiscal year 1997 shows that among the 35,209 deaf and hard of hearing persons served by the Federal/State VR program that year, 14,824 were closed successfully (employed). Of those 'closed successfully,' 13 percent had received support for college/university training, while 31 percent received community-based employment training (See Table 1), precisely the programs that are not currently targeted by most PEPNet programs!

Table 1
VR Training Outcomes -
RSA 911 Data for 1997

	Frequency	Percent
Applied for Services	35,209	100
Closed Successfully	14,824	42
College/University Training	1,917	13
Employment Training	4,626	31

Transition from School to Work or Postsecondary Training

Among other priorities, the IRI Task Force recommended that the states need to more aggressively identify and enroll LFD students in school-to-work transition programs. They also proposed that a person-centered ecological

planning approach can be an effective tool for assessment of individual abilities and potentials in all critical areas. It is recommended that school and VR personnel should place an emphasis on a goal-oriented approach using “mapping,” discrepancy analysis, and trial work assessment strategies such as job prospecting and on-site job coaching in order to obtain assessment data that looks at the whole person across all relevant environments where he or she will function.

Furthermore, it was emphasized that: State VR agencies need to become involved with students who are LFD at earlier age. In 1997, as a national average, only 15 percent of consumers of VR services in active status were under the age of 22, indicating we are not reaching and serving students with disabilities who are of school age. A 1994 study of deaf youth found that 49 percent of non-college bound youth under the age of 23 were unemployed; even more alarming, 39 percent of those OVER the age of 23 continued to have no job/work. VR and schools need to use best practices models for transition efforts with LFD students.

Among other initiatives, school and VR personnel should cooperatively design as many strategies as possible to introduce the student who is LFD to concepts of self-care, independent living, and work experiences, including on-the-job training, supported employment, and related activities.

If VR providers are to maximize the employability and job retention skills of LFD consumers, they must design programs and interventions that circumvent risk factors by focusing their attention on a specific applicant, identifying his or her talents and abilities, and then locating the most appropriate job for that person.

It should also be emphasized that a key factor to the success of the consumer who is LFD will be provision of postemployment and long-term follow-up services that foster development and use of natural supports within the workplace as well as job coaches and ongoing follow-ups to ensure job retention over time. All levels of the VR system — administrators, direct service professionals, clerical support, and contractors — must embrace the concept that employment goals and quality employment can only be realized with the employer as our customer and eventually as our partner.

Qualified Staff with Appropriate Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 emphasize in Section 101 (a) (7) that the states establish and support qualified rehabilitation staff, mandating a comprehensive system of personnel development (CSPD) that focuses on training “to ensure an adequate supply of qualified State rehabilitation professionals and paraprofessionals” and to establish standards for such staff. The 1998 Rehabilitation amendments further require, in Section 101 (a) (7) (c), that the state plan: “contain standards to ensure the availability of personnel within the designated State unit, to the maximum extent feasible, trained to communicate in the native language or mode of language of an applicant or eligible individual.”

Provision of VR information and services “in an appropriate mode of communication” is specified throughout the Act from the point of intake to participation in closure decisions. Plainly, it is intended that communication accommodations be provided to the person who is deaf throughout the VR process, either directly by the counselor or other service providers or through interpreters and technology that result in understandable two-way communication. In addition to the need for commitment at the top administrative level, it is critical to have an administrative staff person — such as a State Coordinator of Services for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (SCD) — who has knowledge and skills in the area of LFD and is empowered to provide direct support to field staff.

The IRI recommended that states identify or establish a statewide network of State VR direct service delivery professionals (Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf - RCDs) and allied professionals who are qualified to provide equal access for individuals who are LFD in VR, independent living, and supported employment extended services. Counselors and other staff providing services to LFD must either be skilled or develop prerequisite knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) in the three distinct areas of: Professional Discipline KSAs, Communication KSAs, and Knowledge of Deafness KSAs. The states can implement and use Comprehensive State Personnel Development (CSPD) and other HRD training and development strategies to enhance and improve the KSAs of the agency’s personnel (Table 2).

Table 2
Development Required for Different Types of Applicants

Level of Readiness	Development Needed
Discipline-ready, with KSA with individuals who are LFD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued honing of skills through use of mentors and peer contacts
Discipline-ready, with no experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications skills • Deafness knowledge
Communication-ready	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional discipline • Deafness knowledge
Deafness-ready	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need manual communication skills • Discipline-related training (rehabilitation, job placement, etc.)

Figure 1
Model Assessment of Current Agency Status

Assessment of Current Agency Status & Assessment Plan	<i>Where are we?</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Level and distribution of current services 2. Quality of current services 3. Counselor assignments and accessibility 4. Office accessibility 5. Policy and practice analysis 6. Projected unserved numbers 7. Available pre-service programs 8. Available staff training programs and consultants
State of the Agency Report Development of Strategic Plan	<i>Where do we want to be?</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Statewide staffing plan 2. Recruiting/assigning counselors 3. Accessibility compliance 4. Policy, standards, and practice 5. Pre-service training plan 6. In-service training plan 7. Continuing education plan
Plan Implementation and Monitoring, Evaluation, Revision	

Assessment and Strategic Planning

Key Points for State-Federal Assessment & Strategic Planning are outlined in Figure 1. Details for following this assessment model can be found in “Rehabilitation of Individuals Who Are Hard of Hearing and Late Deafened: Administrator’s Guide” (University of Arkansas, 1993), of which this is an adaptation. The guide is available through the Oklahoma Clearinghouse.

When assessing current service level, it is important to look at both the current numbers served and the quality of services provided to this population. Analyses of projected unserved numbers and unmet need statewide is equally critical since many individuals who are LFD may have slipped through the cracks.

Making the Commitment: State and Federal Recommendations

State Agency:

- Conduct a formal assessment of the agency’s current quality and scope of services for individuals who are LFD and develop a strategic plan that will ensure equal outreach, access, and quality of postsecondary training and employment services for this population.
- As new programs are developed, including one-stop centers established through the Workforce Investment Act, consider how individuals who are LFD will be accessed and accommodated. Provide technical assistance as needed.
- Consider the needs of individuals who are LFD in the development of cooperative interagency agreements between state VR and postsecondary education and training programs.
- Address holistic needs of persons who are LFD (such as independent living skills training, basic education, and communication and language training) through policy modifications or collaborative efforts with other agencies so that these individuals are enabled to achieve a successful employment outcome.

- State VR agencies that prohibit out-of-state referrals should develop a process to allow justification for use of out-of-state postsecondary education and training programs for persons who are LFD.

OSERS:

- Encourage RSA to conduct a national forum of State Coordinators for the Deaf and State Coordinators for the Deaf-Blind or designated staff to be held biennially. These forums would provide opportunities for collaboration, networking, and sharing information about model programs and services. The first forum should focus on implementation of findings of this IRI document on improving VR services and employment outcomes.
- Encourage RSA to establish appropriate disability coding (911 data) for the purpose of collecting and tracking data related to VR services and this population.
- Encourage OSERS to fund a minimum of four regional service centers to provide specialized direct services for individuals who are LFD.
- Encourage NIDRR to again fund a Research and Training Center for LFD or to increase the funding to RT-31 at the University of Arkansas to enable that group to appropriately address this population in their priorities.
- Encourage NIDRR to develop a priority, either within a research and training center or in research-related competition, for the development of an ASL assessment method for use with adults to establish a baseline functioning level and identify specific language-related deficits of adults who are LFD.
- Encourage funding of a training and technical assistance network to assist professionals and programs serving individuals who are LFD that parallels the PEPNet structure and regions.

- Recommend that each PEPNet geographical region designate 25% of funds and resources to development of voc-tech and employment training programs.

Challenges to PEPNet, Deaf Education, and Deafness Rehabilitation Field

To play a productive role in this process, postsecondary programs and personnel skilled in deafness will need access to the kind of first-hand information this presentation was designed to provide regarding the IRI related to rehabilitation efforts on behalf of “LFD” persons in the various states. The fields of deaf education and postsecondary training will need to become familiar with the IRI publication for improving VR services for “LFD” persons. Deaf education, postsecondary education and rehabilitation professionals, along with deaf and hard of hearing consumer representatives, can then be better prepared for a more active and productive leadership role. Among other goals, we recommend that PEPNet programs and affiliates help foster productive postsecondary training and education programs and services for LFD individuals by working in partnership with their home state VR system to implement the following kinds of interagency and interdisciplinary collaborations.

A National Network of Voc-Tech and Employment Training Centers

- Identify, organize, & coordinate a consortium of programs.
- Develop teams of trainers.
- Deploy expert team to coordinate and support.
- Expand PEPNet outreach to better target voc-tech and employment training programs in the states, including programs that provide job coaching and on-the-job training for LFD.
- Identify and organize expertise in area of LFD to assist/staff of PEPNet regional and state program affiliates in developing and operating a national network of training programs.

State-by-State Network

- Assist states in planning and providing comprehensive voc-tech and employment training.
- Develop a statewide network to include local employment and support systems.
- Coordinate and collaborate on development and establishment of needs- assessment and related research activities related to interagency efforts by state VR, IHEs, and PEPNet programs.
- Implement interagency agreements that include voc-tech and employment training programs for LFD and other non-college bound persons who are deaf.

References

Dew, D. (Ed) (2000) Serving individuals who are low functioning deaf: 25th institute on rehabilitation issues. Washington, DC: George Washington University.

University of Arkansas (1993). Rehabilitation of individuals who are hard of hearing and late deafened: Administrator’s guide. Hot Springs, AR: University of Arkansas Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program.

Contacts and Sources

University of Arkansas Research & Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing at: <www.uark.edu/deafrtc>, click on “Publications” and then download the PDF files for “25th IRI.”

Douglas Watson: <Dwatson@comp.uark.edu>
 Terrye Fish: <tfish@dhr.state.nc.us>
 Patty Conway: <Patty.Conway@mail.state.ky.us>
 Steve Sligar: <SRSligar@aol.com>
 Don Dew: <DonDew@gwu.edu>

National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials (NCRTM) at OK State University:
 1-800-223-5219 <http://www.nchtrm.okstate.edu/>

