

POLICY STATEMENT

Vocational Rehabilitation and People Who Are Hard of Hearing

The United States government operates an extensive vocational rehabilitation (VR) program that provides a wide range of services and job training to people with disabilities who want to work. To be eligible for VR services, a person must have a physical or mental impairment that is a substantial impediment to employment; be able to benefit from VR services in terms of employment; and require VR services to prepare for, enter, engage in, or retain employment. Priority is given to people with the most severe disabilities.

A 1992 report on underserved populations found that hard of hearing people, who represent one of the highest incidence of disability groups, are significantly unserved and underserved by the current VR system. This finding is buttressed by extensive anecdotal experience among people with hearing loss.

The Hearing Loss Association of America believes this inadequate record of service to hard of hearing people is due primarily to two factors. First, few VR counselors have been appropriately trained in the unique needs of hard of hearing people. Often, they fail to make the crucial distinction between being hard of hearing and being deaf, and thus inadequately consider the unique needs of each group. In fact, the typical VR office has no one on staff who is adequately trained regarding the most important issues affecting people with hearing loss. Most notably, too many VR counselors lack:

- Awareness of, and sensitivity to, the communicative, psychosocial and adjustment consequences of partial hearing loss.
- A general knowledge of hearing health and relevant professional services.
- Knowledge of the ever-increasing selection of assistive technology and related services that can reduce communication barriers in employment situations.

HLAA Recommendations:

To improve the quality and quantity of vocational rehabilitation services to hard of hearing people, HLAA recommends that the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) dramatically increase the amount of training provided to VR counselors about the differences and unique needs of people exhibiting a range of hearing loss.

HLAA also recommends that the criteria used to determine severity of disability include standardized self-assessment scales as well as degree of hearing loss. Both of these types of



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measures are necessary in order to determine the extent to which the hearing loss constitutes a barrier to full employment for a particular individual.

Further, HLAA suggests that the government sponsor or conduct research projects to evaluate the nature of current barriers to full employment faced by hard of hearing people, and the kind of "reasonable accommodations" that can be made to eliminate or minimize these barriers.

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