

# BASIC NEEDS OF DEAF PEOPLE

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This paper was presented by Dr. Williams as the keynote address at the opening session of the Commission on Social Rehabilitation held at Stockholm Sweden.

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This inspiring document has light new beacons of hope throughout the new world, even into the darkest corners.

From the viewpoint of American Deaf people, the date was most auspicious for December 10 is the birthday of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, the founder of the first free and permanent school for the Deaf in the Western Hemisphere. As is widely known, from this small beginning, the far flung free educational system for American Deaf people has grown to be within the reach of every Deaf child.

A citizen of western democracy reading the 30 Articles which make up the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is at once aware that they are the reflections of the social circumstances under which one has been raised. These articles do not present new hopes nor new concepts. They simply reaffirm and re-define the conditions under which the free peoples of the world live.

In the foregoing respects and in other aspects which may have peculiar significance to each individual, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a documentation of democratic living. It is a frame of reference to what we believe our people are entitled.

American Deaf people have shared the universal satisfaction that the United Nations has adopted the 30 safeguards for human dignity and aspirations that make up the Declaration. We have recognized that they are inclusive rights, that they cover all of the reasonable expectations and demands to which people may reasonably aspire. Nevertheless, we have found it necessary to develop an ancillary set of rights that reflect the subtle but real needs of Deaf people. This should by no means be construed as suggesting inconclusiveness or lack of coverage in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Rather, this ancillary set of rights for Deaf people is a logical sequel to the Universal Declaration. The

Declaration has legal significance in the minds of men. And, we all know that laws must be developed, must be exploited. That is the purpose of the ancillary needs that I shall present shortly.

We have come to recognize that a minority group must identify itself with a broad statement like the Universal Declaration in terms of the special experience of its own people. It must spell out this special experience in a positive way that reflects what society must do to equalize the opportunities of each minority group member to achieve the full implication of each human right identified in the 30 Articles.

Our experience in America over many years has identified 11 ancillary rights within the frame work the Universal Declaration which must be developed in order for us to say with assurance that the rights of American Deaf people are being properly met.

I am pleased to present herewith the 11 basic needs of Deaf people that we recognize in America and which we offer for your consideration.

**I. To be understood.** This includes communication, both the sending and receiving of thoughts. It also includes understanding of the impact of the disability upon the physical, social, vocational, emotional, and spiritual growth and functioning of the person affected. Finally, this understanding assumes the insight and responsiveness of the humanitarian with his inborn aspirations for mankind as distinct from the disinterested objectivity of the scientist.

**II. To be treated as individuals.** There is widespread vocational, psychological and educational stereotyping of Deaf people. Teachers, counselors, audiologists, psychologists, placement officers speak of "the Deaf." They too frequently use this label as a guide, ignoring the psychology of individual differences.

**III. To be held to the same standards of performance as their hearing peers.** In education in particular Deaf people are permitted to perform at levels less than their potentials. This may sometimes be true in social intercourse also. This is a deplorable aspect of the paternalism currently prevalent, an affliction of the milieu on Deaf people which may stem from oversimplification of their educational and rehabilitation

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needs.

**IV. To be served by real professionals in all areas.** Their teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, psychologists, social workers, ministers, audiologists, medical workers, must all be top notch professional people, not visionary "do gooders." The latter do not usually understand the basic importance that Deaf people be treated as individuals and that they be held to regular standards of performance.

**V. To be allowed time.** The story of Deaf people is replete with examples of too little time being taken to give them the tools for living up to their potentials. It should be understood that the majority of graduates from schools for the Deaf require training beyond that which they acquire during their years in school. Diversified training opportunities should be seriously considered for each person rather than the limited patterns prevailing in the fixed school situation. Do professional workers serving Deaf people allow or have the much greater time necessary to do more effective work?

**VI. To be held equal to be integrated.** The prevailing pattern of paternalism extant toward Deaf people thwarts integration into the larger community. Moreover, it is a heavy damper on social and professional growth, because it avoids recognition and use of opportunities to involve Deaf people in social and work situations appropriate to their over-all competencies.

**VII. To achieve social maturity.** The immaturity of the society of Deaf people, its naiveté, its unsophistication, have been demonstrated in research and training efforts and in other ways. The society of the Deaf moves pretty much alone, without any real help from hearing colleagues. Hence, it feeds mainly on itself, fails to keep pace with society in general.

**VIII. To attain opportunities commensurate with capabilities.** In vocational rehabilitation we are aware of the pressing needs to expand sharply and elevate job opportunities. Too many high grade Deaf people with college degrees are running automatic machines, thus, depriving society of their creative potential. Limitations in educational opportunities are a fundamental cause. One of those built-in limitations results from too much precious time being spent on weaknesses (speech, residual hearing, lipreading) rather than strengths (using normal intelligence of Deaf people to achieve optimal reading and writing skills).

**IX. To be accepted as full-fledged partners.** The special knowledge and skills of qualified Deaf people are seldom used or solicited by workers who serve them. This retards development as special programs for them often miss the proper target. Involvement of the proved creativeness, drive and motivation of Deaf people results in practical solutions to needs.

**X. To be given equal service opportunities.** The dearth of needed resources

such as half-way houses, sheltered workshops, personal adjustment centers, other rehabilitation centers, to meet the urgent needs of the more severely handicapped Deaf persons illustrates the serious inequalities prevailing. The persistent professional personnel shortages complicate the solution.

**XI. To replace the attitudes of complacency and apathy among Deaf people regarding attainment of vocational, social and educational levels equal to hearing peers.** For many reasons Deaf people and their friends share an apologetic attitude regarding their relative competencies. The resultant low level aims keep the whole Deaf society functioning at a needless disadvantage which compounds itself as time moves on.

These fundamental needs of Deaf people cannot be denied. Nor can we pass them off as impractical or unattainable, for the whole fabric of our aspirations for the group depends upon the extent to which we find solutions for these basic problems.

*Editor's Note: Some thirty years ago, Dr. Boyce R. Williams, then the most highly placed deaf person in the federal government wrote the above list of the Basic Needs of Deaf People. We are reprinting it here, so we can all review our progress since the day Dr. Williams first wrote the list. We hope you can use it for your Deaf Awareness Celebrations, and we are also interested in hearing from you as to our overall progress in achieving the rights of deaf persons as outlined by Dr. Williams.*

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