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Employment Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Todd Sprunger, MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services)

Katie Prins, DHHS (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services)

Chris Jacques: One thing before we start. Is anyone going to be using the loop system? We will want you to use this.

Chris Jacques: my name is Chris Jacques and I am the current president for the HLAGR. What I want us to do is introduce ourselves.

Todd: I am Todd Sprunger and I work for MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) as a counselor. We are talking also with Katie Prins about employment for individuals with hearing loss.

Katie (*through sign language interpreter*): I am Katie Prins and I am with DHHS (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services) and am glad to be here.

[Guests introducing themselves].

Todd: I would like to start to share a bit of information about my background. I was born and raised in Michigan. I got my BA in psychology. I also got a Masters in counseling. I worked in Flint for a private agency that provided mental health services. I started to work with MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) about 8 years ago. My primary career is working with people who are hard of hearing and helping them to prepare for and maintain employment.

If you know of anyone who is looking for work and is hard of hearing, or already working and having struggles on the job because of their hearing, we can help them. When I initially started working here there was no agency to provide the expertise and knowledge of the needs of hard of hearing. My goal was to attempt to establish a partnership with businesses to provide this. I partnered with DHHS (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services). That is where Katie comes into play.

We work as a team to provide them with the opportunities to obtain and seek employment. Some of the services available with MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) are a more focused approach to those with hearing loss. It used to be we all went in a group. But people missed a lot of information. Some were very confused. So with my supervisor we

did one-on-one orientations with people interested in the services.

We introduce them to the policies and procedures. Once that occurs, that individual works with me or another person in the office to help identify their needs. Do they want to obtain employment or sustain it?

Some of the other services we can provide are varied but I want to let Katie talk about the services we provide as a team.

Katie: thank you, Todd. I work for DHHS (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services) and have done so for a year. They approached me about setting up a deaf and hard of hearing service for employment. They wanted to start the program to be equal for deaf and hard of hearing. We tend to focus on assessment and what the needs are on the job.

If they need a hearing aid, contact with different employers, etc. We have placed several people on the job already. We partner with MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) to get more recognition for the deaf and hard of hearing services focusing on services.

We offer on the job training and assessment. If the employer is not sure they want to hire deaf or hard of hearing people, we pay for a few weeks to allow evaluation. They have the opportunity to work there and prove their skills and do the job. The boss will realize they are valuable employees. We provide job training and skills.

We have on the job training and evaluation and employers get tax breaks for hiring deaf or hard of hearing employees.

We also have hard of hearing specialists and have several things for deaf and hard of hearing people. This is the PockeTalker. Do you know what this is? Several of you do. It's very successful for people that need straight in the ear and can use amplification and it helps them hear. It's part of the training that they learn about this.

We are willing to pay for most of the equipment if it's necessary for the job. Also, the agency has different equipment that is good for hard of hearing people if they turn their hearing aid off at night. We have smoke alarms with lights instead of the ringing and alarms that shake your bed to wake you. They come to Todd for job retention. We also have job placement services. They come to me to do the job searching and the needs they have in looking for a job.

Todd: there is a lot of information about the variety of services we have. If a person is seeking assistance in looking for a job, they go through the orientation process. The counselor meets with them to identify the kind of employment they want, the training they need and the skills they have. Some of the other services we do is provide assistance with resumes, interview skills and we provide a plan for them to develop their skills and they can be in the decision making process.

We work with high school students up to senior citizens. It's based on the needs and

strengths of each individual. I brought information and introduction brochures from the agency and also my business card. Take as many as you want. If you are seeking employment or struggling on the job or need assistance in keeping your job because of the hearing loss, I encourage you or friends to get in touch with us so you can successfully maintain or obtain employment.

Katie, do you want to add anything?

Katie: I think that is it. Are there any questions?

Chris Jacques: Yes, I have a question. I believe we had a visitor from Oregon State University in the Grand Rapids area a couple weeks ago. David Baldrich. Katie, did you learn anything about him?

Katie: yes, I met him. I know that David Baldrich is hard of hearing himself and he is latent deaf. He has a cochlear implant. He is a professor at Oregon State University and he came to talk about employment research and what affects the hard of hearing and deaf in employment. He is interested in how deaf and hard of hearing people can keep their jobs like if it's the communication or environment. It was interesting information. I enjoyed him.

Chris Jacques: one thing I do know is that he has an internet questionnaire that you might want to take. I have the web information and can give it to you. Or give me your e-mail and I will send you the link to the questionnaire. It's set up so that you answer a number of questions in about 15 minutes. If you are employed, you request someone you work with to fill out the questionnaire; it takes about 5 minutes, and also the person you work for fills out the 5 minute questionnaire. If anyone is interested and has access to the internet I would be happy to give you the link.

Katie: it's our basic rights, or is it what we demand for deaf and hard of hearing people while they work? I hope you will participate in the survey. It would help a lot in the research.

Guest: Todd, I think your agency does a wonderful job to help people find employment. How do you work with companies like Amway and Steelcase? Do they provide specific opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing people so you can refer them?

Todd: I see your question as two prongs. One, what do we provide to help educate employers and what the services are and what we can offer to them. As far as the individuals that we assist, we make some great strides. We contact the Human Resource department and contact the right person who does the hiring. Sometimes just going out and attending the job fairs and meeting the employers and telling what services we offer is good. Katie?

Katie: As a job developer and a job placement person for the last year, part of my job is to identify the companies willing to hire deaf and hard of hearing. If they were not interested in meeting with me, I would try a few more times and tell them how it would be applicable

to the company. It was not easy to get through to the employers but we helped educate them about deaf and hard of hearing people.

Guest: Do they provide you with actual job openings that you can make available to your individuals who get the services so you can match what the qualifications are needed and what they have?

Todd: good question. Sometimes we already have an individual in mind that would like to work there. We tell the employer what skills they have to offer. We explain what they can do and identify who can work with them. Sometimes it does not work out but we try to keep the contact and that we are available. We have the individuals with the skills and desire to work for them.

Katie: I would like to add something. There are two ways I see things since I have been there. The employer looks at equal opportunity employment. They support the appropriate entity. The second one is the person. If they go through the website or Michigan Talent Bank, they look at that.

Todd: A lot of companies now use temporary agencies. That is difficult. In a way we can act as a screening tool for the employer. We can also offer incentives to the employer to get our customers in the door. We have on the job training and evaluation and also work opportunity tax credit. We share these with the employer and along with the work skills the individual brings, hopefully they get the job.

Guest: Can you hear me? Too much background noise? You touched on equal employment opportunity. If after all that has been done and you have done all you can do, if an employer is resistant to that do you ever take legal action or refer people to an agency or resource? That is the other aspect of employment. Maybe not so much from the MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) but maybe a non-government agency.

Todd: through MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) our efforts are to work with the employer and show them the incentive to hire the hard of hearing and deaf. We cannot force them. We work with them and try to work things out. If I work with an individual and they come to me and say that the employer is discriminating against them, I need to find out and then send them to the EOC or DHHS (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services) to provide the guidance for them or the filing of a lawsuit.

Katie: I have a few things to say. If you want to file a lawsuit, you need to prove it. If I had an interview at a hearing job I cannot assume they did not hire me because of my hearing. If it's a deaf or hard of hearing person we can help provide advocacy for you, but you do need proof. Our agency can help through that process. It's a good way to educate employers. It's really hard with the facts to reach the employers. Nowadays, with the marketing for people looking for jobs, one advantage is that we have a pool of employers that are interested in us. If we have placement needs, we contact them. It helps us get in the door and take advantage of the opportunities we have.

Sanford Freed: one of the things that we try to do in the chapter is try to build more relationships with employers. Not so much to find positions for hard of hearing people but to enable the hard of hearing people already on staff to educate their employer and the worker what tools would be available to them, like the PockeTalker. Is there any sort of research that you know of that indicates that hard of hearing people gain or become better employees when working with an employer, have higher productivity, is more loyal?

Todd: I am not aware of any studies that prove that deaf or hard of hearing employees are better employees. My bias is that with our hearing loss we are more focused on our jobs; we don't have the distractions. We don't sit and chat with someone on the other side of the wall or listen to the radio. I don't know of direct studies though.

Katie: yes.

Guest: I agree with Todd. My experience when I was working, all my life I had 13 different jobs. When I worked at the factory I could hear those around me talking. I did all that I could. Guess who finished the job on time? Me, because I focus and work hard. The other hearing people said "slow down" but I was getting piece work. If I can do 30 pieces an hour and they can only do 10 an hour, there is something wrong. The others around me were too busy gossiping around the factory. I agree with Todd. He is right. Deaf and hard of hearing people are better workers than the hearing ones. I agree with him.

Katie: I would like to add that we like to promote that concept with the employers. I wish we could find the research. As a deaf person myself, we take the odd jobs. There is no advantage of deaf over hard of hearing but we value our jobs because that may be the only one we will have. I am not comparing one position with three people, but I am a very focused and loyal worker. There is no written proof or analysis of that, but in general deaf and hard of hearing people are better drivers. There is proof of that. I am sure it applies to the workers too.

Guest: Do employers provide certified sign language interpreters in the work place for deaf people?

Todd: You tend to give me two pronged questions. If an individual is working with us and looking for a job, there is a situation where MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) can assist with the accommodations. To request that right off the bat is very difficult to get in the door. I assist with the interpreter services for the job start up days. I provide that if that's appropriate. Legally the employer has a need to do that.

For those already employed we need to educate the employer and show what accommodations are available. There is where the assistive technology specialist is important. We show what is available and give recommendations to the employer.

Katie: with the law in Michigan anyone who requests an interpreter on the job has the right to have one provided for them. They sometimes try to get by with the employee's sister or friend who signs. But we need to educate the employers for how important this is to provide the interpreter on the job when requested.

Chris Jacques: when you mention that employers can get work credit, what is that credit they get?

Todd: I was speaking of the federally mandated work credit. Targeted population groups, if the employer hires someone from the targeted groups, the employer gets all the paperwork they need to send in and based on the information they can write off a portion of that individual's salary. Right now that is \$6,500. At the same time they get a quality employee.

Guest: I found that the biggest complaint and frustration that hard of hearing people have is when they are in an employer's conference room or auditorium and have difficulty hearing because there is no assistive technology installed. Part of our mission here is to encourage employers to install hearing loops so the people can hear what is going on. That is a real challenge. Can you help us educate employers?

Todd: I am trying to recall the question. Working together with employers and loop systems. When we advocate for our customers we do provide a service with retention service. If a lot of team meetings are necessary and there is no employer understanding of what is needed for the individual, we will work with them and identify what accommodations are available and encourage them to provide them.

Katie: Also, are you talking about public situations, like any university or auditorium? It's not employment related, right?

Guest: our mission at HLAGR is to encourage all public places to provide assistive technology and encourage them to install hearing loops. But we also feel it's necessary for employers to do the same thing. That is why we would like to work closely with you to reach out to the companies and make sure they understand the value of putting loops in these places.

Guest: private employers, correct?

Guest: yes.

Katie: I can answer that. If you feel that it's the employer knows they don't give the appropriate accommodations contact MRS (Michigan Rehabilitation Services) and they will send someone to do a presentation for the employee and the communication is directly with them, and how we can assist them. We have hard of hearing specialists as DHHS (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services) and they make recommendations on what needs to change. It's part of the communication process we provide.

Todd: if we can identify those employers it's also an in-road for other deaf and hard of hearing people seeking employment.

Guest: I just wanted to add that being deaf since 2.5 years old I have seen a lot of growth. Todd and Katie have done a good job of contacting companies and informing them of the deaf and hard of hearing world. I work with hearing impaired kids mainstreamed in high school. I always told them that it's our responsibility to educate the public, the employer, and such. You have to communicate with them and tell them what your needs are and what

your accommodations are and what works best for you. We all have different needs. The more we do that, the more we get it out.

I teach my class and encourage them to go out there and educate your family and workers. I am also a member of the Quota Club. We are trying to get DeVos Hall looped. My friend and I attended an event there. Most people don't read the program until the event is over. In the fine print it did not say anything about a loop system. There was no loop system; we kept asking. We asked Mr. DeVos if we could have a loop system put in, and the Quota club would help with that.

If you have been somewhere without a loop, write to the company or auditorium and ask them to put one in.

Chris Jacques: this is a lot of questions. Any others?

Todd: With the discussion of the loop system and about the employer, I want to tell you about a person I know that is in a manufacturing setting. They were not getting the service they needed. I met with the employer and offered to cover the cost of providing a mini-workshop and sign language classes. That way the team could have a better understanding of the deaf culture and some small communication skills through sign language.

Chris Jacques: any other questions?

Guest: Sanford Freed and I talked before the program and I asked him where you go to get a loop system for, say, your church or work environment. He gave me the name of Mike at PreMovation at www.premovation.com. Sanford Freed said he also does home loop systems.

Vic: Ascom is another installer. They installed the loop system in the terminals of the Gerald R Ford airport. If you take a flight out of the airport and have a t-coil, make sure you turn it on. The terminals are looped and we are getting positive feedback from passengers in that regard. They are excellent.

Guest: I wonder if the announcements are any better to understand.

Chris Jacques: it's only for people who are traveling right now, those in the concourses themselves. They have plans to loop the rest of the terminal but it's not as easy to do. I have experienced it. The system does work very well, the only thing we found is that the service announcements that are pre-recorded are not part of the system yet. The announcements that it's time to board are on the system right now.

Sanford Freed: since we wandered into the area of public loops, it's very important that when we go to looped places when you experience a looped environment go to someone in management in the facility and tell them how much you appreciated the fact that the space is accessible.

The Grand Rapids Art Museum has the main auditorium looped but there are no signs to say that. I contacted a staff person to say that it was great that it was looped but they had no idea what I was talking about. So the buildings and spaces that are looped we need to get the information to. There is a loop at the information desk up at the hospital but it's turned

off right now. I asked if anyone has used it but only one person has used it so far. That is not good. We know there is a huge education piece that has to go on for hearing aid wearers to access it and for the staff to recognize a situation where it can be used.

Thank people where there are loops because otherwise no one will know there is access for T-coils.

Chris Jacques: I don't think that the person knew about me. I used the loop upstairs this week. They knew how to operate it and they knew to ask if I had a T-coil. It worked fine. The Meijer pharmacies at Cascade and Holland have a loop system. I believe they also have it in the drive-through and at the counter.

Guest: why not just leave the system on all the time? 24/7? That would seem to solve part of the problem.

Chris Jacques: the issue also is, and I am not defending this, but they have a speaker and a desk that is very wide so if the speaker is over there they have to make an effort to go over to it. It may not be the best ergonomic situation, but they knew what questions to ask and how to turn it on. But people don't know that it's there. I did not notice it myself but I know that it's there. I walked up and asked them. I did not see the sign but it was right there. I am not always the most observant.

I want to remind everyone that we will have programs on a quarterly basis now, not every month. Our next meeting is December 10. If you run into anyone you know, remind them that we will not have an October or November program. You can also access the website; you can type that in. It's at the bottom of the page and you can link right in there.

Guest: will you set up an e-mail announcement for meetings?

Chris Jacques: right now we just use snail mail and internet. We have a very small list of e-mails right now.

Todd: Are you putting the information on your website? The individuals that I work with that are hard of hearing I refer them to the group and I encourage them to look at your website. If you put it there, it would be great.

Chris Jacques: thank you, Todd and Katie. We appreciate the presentations and the questions that came out.