



Pilot program at Evaluation Center for Deaf clients

Deaf clients give their approval on the appropriateness of a model's dress during a fashion show at the Evaluation Center.

Fourteen Deaf and hard of hearing clients attended a two-week pilot program at VR's Evaluation Center in West Columbia in January. The clients engaged in team-building exercises, practiced interviewing skills, learned about Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), participated in assessments and vocational evaluations.

"We started them off on the ropes course at Wil Lou Gray because we wanted to see what they were capable of," says Shonna Magee, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Coordinator. The group quickly bonded as they worked together and encouraged each other while climbing the catwalk, balancing on platforms and zip lining.



David Xu.

"I'd never experienced that before!" says David Xu. "I was a little scared, especially when I was climbing up that thing. You get weak in the knees." He says that the experience really brought the group together because they were "sharing ideas, thinking positive and supporting each other."

David also appreciated learning more about SSI and SSDI, tax information and budgeting. "I also learned about separating personal issues from the work environment. No one has ever really talked to me about that."

Margi Gorzyca agrees, "I learned a lot about attitude, respecting others and good workplace behaviors."

This was also a chance for the clients to learn how to interact with hearing individuals. Although there were plenty of interpreters, there were times when the staff, hearing clients and the Deaf clients had to figure out how to communicate.

"That's one of the things we wanted to assess," says Ali Cato, Comprehensive Program Supervisor. "How can we help facilitate communication without an interpreter? And it just happened. That was really neat to see. It took cooperation from the staff and the clients."

One of the things that the staff quickly realized was that the Deaf and hard of hearing clients face many of the same challenges as any other client, such as high blood



Margi Gorzyca.

pressure, orthopedic issues, or diabetes that need to be addressed. “For some, those may be bigger barriers to employment than deafness,” says Cato.

For example, she says that nutrition was a huge topic for the participants. “We didn’t realize that would be a need, but moving forward it will be just as important as talking with them about benefits.”



Daisy Francis and Zina Hill participate in aquatic therapy at the Muscular Development Center.

The pilot program was encouraged by Commissioner Neal Getsinger, who wanted to have a special program at the Evaluation Center for VR clients who are Deaf.

“Commissioner Getsinger is very passionate about improving the quality of services for our Deaf and hard of hearing clients,” says Cato. “He understands the value of assessing someone over a longer period of time. The result is that we get to see so many more of their strengths and we can better help them to be stronger.”

VR partnered with the SC Department of Mental Health Deaf Services, SC Association of the Deaf (SCAD), and SC Interpreting Services for the Deaf. They helped train staff leading up to the two weeks and then taught several classes for the clients. VR counselors Amelia England and Jason Hurdich also assisted with the program.

“The Deaf and hard of hearing population have a unique set of needs that are both cultural and linguistic in



Brittany Jensen, Vocational ACE (center) with clients (left to right) Andrea Fludd, Kenisha Hann, Daisy Francis, and Kekeisha Patton.

addition to auditory,” says Magee, “and we could not have done this without the community partners.”

Magee says that she and other VR staff have already received inquiries from Deaf clients and partners around the state about when the next program will be offered. Although a date has not been set, she expects the next program probably will be scheduled by summer and that it will be for four weeks. “All of the clients have expressed how much they have learned and that they want the program to be longer.”

“I’m going to miss being here because I want to learn more,” says Daisy Francis. The staff call Daisy “superstar” because of the way she helped facilitate communication between everyone.

“She advocated for herself and for the whole group,” says Brittany Jensen, Vocational ACE. “She would make an outstanding job coach.”



Daisy Francis.

David is excited to begin planning the next steps for his future. He wants to learn and become fluent in English



Shonna Magee, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Coordinator (standing), and Kayla Wright, Occupational Therapist (center, seated), lead a class for Deaf clients at the Evaluation Center.

and then work for a government agency, or possibly a private sector business.

Reflecting on the past two weeks, he says, “This has helped me develop and grow and learn good job etiquette, positive responsibility.” Then he adds, “Together we’ve all learned and grown as people.”