



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO NEWS RELEASE

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COUNTY HHSA'S DEAF SERVICES UNIT GIVES VOICE TO INDIVIDUALS

Deaf Services Unit Serves Estimated 350,000 Deaf and Hard of Hearing San Diego County Residents

March is National Social Work month, and the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) has several specialized social work units designed to meet the needs of San Diego County residents. One such unit is the County's Child Welfare Services (CWS) Deaf Services Unit.

The unit was started about five years ago, but in the past year it has greatly expanded the services available to the county's estimated 350,000 Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents. The unit continues to make great strides in meeting the needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals in San Diego County.

Before the creation of the Unit, the Agency was able to offer only limited services to Deaf and Hard of Hearing clients. Outside interpreters often had to be arranged or family members of the clients were relied upon to relay information, which could result in some awkward moments or an unwillingness to discuss important issues.

"This is a unit that has received great support from the County Board of Supervisors, HHSA North Region Management team under Deputy Director Nick Macchione, and Mary Harris, Director of CWS," said Cindy Shelton, Manager, CWS North Central Region. "We would not be here without their support."

The Deaf Services Unit began about five years ago with the hiring of Lynnette Miller, the County's first deaf Social Worker. At the time, Miller was doing most of the interaction with Deaf clients.

"I started taking on cases with Deaf or Hard of Hearing children or parents," said Miller.

Slowly but surely, Miller started working with others in the Agency to develop services and programs reaching out to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community in the County. "We realized we needed workers that could communicate directly with clients," said Miller.

Since then, the expansion of services offered has grown considerably. Three more Social Workers joined the unit and a supervisor was assigned to work with them. With the growth in



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resources, the ability to serve the community has grown as well. There are usually about 30-40 active Deaf and Hard of Hearing cases and that number is growing as that community learns more about the services the Agency is now able to offer them.

“In December, Michele Cannon (the unit’s investigator) had five referrals,” said Susan Solis, the unit’s supervisor. “In January, she had 10. The word is out in the community that we have the resources to work with them.”

Even though the unit is housed in the HHSA’s North Region, the Deaf Services Unit serves the entire county. “If other regions receive a call, they call us,” said Shelton.

American Sign Language is the fourth most commonly used language in San Diego County, and Shelton stresses the unit will work with a case where anyone in the home is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, not just the client.

The unit has been invaluable in working with the community. Solis points out that they aren’t just working with the Deaf or Hard of Hearing, they are working with a culture.

“If I go out as a Deaf person and work with a Deaf parent, they are very responsive said Miller. “If a speaking person goes out and even if they sign fluently, there is still a trust issue there. It’s the direct communication that allows the parent to come forward and use our services.”

Kathy Shely, a Social Worker in the Unit, says that one-on-one face-to-face communication is vital to the work they do. “Our children have voices too, and without our unit, their voices may not be heard,” she said. “The ability to communicate is often lost with a third person.”

Ranila Allen is one of the unit’s continuing workers, and she added that a lot of the work the unit does is education. “A lot of what we do is education on the services we offer,” she said. “Things we can offer the community.”

The unit has worked with several other entities to successfully establish a Deaf Group Home in San Diego. In the past, Deaf or Hard of Hearing children that needed to be placed in a home had to be flown to Boston, New Mexico or other locations far away from their families, friends and communities.



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"It's hard to reunify families because of the distance," said Miller. "We began reaching out to groups and encouraging them to open a home here in San Diego."

The unit has another goal in sight: establishment of a Deaf Courthouse. "We've been working to establish a Deaf courthouse," said Miller.

"Los Angeles County has a courtroom (for Deaf clients)," said Shelton. "Here (in San Diego County), the court reports these workers write have to spend a great deal of time educating lawyers, court employees and others (about Deaf culture.)"

If anyone can make things happen, it's The Deaf Services Unit. This group has succeeded in giving Deaf and Hard of Hearing San Diego County residents a stronger and clearer voice.

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