



**NYS HEALTH**  
FOUNDATION

*Improving the state of New York's health*

Unity Health System:  
Deaf Community Home Health Aide  
Program

**Grant Results Report – February 2008**

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Unity Health System  
1559 Long Pond Road  
Rochester, NY 14626  
Phone: 585-368-4206  
Fax: 585-426-7906

**Contact:**

Jane Shukitis  
585-368-4206  
[jshukitis@unityhealth.org](mailto:jshukitis@unityhealth.org)

**Grant Title:** Deaf Community Home Health Aide Program

**Grant Amount:** \$95,667

**Grant ID:** 1600799

**Period Covered by the Grant:** 01/08/2007–12/31/2007

**Foundation Program Officer:** Kelly Hunt

**ABOUT THE GRANTEE**

Unity Health System is a large, integrated health care delivery system that is nonprofit and hospital-based. It offers comprehensive aging services in Rochester/Monroe County, NY. In addition to Unity Hospital, it operates three nursing homes and offers a full range of community-based services, among them medical and non-medical home care services, and adult day services at multiple sites.

## **Home Health Services for Deaf Elderly**

### **THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED**

Rochester and Monroe County, NY, have some 12,000–15,000 Deaf and hard-of-hearing residents, an estimated 600 of whom are elderly. Deaf elderly people cannot easily communicate with hearing people, miss much health information conveyed by traditional means (radio and T.V.), and when they need home health services, they require specially trained aides who can communicate with them in their primary language of American Sign Language (ASL). Some need adaptive equipment to live safely and independently in their homes.

### **PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT**

Unity Health System (Unity) became aware that their community's elderly Deaf residents were not receiving home health services due to a communications barrier with the hearing community. "Deaf clients coming out of the hospital who needed home health care would refuse it. They didn't want to have someone coming in the home they couldn't communicate with," says Barbara Bushart, Unity Deaf services Program Coordinator, who herself is Deaf.

At its beginning, the program had to educate the professional community (and the community at large) about what it means to be Deaf, and Deaf people's special needs. Program staff also had to educate Deaf people about the concept of home health care and the home health aides (HHA) who provide it.

### **UNDER THE GRANT, UNITY HEALTH:**

- Used community outreach to identify and enroll Deaf clients eligible for Unity HHA services.
- Produced flyers, brochures, a Web page, and online advertisements about the availability of the new program and employment opportunities for Deaf or American Sign Language-fluent HHA candidates.

- Unity Health held four HHA training sessions, two of which included Deaf individuals who were trained to be HHAs serving Deaf clients. The three-week, 120-hour program is approved by the New York State Department of Health. Unity provided interpreter services and support to the trainees.
- Worked closely with the New York Office of Vocational Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID) for identification and referral of candidates for training.
- Employed six HHAs in addition to the program coordinator and a second social worker professional (both of whom are Deaf) serving the Deaf community.
- Served 34 people; including five who received adaptive services (such as flashing lights that indicate the doorbell is ringing), and two who had home health aides.
- Identified additional external funding resources for program continuation.
- Conducted an end-of-year project evaluation, reviewed with Unity and other stakeholders.
- Reviewed and revised the HHA training materials and incorporated a section on communicating with Deaf people in all Unity HHA trainings.

## **BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT AND CHANGES TO ORIGINAL WORK PLAN**

Originally, the program staff had hoped to reach 90 to 100 clients in their first year, and they still believe the need is out there. But, says Jane Shukitis, program administrator, “This was an aggressive target. We had anticipated that other agencies would contract with Unity for HHAs for their Deaf clients.” In retrospect, the leadership team believes, they should have begun their marketing by contacting other agencies that provide home care, rather than the more time-consuming and laborious process of identifying Deaf individuals.

“A big piece of the problem relates to the payment mechanism,” says Shukitis. “Incomes of many people who need the service are a little too high for Medicaid, but they cannot afford to pay for it out-of-pocket. Or, if they are eligible for Medicaid, they aren’t

qualified for home health care payments, according to state regulations. Inflexibility and systems barriers like these have dampened enrollment.”

With Foundation permission, the program reallocated some funds from interpreter services to help five additional Deaf people with serious needs. “We have become a referral hub to get people devices that allow them to communicate with their health provider and various other safety adaptations,” says Shukitis.

Additionally, the program staff encourages nurses, social workers, and physical therapists to take sign language classes, so they are better able to communicate in homes of Deaf clients. This work evolved as part of the NYSHealth grant but was funded under a concurrent Greater Rochester Health Foundation grant.

## **PROGRAM EVALUATION**

Although the number of clients so far is smaller than hoped, Deaf home health aides and Deaf clients say the program has made a huge difference in quality of care, as evidenced by:

- **Client Satisfaction Survey.** Quarterly client surveys administered in August and December that indicated a very high degree of program satisfaction (98% to 100%).
- **Service Provider Survey.** Providers who referred clients to the program largely found it beneficial to their clients (60%). All of the five surveyed would recommend it to Deaf clients.
- **Home Health Aide Survey.** Four surveys of HHAs indicated that all of the aides had 100% satisfaction with their training, communication ability, and job satisfaction.
- **Functional Improvement Outcome.** Staff used the Older Americans Resources Scale (OARS) to evaluate clients’ quality of life, adding a communication component. Some 84% of clients showed improvement in their level of health because of the services provided.

- **VESID expressed a very high level of satisfaction** with the program and its “outstanding effort to hire and promote people with disabilities.” Unity received one of VESID’s annual Employer Recognition Awards in October 2007.
- Finally, **Collaboration on a survey of Deaf elders with the University of Rochester Medical Center** is now beginning.

## **DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS**

Unity created a CD used at health fairs, in which the Program Coordinator describes the program in sign language.

The program staff developed a marketing brochure for use in medical settings, and Unity hired a marketing specialist to assist with publicity.

The grantee also has been contacted by several other agencies that want to learn more and was featured in magazine called *Future Age*. The program administrator is active in the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging and hopes to “spread the word” there.

“This is a great—and rare—program that is needed across the State and across the country,” says Shukitis. “We are happy to share what we have learned.”

## **THE FUTURE**

Unity has integrated the position of Deaf services program coordinator into its health system, facilitating ongoing outreach in the community.

The Greater Rochester Health Foundation’s support will continue through 2008.

Program staff continues to seek funding for in-home support for Deaf people that does not depend on insurance.