

# New Report Cites Need for Better Information on Disability Laws

By Michelle Meadows

Closing the Gap, Disabilities • October/November 1999

Even the experts say it can be tough to wade through disability laws and figure out how they should be applied. According to a July 1999 report from the National Council on Disability (NCD), there is a need for more culturally-appropriate and easy-to-understand information on disability rights under federal law, including what to do if violations occur. The NCD recommends a team of Federal agencies come together to implement outreach and training on disability rights.

The report, "Lift Every Voice, Modernizing Disability Policies and Programs to Serve a Diverse Nation," is based on the Council's meeting last year on the unique needs of people with disabilities from cultural backgrounds. Held in San Francisco, the meeting involved a series of hearings in English, Spanish, and Cantonese. This latest report follows the 1993 NCD report, "Meeting the Unique Needs of Minorities with Disabilities."

## Understanding and applying the law

A decade after the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law, experts agree that significant progress has been achieved. But the struggle for inclusion remains, even when it comes to getting appropriate health services. For example, the HHS Office on Civil Rights (OCR) recently announced that the D.C. Department of Health will now provide sign language interpreters for hearing-impaired individuals in D.C.'s Medicaid program.

Low-income persons with hearing impairments will now have interpreters when they visit their primary care doctors. The action closes a complaint filed with the OCR by a hearing-impaired client and enforces section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination on basis of disability. Under Title II of the ADA, state and local governments must make programs accessible to persons with disabilities.

Bob Griss, director of the Center on Disability and Health in Washington, DC, said there's a need for all stakeholders in the health care system to improve their understanding of what it means to comply with ADA principles in health care delivery. Based on the understanding that managed care plans have an obligation to ensure that all enrollees benefit from covered services, he is working on ADA checklists for five groups: managed care plans; health care providers; consumers with disabilities; consumer advocacy groups; and regulators.

For example, Griss' checklist for managed care organizations in the area of communication accessibility includes such items as: "MCO screens all patients after enrollment to identify auxiliary aids and services needed to ensure effective communication."

The National Council on Disability plans to release a new report on Federal enforcement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the ADA in Winter 2000. The report will include recommendations for people from diverse backgrounds.

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