Case Study December 2005

Community-Based Learning Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, Winner, 2005

The Canadian Helen Keller Centre's Computer Essentials and Technical Devices Program

OVERVIEW

There are at least 15,500 Deaf-Blind people in Canada, many of whom are underserved and isolated. The Canadian Helen Keller Centre (CHKC) is a not-for-profit organization in Toronto, Ontario, that offers training and skills development for individuals with the dual disability of deafness and blindness.[1] Since opening its doors in 2001, the Centre's *raison d'être* has been to assist Deaf-Blind persons to develop independent living and technical skills, maintain their autonomy, access services in the community and decrease their social isolation. The CHKC endorses the philosophy that "Deaf-Blind persons have a right to expect that their capabilities and their aspirations to lead a normal life within the community shall be recognized and respected by all."

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning.

Name of Program
Computer Essentials and Technical Devices (CE/TD) Program

Date Established
2001

Skills Developed
Computer essentials
Personal growth
Positive outlook
Independent living

Contact
Patricia Grant
Executive Director
Canadian Helen Keller Centre
210 Empress Avenue
Toronto ON M2N 3T9
Tel: (416) 225-8989
Fax: (416) 225-4871
E-mail:
deafblindinfo@onramp.ca

The CHKC is the only residential training centre in Canada that provides intensive skills development programs to Deaf-Blind persons. Instruction is provided one-on-one in the client's preferred mode of

communication, including 2-Hand Manual tactile spelling, finger spelling, sign language, Braille, large print, or using technical devices with refreshable Braille displays. A broad range of customized learning programs is offered, including:

- adapted communication systems (e.g., American Sign Language [ASL], Tactile ASL, 2-Hand Manual, and Braille);
- orientation and mobility (e.g., identifying locations, obstacles and travelling safely in one's environment);
- skills of daily living (e.g., cooking, safe food handling and dietary needs, cleaning, shopping, laundry, grooming, household management);
- recreation and leisure (e.g., socializing, entertaining, exercise programs, hobbies); and
- technology (e.g., using computers, electronic communication devices such as the tty; technical devices such as signalling systems, household gadgets, alarms).

This case study focuses on the CHKC's computer essentials and technical devices (CE/TD) program and the impact it has on Deaf-Blind individuals.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE CE/TD PROGRAM

CHKC provides training in computer essentials so that Deaf-Blind people can stay connected to the world. They also learn about technical devices to help increase their independence, safety and employability. In addition to teaching Deaf-Blind students to overcome barriers to information and communication, the CE/TD program also helps reduce the isolation they experience on a day-to-day basis because of their disability. Finally, CHKC strives to provide role models (the CE/TD instructor is Deaf-Blind) and employment opportunities for people who are Deaf-Blind.

TARGET GROUPS

CHKC is accessible to Deaf-Blind individuals living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) as well as those individuals living outside the region who travel to the Centre and stay for upwards of six months. Specifically, CHKC targets Deaf-Blind youth transitioning into adulthood and adults who have become Deaf-Blind.

ACTIVITIES

The CE/TD program teaches Deaf-Blind individuals how to use the computer and related technology and other technical devices to enhance their independence, safety and security. The devices include:

- Alertmaster 6000 signalling devices to alert individuals to sounds such as the telephone ringing, the doorbell, or a crying child;
- Blackberry PDA and other paging devices;
- Braille clocks and embossers;
- webcam so that deaf people can communicate using ASL on the Internet through MSN;
- closed-circuit television;
- talking clocks;
- computers with large-screen monitors;
- telephones with large print and adjustable volume controls; and
- TTY (Text Telephone/Teletype Terminal/ Teletypewriter) with large print display.

The software used in the CE/TD program includes:
- a screen reader called Window Eyes;
- a screen magnification package called Zoomtext;
- Kurweil—a software package that is used with a flatbed scanner to translate documentation from print to electronic text.

The CE/TD program also teaches individuals how to use word-processing and e-mail applications, surf the Internet, develop weblogs, use chat rooms, manage files and design web pages.

INNOVATIONS

CHKC is a special place, designed specifically to help Deaf-Blind people interact and live safely within their environments. It works hard to acquire the latest in access technology so that students can learn about what is available, how to use it, and the funding programs that can help them to acquire it.

CHKC offers individuals an environment free of communication barriers. In addition to providing one-on-one instruction in a student's preferred mode of communication (e.g., ASL, 2-Hand Manual), all courses are customized so that the pace, focus and level of detail meet each client's individual requirements.

CHALLENGES

CHKC relies heavily on donations and fundraising in order to provide its training and services. Currently the government does not offer much support for Deaf-Blind adults, and although the Centre has a grant through the Ontario Trillium Foundation, it does not have permanent funding. Each year, CHKC needs to raise up to $100,000 to provide the quantity and quality of services needed; as a result, it is always looking for sponsors.

RESOURCES

Classes are conducted at CHKC and in the homes of students, where some are more comfortable and are able to use their new skills sooner. The Centre uses volunteers to augment instruction, and in doing so, provides opportunities for the public to meet and interact with people who are Deaf-Blind. Finally, where required, interveners are provided to act as eyes and ears for individuals in order to facilitate communication and learning.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

The CE/TD program is successful because of its commitment to helping Deaf-Blind individuals gain independence and overcome the challenges of isolation. CHKC's instructors introduce students to various computer and technical devices and help determine what works best to suit their individual needs.

OUTCOMES

To date, CHKC has made a difference in the lives of 42 individuals who are Deaf-Blind. Since March 2002, the CE/TD program has offered almost 640 hours of instruction (excluding intervener services). From June 2004 to May 2005, CHKC provided 1,829 hours of instruction and intervener services to individuals. The Centre also contracts four part-time instructors who are Deaf-Blind.

CHKC connects the Deaf-Blind Community electronically and those in the GTA are connected with peer support groups. Individuals form a community and lend support to each other as they continue to lose vision and hearing. Because of this community, many students become more accepting of their disability and more confident in their abilities, and go on to reclaim the independence that they once had.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The learning provided by the CE/TD program has many benefits for Deaf-Blind individuals. E-mail and Internet chat programs help break down communication barriers, which is tremendously empowering. TTY programs allow individuals to use their computers as a simulated TTY machine, and being able to independently access information allows them to learn about what is going on in the world around them. For CHKC instructors, it is very rewarding to be able to help make a difference in other people's lives.

E-mail and Internet chat programs help break down communication barriers.

One major impact of the program has been a return to literacy among Deaf-Blind individuals. Students who were unable to access printed or electronic media prior to arriving at CHKC are taught new ways and introduced to new technologies in order to keep reading. For example, refreshable Braille displays help Deaf-Blind people read computer screens and, at the same time, help them develop skills for reading Braille, anywhere and at any time. Becoming knowledgeable on a keyboard and using computer shortcuts also helps individuals to make the switch to Blackberry PDAs and other communication technologies.

USE AS A MODEL

CHKC is a unique facility that offers services to a unique clientele. However, given that there are more than 15,500 Deaf-Blind people in Canada, there are countless other communities that could benefit from a Centre, or satellite centre of CHKC. Programs such as the CE/TD keep individuals up to speed and informed on a range of interpersonal technologies and communications devices that help individuals live more complete and fulfilling lives.

Through the CE/TD program, CHKC prepares students for future technological advances by helping them develop an understanding and appreciation of the changing nature of information technology. This is extremely important because people who become Deaf-Blind have changing visual or auditory capabilities—and, as such, tend to be continuously learning and seeking out new communications technologies and strategies. As they continue to lose vision and hearing, they need to know about emerging technologies so they can access them when the technology they are using is no longer useful.

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1   People who are considered to be Deaf-Blind have significant impairment of both vision and hearing. They may be hearing-impaired and visually impaired, hearing-impaired and blind, deaf and visually impaired, or deaf and blind.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded in part by the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

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by *Douglas Watt*

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