

Building Bridges of Access: Teaming, Transition, Outcomes

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Deaf-Blindness (DB) is a disability of access to people, places and information. A person with combined hearing and vision loss may also have other disabilities. Due to the heterogeneous nature of deaf-blindness, it creates unique challenges for systems, educators and families. It is not uncommon that a young adult who is deafblind is often the only such student in their entire school district! For young adults who use sign language, reduction in visual acuity or visual fields can impact adversely on their ability to understand or be understood. Young adults who can use speech also face isolation because facilitating communication is so difficult in noisy environments.

The challenges of access to people, places and information play a major role in the lack of opportunities to make friends and establish meaningful relationships. Neighboring states discovered that the challenges young

I learned that it is my responsibility to be my own advocate. I need to look into my future and make goals.

*-Young Adult
Participant*

meeting the unique challenges made one thing very apparent... to effectively address this need, a collaborative relationship built on trust, shared expertise and resources was necessary.

“Exponential gains in organization effectiveness are possible at the intersection of team and spirit.” Dr. Barry Heermann, Creator of *Team Spirit*, a model for building high performing teams, made this statement in his 1997 publication, *Building Team Spirit*. His insight and model could never be more truly realized than by the teaming experience of the Southeastern Deaf-Blind Projects challenged to meet the unique needs of access for students with deafblindness and their families facing transition. Driven by this need of *service*, the force in *Team Spirit*, several states embraced the power of teaming resulting in improved service (Transition Institute) and product ([The Transition Toolkit](#)).



In 2005, the South Carolina DB Project staff had a desire to connect their young people with others with deafblindness. They were encouraged to contact the Georgia DB Project who were sponsoring an annual weekend for young adults in partnership with the Florida DB project. Together the state projects found that they could introduce young people to a greater number of peers while sharing the responsibility of identifying, training and financing interpreters, Support Service Providers (SSPs) and materials, all crucial components of making the weekends accessible. Teaming in this manner ensures young adults fully participate in the experience. (*Team Spirit aspects of Initiating: building trust and belonging*)

To make this happen successfully, the planning team learned how to build an infrastructure in which *access* was at the forefront of planning. High quality interpreting costs were expensive, tactile interpreters resources scarce, and recruiting volunteers/SSPs that had a specific skills set for the discrete needs of the young adults were even more scarce! Through teaming, the resource pool expanded by partnerships being forged with interpreting training school programs resulting in a larger network of skilled interpreters and volunteers. (*Visioning and Claiming, role clarification and responsibilities.*)

The Institute's core ingredients:

- Keynote Speaker should always be an adult who is deaf-blind, providing the adult role model.
- Mentors are cultivated from previous attendees and gain leadership skills by their embedded role.
- Interactive role play, resource fair, and team building.
- Afterwards celebrate, self-evaluate and review the participants, interpreters, and volunteers' feedback ensuring continual growth and refinement. (*Celebrating and Letting Go*)

During the interview, the person asked me what I had hope to pass on to the kids, sorry to say I don't think I could have given them anything, but I am telling you they gave and changed me!

Stephen Head,

Father of a Young Adult



By following this recipe, the Institutes have consistently produced teens that emerge from their weekend experiences with focused action plans and renewed sense of self-confidence and direction. The families have especially remarked on the transformation occurring within themselves and their young adults from the exposure to deaf-blind role models and mentors.

Found on [NCDB's website](#), The Transition Toolkit's contents provide guidance and resources for any group or organization to replicate the Institute to meet the needs of any population!

As a result of the shared commitment to effort and resources, the states agreed to develop a toolkit making it possible for any organization to successfully plan an event aimed at assisting youth with disabilities to become more self-determines and help their families to become effective advocates. The product is titled “[The Transition Toolkit.](#)”

Currently, the Southeastern states are again *Team Spiriting* and using “The Transition ToolKit” for two upcoming 2015 Institutes, one in Alabama, June 11-14th, and the other in Kentucky, June 19-21st. In this way, additional states can participate with less cost and travel time.

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