

Alternative Solutions Center's Crusade in Addressing the Gaps in Mental Health Care for the Deaf

Sara Collins
SIGNews staff writer

Note: SIGNews interviewed Dr. Candace McCullough, a licensed Deaf psychotherapist, and the owner and founder of Alternative Solutions Center (ASC), and Ms. Sharon Duchesneau, a licensed Deaf psychotherapist with ASC. The interview has been edited for space and clarity. Additional information about ASC can be found online at www.ascdeaf.com/blog.

SIGNews: What are some of the issues that are unique to the deaf communities when it comes to psychotherapy and counseling services and practices?

McCullough: The biggest issue is accessibility to psychotherapy and counseling services provided by Deaf therapists. We have a huge scarcity of Deaf therapists all over the country, even more so in rural areas.

Today, the trend seems to be that Deaf people are seeking Deaf therapists, rather than signing hearing therapists. Deaf people are now recognizing that they can get top-quality therapy services from Deaf therapists who are fluent in ASL and who “get” the Deaf experience. ASC is the only Deaf-owned and staffed group psychotherapy practice.

SIGNews: What served as the impetus for the founding of ASC? How many years has ASC been in operation?

McCullough: ASC was founded in 2001—10 years in business now. My long-term goal was always to run my own group practice. After working for several years as a mental health director of clinical services at a community agency and observing issues related to inaccessible services, I decided the best option was to set up my own Deaf-centered practice.

SIGNews: It is my understanding that ASC also provides counseling services via videophone (VP). What are some of the successes and challenges when it comes to providing such services via videophone?

Duchesneau: We have had great success utilizing



videophones for therapy sessions. The superior quality of today's videophones makes it possible for VP sessions to be almost equal to in-person sessions.

The benefits of VP therapy include: geography no longer determines access to therapy, travel time is eliminated, confidentiality concerns are eased (you can see a therapist outside of your community), and the attendance to therapy is usually better. However, the challenges are the usual technical issues that sometimes arise with poor Internet connections, power outages, etc.

SIGNews: What would be one of ASC's biggest successes from over the years?

Duchesneau: Closest to our hearts, our biggest success is having been privileged to be a part of so many people's lives and to share their deepest struggles and successes. We can't run ASC without the trust of our wonderful Deaf community. As a result of our success, we have expanded to include contractual therapists in different states to meet the needs of our clients.

SIGNews: Who or which audiences do ASC serve?

McCullough: Deaf clients, hearing people with deaf family members, CODAS, and interpreters.

SIGNews: Does ASC have any specialized programs (i.e. substance use disorders), clinics, or public mental health awareness campaigns? If so, could you kindly share more information about that?

McCullough: ASC's therapists have a wealth of experience and expertise in a range of mental health issues. These include treatment of depression, anxiety and identity issues — to name a few of the most common presenting complaints. We offer individual, couples and family therapy and have strong backgrounds in working with parenting issues, domestic

ASC, continued on page 16



Candace McCullough and Sharon Duchesneau

violence, ADHD, and relationship issues (both straight and LGBT).

SIGNews: Where do you see ASC in the future (within one year, five years, etc)? Do you have any planned expansions or events?

McCullough: We hope to continue our expansion to more states this year and over the next five years. We are planning the first ever-national conference for Deaf mental health providers and hope to bring together Deaf therapists, counselors and psychologists from all over the country for an intensive Deaf-centered networking and training opportunity.

The only other national conferences for professionals working in the mental health field with Deaf clients are made up of over 80% hearing professionals. This new conference will be tailored to Deaf professionals' interests and needs and will focus on our unique perspective and clinical approaches as Deaf professionals.

SIGNews: What are some of the things that people (both people with and without counseling background) can do to address mental health service gaps within the Deaf communities — especially in the rural areas?

Duchesneau: Push agencies to hire Deaf therapists who can provide direct services to Deaf clients. Encourage our bright and talented Deaf college students to consider going into the mental health profession. Educate health insurance companies about the unique needs of the Deaf community. Demand greater accountability when it comes to their network lists of providers fluent in ASL. Many providers simply check off a box indicating they know sign language, but the insurance companies do not verify their fluency. This means Deaf people end up going to see providers who only have introductory-level ASL skills and who are unqualified to work with Deaf clients.