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Embry, Richard A.
Grossman, Frank D.

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THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY RESPONSE TO CHILD ABUSE AND DEAFNESS: A SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY ANALYSIS

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HERE IS INCREASINGLY STRONG evidence that children with disabilities are at higher risk for maltreatment when compared to children without disabilities. There is also concern about the adequacy of child welfare services for children and parents with disabilities, particularly those disabilities that result in a communication impairment. This article describes a successful community practice effort in Los Angeles County that resulted in the establishment of a comprehensive array of linguistically and culturally competent child abuse prevention and treatment services for the maltreated deaf child and for the deaf parent at risk for child abuse perpetration. Social movement theory is used to analyze a change effort that was developed and implemented by a broad coalition of members of the Deaf and hearing communities. Elements of the problem, social movement theory, the coalition, the change strategy, and the results are described.

**RICHARD A. EMBRY AND
FRANK D. GROSSMAN**

EMBRY IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR,
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY, MOUNT SINAI
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, NEW YORK. GROSSMAN
IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION,
SWARTHMORE COLLEGE, SWARTHMORE, PA.

For several years, advocates for the Deaf community, researchers, and service providers have attempted to bring attention to the problem of maltreatment and the deaf child (Sullivan, Vernon, & Scanlon, 1987). These efforts have focused on examining the prevalence of maltreatment of deaf children (Knutson & Sullivan, 1993), risk factors related to maltreatment of deaf children (Embry, 2000; Mather & Mitchell, 1993; Sullivan & Knutson, 1998), child welfare system capacity to serve the deaf child and deaf parent (Kennedy, 1992; Ülgen & Petal, 1992), and models for effective child abuse prevention and treatment services for the deaf child

and support services for deaf parents at risk to perpetrate child maltreatment (Embry, 1993; Sullivan, Scanlan, Brookhouser, Schulte, & Knutson, 1992).

The present article describes efforts in Los Angeles County, CA, conducted by the Advocacy Council for Abused Deaf Children (Advocacy Council) between 1990 and 1996 that resulted in significant reform of child welfare services for the deaf child and parent.¹ We review current literature regarding the maltreatment of deaf children, discuss child welfare services for deaf children and deaf parents, review central elements of social movement theory, and describe the Los Angeles County effort.

This reform effort demonstrates that changes in the political/institutional structures, the ability to garner resources, and the ability to make claims that resonate with diverse stakeholder groups are essential to successful reform. In addition, this analysis of the efforts of a coalition among the Deaf community, child welfare specialists, researchers, private agencies, and public agencies extends the application of social movement theory described in the social work community practice literature (H. J. Rubin & I. S. Rubin, 2001; Weil & Gamble, 1995).

Maltreatment of the Deaf Child and the Inadequacy of Current Child Welfare Services

There is strong evidence that children with disabilities, including deaf children, are at increased risk for maltreatment when compared to children without disabilities.² One study investigating the risk for maltreatment of children with disabilities examined a nationally representative sample of substantiated child maltreatment cases and found that the incidence of maltreatment among children with disabilities was 1.7 times higher than the rate for children without disabilities (Westat, Inc., 1993). Two investigations by Sullivan and Knutson—one using a hospital-based sample (1998) and one using a population-based sample (2000)—also found evidence of increased risk for maltreatment among children with disabilities. The hospital-based study found that children with communication disorders—including deaf and hard of hearing children—were twice as likely to be maltreated when compared to children without disabilities. The population-based study examined maltreatment reports made to both child protective services and law enforcement agencies—a strategy more

likely to identify both intrafamilial and extrafamilial child maltreatment than the Westat study—and found that children with disabilities were 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated when compared to children without disabilities.

The overall goals of the child welfare system in the United States are to protect children from abuse and neglect, to provide support to families, and to promote the provision of permanent homes for children unable to return to their families (Pecora, Whitaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000). These goals typically are addressed through the investigation of suspected child maltreatment, provision of services to maltreating families, provision of out-of-home care services for children unable to live with their parents, efforts that promote reunification of children with families when out-of-home placement has occurred, and efforts that promote permanent homes for children who cannot be returned to their parents.

Despite long-standing legal mandates that are intended to assure access to social services for adults and children with disabilities—such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (McKentree, 1995; Orlin, 1995)—there is considerable concern that current child welfare practices are not adequately meeting the needs of children and adults with disabilities, including deaf children and adults (Bonner, Crow, & Hensley, 1997; Kennedy, 1992; Morris, 1999). How is the child welfare system responding to the unique needs of the maltreated deaf child or the deaf parent suspected of perpetrating child abuse? A case example demonstrates the typical child welfare system response:

Monica, a 12-year-old who was profoundly deaf from birth and who com-

municated with sign language, reported to her signing teacher that her hearing father had sexually and verbally abused her. Her teacher, as required by law, made a report of suspected child abuse to the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). An emergency worker made a home visit and was surprised to discover that the alleged victim was deaf. Interviewing Monica without sign language or interpreter services—through gestures, note writing, and the use of family members as interpreters—the emergency worker decided that there was insufficient evidence for intervention, and the case was not opened.

Following continued disclosures of sexual and verbal abuse, the teacher made an additional report of suspected abuse, this time recommending that an interpreter be used for the investigation. The second assessment was completed by DCFS at Monica's school, with the teacher serving as an interpreter. Based on information gained from this second interview, Monica was removed from the custody of her parents and placed in a foster home for protective custody.

The foster parents, and other foster children, whom Monica was placed with had no sign language ability. Monica was reported as making a poor adjustment to the foster home and being oppositional to the foster parents' directions, and was quickly placed in a different foster home. The second foster family also did not use sign language.

Monica was placed in seven different foster homes before she was placed with Janet, a hearing woman of deaf parents; she was also one of two foster parents in Los Angeles County with strong sign language ability and equally strong knowledge of Deaf community strengths and resources. Under Janet's care, Monica's

communication abilities and self-esteem flourished. She developed a new self-confidence and pride, began to do well in school, and started making plans for independent living. Monica also began therapy with a signing therapist, and started the process of recovery from many years of sexual abuse and ridicule of her deafness by her father.

The inadequate child welfare services described in this example include poor initial investigation of suspected maltreatment due to communication barriers, inappropriate utilization of family members as interpreters, a lack of out-of-home placement resources with sign language capability, and the scarcity of mental health services that adequately addressed the unique mental health treatment needs of the abused deaf child. These inadequacies are thought by advocates for abused deaf children to be experienced by many deaf children who come into contact with the child welfare system (Kennedy, 1992).

The need for child welfare services for the deaf child and parent received important empirical support from a study completed in 1992 that estimated that in Los Angeles County approximately 700 deaf and hard of hearing children should be the subject of initial investigations for suspected maltreatment each year, and that approximately 100 deaf and hard of hearing children should be placed in out-of-home care at any point in time (Ülgen & Petal, 1992). The study estimated that approximately 300 children with a significant bilateral hearing impairment should receive public child welfare services ranging from initial investigations to out-of-home care in Los Angeles County at any point in time. Additionally, the study estimated that approximately 1,000 deaf adults should come into contact

with child protective services in Los Angeles County each year. Because Ülgen and Petal conducted their study before publication of Westat, Inc. (1993), or of the epidemiological works of Sullivan and Knutson (1998, 2000), Ülgen and Petal made all of their study estimates assuming that deaf children were maltreated at the same rate as hearing children: a conservative assumption contradicted by the subsequent epidemiological studies. But even given this assumption, the study by Ülgen and Petal documented considerable inadequacy in child welfare practice.

Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory—a rich theoretical perspective drawn from sociology (McAdam, 1999), political science (McFarland, 1998), anthropology (Edelman, 2001), and social psychology (Klandermans, 1997)—provides a particularly relevant framework for examining how the Advocacy Council successfully mobilized to reform the provision of child welfare services to deaf children and parents in Los Angeles County. Theories of social movements contend that groups lacking access to formal policymaking pathways are forced to pursue alternative methods to attain their policy goals (Katzenstein, 1998; McAdam, 1999; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001).

Traditionally, studies of social movements have focused on large, disruptive challenges to the state. For instance, social movement scholars have examined the civil rights (McAdam, 1999), antinuclear (Kitschelt, 1986), and women's liberation (Clemens, 1993) movements. Recently, however, scholars have begun to consider change efforts—within social movement theory an effort characterized as *protest*—aimed at institutions³ (Binder, 2002; Davies, 1999; Epstein, 1996; Grossman, 2005;

Katzenstein, 1998; McIntosh, 1995; Moore, 1999).

Protest

Social movement theory posits that actors who are denied access to traditional policymaking pathways use *protest* to change the policies or practices of an institution. Protest is action that “disrupts” the norms and procedures of everyday institutional life (Moore, 1999). An emerging line of theorizing within the field of social movements has expanded on traditional notions of the actions that are considered protest. Such theories maintain that protest can take traditional forms—boycotts, rallies, or sit-ins—or can be action that seeks to transform the deeply held beliefs and practices of an institution (Eisenstein, 1996; Katzenstein, 1998; Mansbridge, 1995; Reinelt, 1995; Spalter-Roth & Schreiber, 1995). As Katzenstein writes, while protest aimed at institutions may be less “lawless” and more “norm-breaking,” it is nevertheless “proactive, demand-making political activism” (p. 8). Consistent with this developing literature, we consider the actions of the Advocacy Council—an organization whose goal was to dramatically reorganize how deaf parents and children in Los Angeles County receive social services—to be protest. The Advocacy Council strategically attacked DCFS's existing service model as inadequate to meet the needs of deaf children and successfully pressed for fundamental changes in how Los Angeles County provided social services to the Deaf community.

Emergence and Development of Protest

The literature on the conditions necessary for the emergence and development of collective action that seeks social change can be grouped in three major schools—political

process, resource mobilization, and frame analysis (McAdam, 1999; McAdam et al., 2001). There is, however, growing scholarship that examines factors across these three schools (Binder, 2002; Davies, 1999; Grossman, 2005; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). Building on this work, we believe that each of these theoretical traditions has explanatory value in the case we make in the present study.

Political Process Model

The political process model examines changes in *political/institutional opportunities* that facilitate the emergence of a social movement. Such changes can be effected either by increasing the political leverage of a single protest group or by significantly undermining the stability of the entire political/institutional system (Binder, 2002; Grossman, 2005; McAdam, 1999). Shifts in the institutional climate improve the chances for successful protest by reducing the power differential between challenging groups and their opponents. Changes in political/institutional structures may include rapid growth of the institution (Moore, 1999), change in leadership, or the restructuring of power relationships (McAdam, 1999).

Creation of institutional opportunities, as well as utilization of preexisting opportunities, was essential to the success of the reform effort in Los Angeles County. One factor that we theorize created an opportunity for the successful reform is the long-standing and widespread dissatisfaction with modern child welfare services (Gelles, 1996; Lindsey, 1994; Roberts, 2002; Waldfogel, 1998). This intense dissatisfaction has resulted in child welfare system leadership with a professional and political mandate for change (Gustafson & Allen, 1994). As a manifestation of this mandate for change in Los Angeles County, and prior to the

Advocacy Council's efforts, there had been a change in the executive leadership at DCFS—a new public child welfare services director was hired who promoted a wide-ranging reform agenda. In addition, in a prior leadership position this new director had been responsible for directing the investigation of suspected maltreatment at a residential school for the deaf. This experience gave him some sensitivity to the need for specialized services for deaf children.

Such local efforts at reform of child welfare services are frequently influenced by shifts in state and federal policy. This larger policy influence can take many forms—including financial incentives. Particularly relevant to the present case, a new private-sector program serving the maltreated deaf child and the deaf parent at risk for perpetrating maltreatment—Five Acres: The Boys' and Girls' Aid Society of Los Angeles (Five Acres) Deaf Services Program—which became instrumental to the reform effort, received a state grant with a priority to fund services for people with disabilities. Five Acres is a well-established and highly regarded private nonprofit children's service agency. At the time Five Acres received the grant, it had no experience serving the deaf client.

Resource Mobilization Model

While political opportunities may be essential precursors to mobilizations, in the absence of resources—material or nonmaterial—opportunities are not likely to be seized (McAdam et al., 1996). The *resource mobilization perspective* examines the process by which groups obtain needed resources. Resources can be anything from material resources—money, jobs, or meeting space, for example—to nonmaterial resources—authority, technical capacities, access to political decision making, or networks of

associates (Oberschall, 1973). Organizations such as social service agencies, church groups, foundations, or the government can provide such resources.

In the present case, a wide range of public and private organizations contributed both material and nonmaterial resources that made the successful reform initiative possible. For instance, well-established organizations within the Deaf community such as the National Center on Deafness at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), and a local deaf college student organization, also at CSUN, provided a rich social network through which necessary resources were mobilized. This network of established organizations within the Deaf community helped the Advocacy Council to quickly learn about and adopt communication practices and cultural norms that were used in the larger Deaf community (a valuable nonmaterial resource). In addition, the state government offered financial assistance, as did Five Acres. Moreover, with institutional ties to official county and state child welfare agencies, Five Acres furnished public-policy expertise—the ability to transform policy demands in official institutional language. This capability increased the likelihood of successful reform (Binder, 2002; Eisenstein, 1996; Moore, 1999).

Frame Analysis Model

Frame analysis examines how activists strategically construct frames to assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents, to garner bystander support, and to influence power holders (Benford & Snow, 2000; Davies, 1999; Snow & Benford, 1988; Zald, 1996). From this perspective, collective actors are involved in the construction and maintenance of meaning and

ideas—referred to as *frames*—that describe movement complaints, strategies, actions, and solutions. While the political opportunity and resource mobilization perspectives focus on the conditions necessary for social movements to emerge, the frame analysis perspective can be used to examine the emergent phase of collective action, as well as the strategic action taken by activists to pursue their agenda of social change.

In the present case, for example, when attempting to mobilize members of the Deaf community, the leaders of the Advocacy Council strategically framed the need for improved child welfare services as a civil rights issue—the deaf child or parent's right to child welfare services. Conversely, when it came time to pursue policy change within DCFS, the Advocacy Council chose to frame its demands as the need to provide services to a minority group with unique linguistic and cultural characteristics, thereby employing a cultural minority model that, because of the extreme ethnic and cultural diversity of Los Angeles County, was very familiar to the leadership of DCFS.

The Community Context for Reform

Los Angeles County is the most populous county in the United States, and is an extremely diverse community. Recent census figures show that the 9.9 million residents of Los Angeles County includes 2.7 million children and youth age 17 years and younger (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). Los Angeles County is unique in the United States in that no ethnic or cultural group holds a numerical majority among its population: 47% of its residents are Hispanic; 30% are White, not Hispanic; 13% are of Asian descent; 10% are African American; and 1% are Native American (the sum of the percentages exceeds 100 because

of rounding). Many of the residents are recent immigrants and retain the language and customs of their country of origin. This extreme ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity has created pressure for social service agencies to provide linguistically and culturally responsive services.

For example, in an attempt to provide more effective child welfare services to an ethnically and linguistically diverse client population, DCFS had established special units that provide services to the Hispanic/Latino community, the African American community, and the Asian/Pacific Islander community. This preexisting practice of establishing special units was a key ingredient in the reform of child welfare services for the Deaf community of Los Angeles County.

The U.S. Census provides no official estimate of the size and nature of the Deaf community in Los Angeles County. However, application of prevalence figures developed from the National Center for Health Statistics' National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) conducted during 1990–1991 (1994, as cited in Holt & Hotto, 1994) can provide some estimate of the size and nature of the deaf population there. The NHIS produced an estimate that 8.6% of the U.S. population had a hearing impairment and 0.9% had a severe or profound hearing loss. Application of these percentages to Los Angeles County, whose 1990 population was more than 8.8 million, would result in an estimate of around 760,000 residents with a hearing loss and almost 80,000 with a severe or profound hearing loss (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006a). Application of the NHIS prevalence rates to people ages 3 to 17 years living in Los Angeles County in 1990 would suggest the presence of approximately 42,000 children and youth with some degree of hearing impairment, including ap-

proximately 2,300 deaf children and youth.

In addition to a sizable deaf and hard of hearing population, numerous advocacy, educational, social service, social, artistic, recreational, and religious organizations were present in Los Angeles County that served or were controlled by the Deaf community during the period covered by the present article. While these agencies differed in the proportion of services provided to deaf clients, had different philosophies regarding service delivery, had served deaf clients for different lengths of time, and had differences regarding the institutionalization of Deaf community leadership and input, the agencies proved to be essential elements of the Los Angeles County response to child abuse in the Deaf community.

The Advocacy Council for Abused Deaf Children

At the time of its founding, in 1992, the Advocacy Council was one of 16 child abuse councils in Los Angeles County and was the only child abuse council in the United States that focused exclusively on the maltreatment of deaf children. The Advocacy Council was founded as an advisory committee to the Deaf Services Program, a newly established child abuse prevention and treatment program serving the deaf child and parent that had been developed by Five Acres.

A consultant to the Deaf Services Program and staff hired by the new program cautioned the Five Acres senior administrators that services targeted for the Deaf community were most effective when the highest standards of linguistic access were assured for clients and staff and when a cross-cultural perspective was applied. The Five Acres administrators were also advised that numerous agencies and groups had begun services for the Deaf

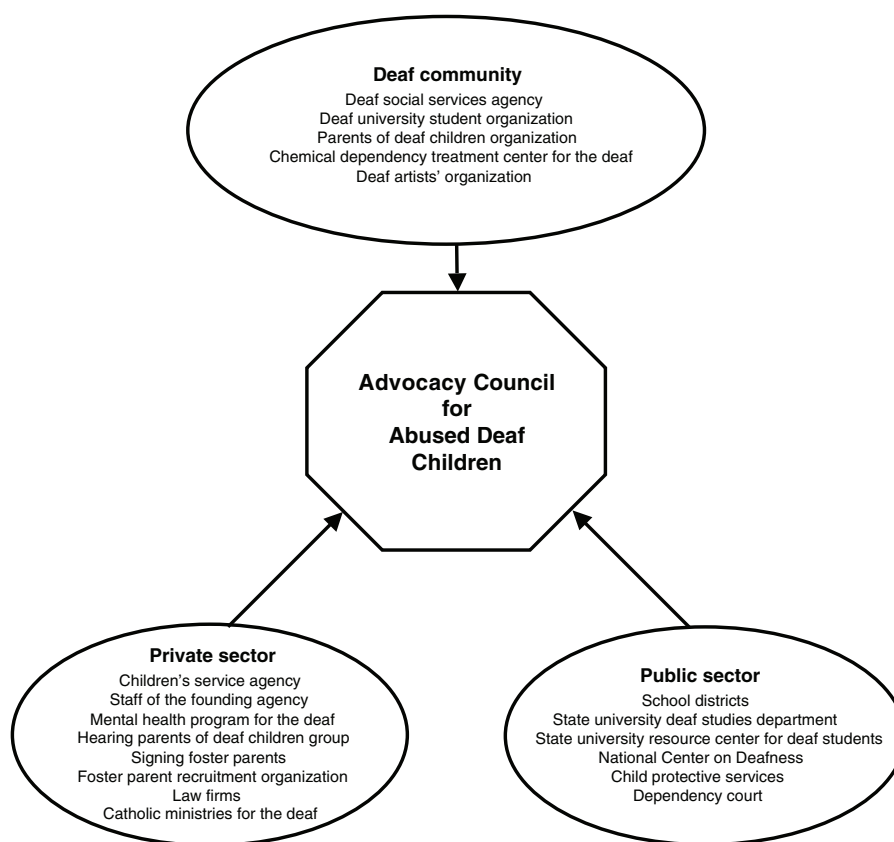
community, perhaps motivated by sentiment engendered by the “human tragedy” model of deafness (DeJong, 1983; Lane, 1992), but few adequately addressed the communication accommodations required for the full provision of service. These well-intended but poorly designed services typically were rejected by early deaf consumers. Word of this experience with poor accommodation, with resultant poor services, spread quickly through the Deaf community. An advisory committee therefore was established by the Deaf Services Program as a mechanism to ensure referrals for services and to provide feedback regarding service design and service provision. In adopting goals far beyond simple program advisement, the advisory committee soon became the Advocacy Council.

Special effort was made to recruit a membership for the advisory committee composed of deaf and hearing individuals and organizational representatives. Organizational representatives from public-sector and private-sector organizations were included (Figure 1), with an emphasis on deaf services organizations or deaf service divisions of large institutions.

Professional sign language interpreters were supplied to the Advocacy Council by the host agency. Additional steps were taken to ensure the fullest level of inclusion of deaf members, including having interpreters present before and after meetings, adjusting sight lines for full visual access to proceedings, facilitating meetings so that only one person communicated at a time, and accepting spontaneous accommodation-related adjustments as routine business. Bylaws adopted by the Advocacy Council mandated that the chairperson be deaf.

A program consultant who was a specialist in deaf services, community organization, and policy development

Figure 1
Representation on the Advocacy Council



devoted a few hours each month to the Advocacy Council—this consultant time was funded by the host agency through the state grant that funded the Deaf Services Program. While the Advocacy Council benefited from a membership that was composed of numerous deaf members and deaf services organizations, and received generous financial support from the sponsoring agency, the unique qualities of the program consultant were essential to development and implementation of an ambitious but achievable plan of action. All the elements—human, organizational, and financial—that went into development of the Advisory Council are clear examples of material and non-material resources provided by mainstream organizations to a group of advocates who were, at that time, not

part of the policymaking process for public child welfare services.

The Plan for Reform

Within a few months of its establishment, the Advocacy Council evolved from a group that was exclusively sponsored by and gave advisement to one agency program into an autonomous child-abuse council with a more ambitious goal—to drastically reconstitute how social services were provided to deaf children and parents in Los Angeles County. This expansion of the Advocacy Council's goals occurred for a variety of reasons. First, Advocacy Council members may have developed confidence that Five Acres' Deaf Services Program efforts where being conducted in a linguistically accessible and culturally competent manner, and thus their initial advisory

role had been satisfied. Second, the establishment of the Advocacy Council may have created a vehicle by which the concerns of previously isolated individuals could receive powerful social support. Third, the more expansive activist stance the Advocacy Council had adopted was consistent with the civil rights/social change ethos strongly embedded within some parts of modern Deaf culture in America (Charlton, 1998; Lane, 1992). By maintaining its association with Five Acres, the Advocacy Council was able to continue to have access to the Deaf Services Program's valuable resources. At the same time, by becoming an autonomous child-abuse council, the Advocacy Council was able to adopt more ambitious advocacy goals and strategies targeted toward public-sector partners that Five Acres could not alienate.

Initial goals adopted by the Advocacy Council are listed in Table 1 (Advocacy Council for Abused Deaf Children, 1992). These goals focused on eight broad areas:

1. membership
2. research and documentation
3. community education and outreach programs
4. systemic advocacy and lobbying
5. professional peer support
6. program advisement
7. financial resource development
8. foster parent support

While all of the goals were important, two proved essential to the reform effort and are discussed in more detail below.

Community Education and Outreach Programs

The initial focus of the community education and outreach effort was "to provide community education and outreach to the Deaf community, to

Table 1

Goals of the Advocacy Council for Abused Deaf Children

1. Membership	To recruit and involve a broad membership in the Advocacy Council representing both the Deaf and hearing communities, public and private service providers, and advocates concerned with child abuse prevention and the needs of abused deaf children
2. Research and Documentation	To initiate documentation, research, and analysis in order to identify the needs of abused deaf children, and to develop policy recommendations based on these findings
3. Community Education and Outreach Programs	To provide community education and outreach to the Deaf community, to increase awareness of child abuse prevention issues, and encourage the development of foster families and other voluntary resources for abused deaf children
4. Systemic Advocacy and Lobbying	To provide community education and outreach to children's services systems and child welfare advocates to increase their awareness of the unique needs of deaf children and families, in particular the linguistic, cultural, and nondiscriminatory access issues in the provision of services to deaf children
5. Professional Peer Support	To provide a network for professional peer support and sharing information on resources and treatment research
6. Program Advisement	To offer program advisement upon request to agencies developing or providing child abuse prevention and treatment services for deaf children and families
7. Financial Resource Development	To develop financial resources for the purposes of (a) supporting the work of the council and (b) supporting the work of treatment and prevention services for deaf children
8. Foster Parent Support Network	To provide a support network for foster parents with deaf children

increase awareness of child abuse prevention issues, and encourage the development of foster families and other resources for abused deaf children" (Advocacy Council for Abused Deaf Children, 1992). Community education activities focused on the Deaf community included an event cosponsored by the Advocacy Council, the deaf student organization at a local university, and a deaf recreational association. The event included panel presentations by adult deaf survivors of child abuse and signing foster parents. The goal of the event was to raise awareness regarding child abuse and to underscore the important role that signing foster parents can play in the life of an abused deaf child.

Advocacy Council member agen-

cies were also encouraged to take initiatives regarding community education. As a result, staff at a member agency wrote an article about the abuse of deaf children and the inadequacy of child welfare services for deaf children; a regional deaf services organization founded and run by the deaf published the article in a magazine for the Deaf community. In addition, a presentation regarding maltreatment of deaf children and the need for signing foster homes was made to deaf members of a synagogue. There were times when Advocacy Council activities were designed to achieve multiple goals. For example, a social event that featured performances by deaf artists served the multiple goals of fund-raising, mem-

bership development, and community education.

While such efforts did not result in the recruitment of any deaf foster parents, they did serve as vehicles for community education and Advocacy Council membership recruitment. Just as important, these activities provided invaluable cross-cultural experiences for hearing Advocacy Council members who may have had experience in child welfare or research but limited knowledge of, or experience with, the Deaf community and Deaf culture. In other words, the educational efforts were bidirectional: Those child welfare advocates with limited knowledge of the Deaf community shared information about child abuse and neglect and the inadequacies of the child welfare system while learning about the richness of Deaf culture and the size, strength, and diversity of the Deaf community in Los Angeles County.

Systemic Advocacy and Lobbying

The goals of the systemic advocacy and lobbying efforts were “to provide community education and outreach to children’s services systems and child welfare advocates to increase their awareness of the unique needs of deaf children and families, in particular the linguistic, cultural, and nondiscriminatory access issues in the provision of services to deaf children” (Advocacy Council for Abused Deaf Children, 1992). Actions to achieve these goals included the Advocacy Council’s targeting of key service delivery systems and policy groups in Los Angeles County for educational presentations or specific proposals for reform of services. Targeted agencies included DCFS and Los Angeles County Superior Court. Because of the size and complexity of DCFS, numerous presentations were made to members of key divisions, including executive man-

agement, emergency response staff, and shelter care staff. Presentations were made by the executive committee of the Advocacy Council, which included deaf and hearing members and representatives of public and private agencies as well as other community members. Interpreter services were provided by the Advocacy Council or by the council’s member agencies.

Community education and advocacy efforts typically focused on the inadequacies of current child welfare services for the deaf child or deaf parent and the need for linguistically and culturally competent services. Linguistically competent services were defined as those that met the language needs of the deaf or hard of hearing client but typically required staff who were proficient in sign language and services accessible by TDD. Because Ülgen and Petal (1992) had estimated a significant unmet need for child welfare services in the Deaf community—a need that would support the hiring of signing staff—provision of services through qualified interpreters was seen as a second-best alternative to signing staff. While the Advocacy Council supported the use of interpreters in certain circumstances to create access to services, there was sufficient evidence that the need for child welfare services by deaf children and parents could not be adequately met solely by relying on interpreters.

The presentation to the executive management of DCFS included a direct request for a specialized unit to serve the Deaf community of Los Angeles County. Among the proposed specifications for the requested specialized unit were that

- child welfare workers be proficient in sign language
- staff interpreters be hired
- staff caseloads be reduced

- administrative authority and support for resource development be provided
- the Advocacy Council participate in staff hiring
- there be an ongoing program advisory role for the Advocacy Council

This request was strategically framed as a way to provide services to a minority group with unique linguistic and cultural characteristics—a frame consistent with recent DCFS efforts to serve the Latino, African American, and Asian/Pacific Islander populations.

As a result of the Advisory Council’s advocacy and lobbying efforts, DCFS created a deaf unit as 1 of the 20 alternative and specialized service units it established to meet the needs of Los Angeles County’s unique populations (Tran, 2006). A national search was conducted (including meetings and recruiting at Gallaudet University) to hire deaf staff and a director for the deaf unit. The search was successful in that it resulted in the hiring of deaf staff members and social workers, but a deaf director was not found. Instead, DCFS and the Advocacy Council agreed to hire a DCFS insider with considerable leadership experience. DCFS agreed that the director would attend Advocacy Council meetings and make regular reports to the council.

Using an approach similar to its appeal to DCFS, the Advocacy Council lobbied the Los Angeles Superior Court to improve its services to deaf children and parents. The Advocacy Council’s request included the designation of specialized courts that would handle all child welfare cases with deaf family members. It was further requested that these courts

1. receive special training on serving the deaf client

2. have readily available procedures for obtaining access to interpreter services
3. work with lawyers with an interest in the Deaf community
4. use judicial orders to mandate linguistically and culturally competent services

Ultimately, the Advocacy Council's actions were successful. As a direct result of its lobbying efforts, the Superior Court established a specialized court to meet the needs of deaf children and families. The creation of the DCFS Deaf Unit and the "Deaf court" both demonstrate the Advocacy Council's ability to initiate significant systemic reform.

Summary: The Reformed Child Welfare System in Los Angeles County

How does the child welfare system in Los Angeles County currently provide services to the deaf child and parent? A wide range of services are provided by an emerging cadre of child welfare professionals who are proficient in sign language and knowledgeable about Deaf community resources, traditions, and mores. These specialists integrate the social model of disability into their understanding of the unique needs of the abused deaf child and maltreating deaf parent. Services that are available through a wide range of public and private agencies include public child welfare services; specialized dependency court services; family preservation services; mental health services; perinatal home visitation services for pregnant deaf women; recruitment, training, and support of signing foster parents; therapeutic foster care services for behaviorally disturbed maltreated deaf children; group home services for more seriously disturbed maltreated deaf children; substance abuse treatment services for deaf adults; and partner violence perpetra-

tor treatment services. Whether this rich array of more accessible services has resulted in improved safety, permanency of residence, and well-being for deaf children is beyond the scope of the present article, but the question clearly merits further research.

This impressive list of essential child welfare services for the deaf child and parent was developed through the highly successful reform efforts of the Advocacy Council. A confluence of factors enabled the Advocacy Council to significantly reform child welfare services in Los Angeles County on the basis of a model promoting linguistic and culturally competent services. First, widespread dissatisfaction with child welfare services, a political mandate for change within DCFS (facilitated by new leadership), and state-level incentives provided political and institutional opportunities that were important precursors of the successful reform. Second, as a coalition of private and public organizations, the Advocacy Council maximized the dual strengths of child welfare advocates and the Deaf community. The Advocacy Council's diverse constituency provided it with legitimacy among both official child welfare service agencies and the Deaf community. This unique position provided the Advocacy Council with the resources needed to initiate this significant change. These resources were financial, in the form of funds from state and private agencies, as well as technical, in the form of "official" language from both public-policy-making agencies and influential organizations within the Deaf community. Third, in an attempt to capitalize on its unique position, the Advocacy Council strategically framed its demands in ways that resonated within both the Deaf community and DCFS. That is, the Advocacy Council's claims were responsive to the "Deaf way" as well as aligned with emerging DCFS policy.

In the present article we advance the community practice literature, typified by the work of H. J. Rubin and I. S. Rubin (2001) and Weil and Gamble (1995), by applying the concepts of social movement literature to a specific case of change. For example, while H. J. Rubin and I. S. Rubin review large themes in the literature and highlight the implications for possible mobilization, we focus on a single case and examine the factors that contributed to successful policy reform. In addition, we agree with Weil and Gamble that social movements often target "the general public, and especially political systems" (p. 589). We demonstrate, however, that movements may also target institutionalized systems of power. For example, in the case we present, a coalition forged among the Deaf community, child welfare specialists, researchers, and public and private agencies hoped to change the policies and practices of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services.

By extending the work of previous community practice scholarship, we present a conceptual framework for future researchers to use in investigating specific occurrences of policy reform within an institutional context. Specifically, we bring to light the importance of analyzing the political/institutional conditions and the resource pathways necessary for the emergence and development of social movement activity, as well as the ability of movements to strategically frame their claims to resonate with both potential members and targets.

Recommendations for Implementation in Other Communities

In the present article, we have demonstrated that the Advisory Council was successful in reforming how child welfare services were provided to

deaf children and parents in Los Angeles County. While we do not claim that the findings from this case are generalizable across all populations, we do believe that other communities can benefit from the lessons learned from the Advocacy Council's accomplishments.

First, organizations that are attempting to pursue change for or on behalf of historically marginalized actors benefit from having diverse membership. By this we mean that groups are in a better position to create meaningful reform if their membership consists of actors that represent the targeted group (e.g., deaf children and parents) as well as actors with expertise in the targeted policy environment (e.g., child welfare services in Los Angeles County). In this case, for example, having deaf representation made it more likely that the changes the Advocacy Council was pushing for would be responsive to the unique needs of the Deaf community. At the same time, having members with knowledge of the institutional and political processes of DCFS and the Los Angeles County legal system allowed the Advocacy Council to translate its demands into official institutional language. However, while we found that collaboration was a critical factor in the council's success, we also found that meaningful measures need to be taken to include diverse constituencies in all organizational processes. Organizations also need to work to facilitate communication between actors representing differing groups.

Second, organizations seeking change increase their likelihood of success by strategically framing their demands in a manner that resonates with larger cultural or institutional themes. In this case, the Advocacy Council strategically framed its demands in the language of civil rights,

which was a salient idea in the DCFS policy context.

Finally, we found that creating lasting institutional change is an ongoing and difficult process. Advocates must constantly work to maintain gains and press for greater change. The reform that the Advocacy Council achieved was significant, but the council's struggle is not complete. DCFS has yet to hire a deaf director, and still has difficulty recruiting deaf foster parents or hearing foster parents who are proficient in sign language. However, the Advocacy Council is still active and working to remedy these limitations, as well as to continue to improve how child welfare services are provided to deaf children and families in Los Angeles County.

Notes

1. While the present article concerns child welfare services for deaf children and parents, it should be noted that approximately 90% of deaf children have hearing parents and 90% of the children of deaf adults are hearing (Holt & Hotto, 1994). Therefore, when the child welfare system serves a family with a deaf member, it is most likely that the family has both hearing and deaf members.

2. The examination of the maltreatment of deaf children is partially embedded within the literature on the maltreatment of children with disabilities and exists, to a limited extent, as a separate body of knowledge. For the purposes of the present article, it is helpful to briefly review select studies that have looked at both the broad area of maltreatment of children with disabilities and the literature on the maltreatment of deaf and hard of hearing children.

3. *Institutions* are social groups organized around a specific topic, for example, science, education, or art (Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Moore, 1999).

In contemporary industrial societies, institutions are usually dominated by professionals who have routine access to decision-making power (Meyer & Rowan, 1983; Moore, 1999). Unlike "the state," institutions lack direct mechanisms for influence by everyday people, such as voting (Moore, 1999).

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