

## Characteristics of Successful SSPs

By Katherine Gabry

As SSPNJ program director, I'm often asked where to find people interested in working as a Support Service Provider, or SSP, and what are the essential qualities of a successful SSP? It's true that certain SSPs get a lot of work, while others ... not so much. What is it that sets them apart?

These questions are important because the bottom line is that training is expensive – about \$500 per SSP – and with funding always a significant issue, it can be a challenge to ensure that quality candidates are trained – those who are requested by consumers, and those who will stay on board and work for the long term.

Before we can consider the specific qualities of a successful SSP, it's imperative to first understand the role of the SSP. You could say that an SSP acts as the eyes and/or ears for a person who has a combined hearing and sight loss. The SSP provides visual and environmental information, human guide travel support, and access to communication in this person's primary mode of communication. The relationship between these individuals must be a partnership based on trust and open, honest and comfortable communication. The exchange of unbiased information is essential so that the person who is DeafBlind can make informed choices and decisions. All of this is provided to support independence and greater community participation for someone who has a combined hearing and sight loss.

SSPNJ has asked our participants what they value in an SSP. It was no surprise to learn that the most important factors are:

- Good communication and conversational skills
- A patient, easy-going and pleasant personality
- Availability during weekday, daytime hours

Other qualities include respect, keeping confidences, and a sense of humor.

While these are the behaviors that our consumers look for, they transfer to a set of characteristics to seek when screening SSP candidates. Our experience shows that the most-requested SSPs are typically mature (age range = mid 30s to 50+), connected to the blind, Deaf and/or DeafBlind communities, and have enough life experience to believe that every human being brings value to the common good. They are bright, and have common sense, are responsive, and good communicators. They're humble, yet assertive, patient and sensible, professional, and genuine. They believe that DeafBlind people are capable, and they also respect that DeafBlind people are the experts on their own lives. They realize that the learning process never ends, and they do this work because they enjoy it, not for financial gain.

While “hearing” women may be the usual SSP applicants, we also strive to meet our consumers’ requests for diversity in SSPs, specifically, including more male SSPs and more Deaf SSPs.

So, where does one find these SSP candidates?

Our first resource is our program participants. Their referrals are people who have been doing the duties of an SSP through their friendships with DeafBlind people, often for many years. Our SSPs are also a great source of referrals, as are the interpreter training programs; we regularly present to DeafBlind interpreting classes about SSPs and our program.

The comprehensive, “hard” work in building a team of professional SSPs is done before the actual training even begins. With training costs in the \$500 range per SSP, candidates must be carefully selected, with the goal of finding quality individuals and keeping them on board and active for the long term. Our screening process is thorough, including 1) a minimum of two references, both of whom must be connected to the blind, Deaf and/or DeafBlind community; 2) an online review of our program; 3) a pre-screening test; and 4) an in-person interview. If, after all this, we feel there’s a good fit between the candidate and the needs of our consumers, the candidate is invited to join our training. Training involves completion of our 3-module, 10-12 hour training program, and successfully completing three probationary assignments.

Maintaining the SSP team – balancing the number of participants and their needs with the number of SSPs – can be challenging and requires ongoing review to meet the diverse needs of the DeafBlind community. Be careful not to train too many SSPs who are sidelined with no work, yet be sure that there are enough SSPs to meet everyone’s needs.

In the long run, it’s important to keep the lines of communication open, to be responsive to our consumers’ requests, and to be receptive and engaging in regard to their referrals and critiques so that we effectively seek out, find and train quality SSPs.

***Katherine Gabry** developed the SSPNJ program and was its director from 2010 – 2015. She trained 68 SSPs during her tenure in that role. She is a graduate of Penn State University and the parent of a son who was born both deaf and blind. She was a founding member of Parents of Blind Children-NJ and has served on its board since 1993. She has been the editor of The Sounding Board, the magazine of the NFBNJ, since 2005. Her background also includes serving as Family Coordinator & Lecturer for a seminar on Family Centered Care & the Impact of Disability on the Family at Rutgers Medical School, 2003 – 2015. She was an assistant vice president and sales manager, and then a marketing/sales consultant for The Provident Savings Bank, 1981 – 2000. She also holds a Foundations of Banking diploma from The American Institute of Banking.*