

Hed: Direct Line to the Tropics

Dek: SLP Shameka Johnson is finding a way to provide much needed services and saving money for families in the Bahamas.

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When I first met Cara¹, she was three years old, had never spoken, cried if you came too close and refused to be touched. I remember turning to her mother and asking if she had ever received a speech and language evaluation or any evaluation for that matter. She replied, “She has never been tested; we have been on the waiting list for services for 8 months. I just want to hear her say mommy. Can you stay? We need help”. During my trip back to the U.S., I couldn’t get this beautiful little girl and her mother’s words out of my head. Something had to be done; I had to find a way to be in two places at one time.

During my first volunteer trip to the Bahamas, the dearth of speech-language services was soon apparent: Only seven trained and licensed speech-language pathologists are available to serve over 2,804 (5% of school-age population) children experiencing disabilities affecting the mind and/or body (see

<http://www.bahamaseducation.com/PDF/Docs/BAHAMAS%20NATIONAL%20CENSUS%20OF%20SPECIAL%20EDUCATION%20AND%20SUPPORT%20SERVICES.pdf> for population estimates). Waitlists extend into months and sometimes years, it’s typical for services to occur just once or twice a year, and in some areas, SLP services are not provided at all.

In 2009, I was invited by a child psychologist in the Bahamas to volunteer speech and language services to underprivileged children. That first visit expanded into volunteer visits every holiday and then monthly visits. However, after a year of functioning this way, it was soon clear that my monthly travel to the Bahamas wasn’t enough and was too costly as I was funding my travel personally. I went back to the drawing board and developed a solution to offer telepractice SLP services that would be accessible and affordable to the families in the Bahamas and myself because I would be eliminating the need to purchase flights and housing accommodations. In the summer of 2011, I introduced more than 40 parents of children enrolled in private special needs schools to the idea of online services. I screened and re-evaluated (as needed) more than 25 children to determine their speech and language needs and levels of severity. All screens were free to the families and the evaluations were paid for by the private school where the children were enrolled. At the end of this nine-day process, 15 families agreed to try the Divine Intervention Rehab Tele-speech program.

¹ Name changed to protect identity of person.

How it works

Telepractice in the United States can be a difficult process to navigate because of varying laws, ethical guidelines, and licensure requirements. Now I found it can be even more challenging across oceans because of limited and sometimes no internet service in Bahamian homes. Telespeech services were offered during the school day with the option to receive services on Saturdays at the school so that parents could also have the chance to participate. I also enlisted communication assistants—either obtaining or already holding college degrees—to assist me at the private special needs schools where the telespeech services were provided. The assistants were employed by the schools and received training from me to function as a communication assistant/facilitator during telespeech sessions. Among other benefits, the communication assistants:

- Provide a comforting presence to parents because they know the culture and practices of education on the island.
- Ease the service-provision burden on schools.
- Eliminate the need for parents to take time off work to attend sessions.
- Facilitate and redirect the child as needed.
- Help ensure consistency of service delivery.

I elected to provide services using Skype because of its ability to create separate accounts for each family or school and to allocate one central Skype number the families could call to reach me. At the end of every month the school of all the students on caseload receives an invoice for services via a PayPal account. The families that can afford to contribute something to their child's bill, assists the school in making the telespeech services payment. Using Paypal allows the families who can assist and the schools to use methods of payments supported by the Bahamas banking system. Paypal then automatically converts the payments to U.S. dollars.

Licensing was another challenge, but after considerable research I determined the island has no documented laws for the provision of telepractice. However, the Bahamas Ministry of Health does require non-citizen professionals who work solely on the island to maintain a work permit and a Medical Health Professions license (Ministry of Health , 2010). Clients of Divine Intervention Rehab telepractice are required to sign a contract detailing the stipulations of telepractice and enter into an agreement with my practice. Doing this eliminates the need for me to obtain a work permit and be licensed as a medical health professional in the Bahamas, as my telepractice is United States-based. Currently, I am licensed by both ASHA and Washington, D.C., where my sole proprietorship was established.

Cultural obstacles

Providing services to children with special needs in the Bahamas has been a continuous lesson and has involved cultural challenges. In the Caribbean islands, having a child with special needs

is sometimes considered a punishment for something that a parent or relative did wrong and is unacceptable to society. Also, lack of awareness of what a communication disorder is and/or misdiagnosis of a disorder can cause parents to balk at receiving services. In the past two and a half years of providing services, I have found the two biggest barriers to providing telepractice services in the Bahamas to be:

1. A lack of treatment material that supports children's environment and day-to-day interactions. To solve this, I spoke with teachers and parents and created a list of culturally relevant vocabulary and material to make therapy more effective. This included modifying communication books for nonverbal children to include, for example, beaches, sand, bread fruit, conch and guava duff. Things I would eliminate include coats because there generally is no winter.
2. Missed services because of unpredictable Internet connections. The entire island relies on one electrical company and generator and one Internet provider. At times, electricity and phone connections go down for hours and days, with no warning.

Hope floats

Although, providing telepractice services in the Bahamas has not been easy and continues to be a work in progress, the benefits to the island are undeniable. Not only are my costs reduced (because I don't have to travel), but so are the costs for families. My fee is almost 60 percent less than what private SLPs on the island charge in some areas. In addition, I:

- Have the ability to provide services in the child's least restrictive environment as needed.
- Have the ability to offer services to a population where consistent SLP services are limited.
- Have increased family and educator participation.
- Have reduced barriers between families and specialized expertise.
- Have reduced waiting lists and increased the number of children on the island receiving SLP services.

Being able to provide speech and language services to children who previously had limited access outweigh the challenges of implementing telepractice services internationally. Seeing their faces on my computer screen and watching them improve daily is ultimately my biggest reward. Thinking back on Cara's mother's statement I have not only answered her request, (Cara is now able to express her wants and needs with ease and is an avid user of the word "mommy") but, I have also found a way to be in two places at one time.

Shameka N. Johnson, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Shameka N. Johnson possesses a Doctor of Philosophy in Communication Sciences and Disorders specializing in Augmentative and Alternative Communication and Severe Disabilities within multicultural populations from Howard University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Johnson earned her Master of Education

degree from North Carolina Central University in Durham, NC and her Bachelor of Science degree from Shaw University in Raleigh, NC. Dr. Johnson has been a licensed speech and language pathologist for five years working with both children in the school and medical setting and adults/geriatrics in skilled nursing facilities and hospitals throughout Washington, D.C., Maryland and North Carolina. Dr. Johnson is currently an Assistant Professor at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey conducting research and teaching both Graduate level students within the communication disorders department. Dr. Johnson's current research focuses on increasing speech-language services and AAC awareness and utilization in the Caribbean. Within the last four years, she has traveled to over four countries conducting research studies, workshops, seminars, and trainings. Dr. Johnson has also established a private practice dedicated to the advancement of communication disorders, AAC research and severe disabilities within third-world countries and under-served populations. Her private practice offers both remote/local and telespeech services at this time. She can be reached at shameka.johnson@stockton.edu