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New USF, UCF Program to Help Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children

\$1.1M federal grant to address critical shortage of speech-language pathologists

While growing up in the Bronx, Linda I. Rosa-Lugo watched children in her family with hearing loss struggle to learn Spanish and English, so she learned sign language to communicate with them.

Rosa-Lugo's relatives would have benefited greatly from a new program she is launching in cooperation with University of South Florida professor Theresa Hnath Chisolm. The new initiative, funded with a \$1.1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, will train future speech-language pathologists so they can help deaf and hard-of-hearing children whose families do not speak English.

"It really is a wonderful blessing," said Rosa-Lugo, an associate professor in the University of Central Florida's Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. "This grant will give us the chance to train students to partner with families and their children to develop foundational listening, speech, spoken language and early literacy skills in children with all levels of hearing loss."



Theresa Hnath Chisolm, PhD, CCC-A

While there are many speech-language pathologists in Florida, few have the specialized knowledge to help children with hearing losses who come from homes where English is not the primary language.

More than 31.5 million Americans have some degree of hearing loss, and an estimated three out of every 1,000 children in the U.S. may be born with hearing loss. Children who do not receive appropriate services are at risk for academic failure.

Generally, public schools serve deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students by offering speech-language services at school. If more help is needed, children can attend specific schools that have a state-certified specialist for more intensive therapy. However, there is a critical shortage of speech-language pathologists in public schools with the specialized skills to work with children with hearing losses, and specifically with those from culturally and linguistically diverse homes.

Only 10 speech-language pathologists in Florida are trained in developing listening and spoken language in children with hearing loss. The UCF-USF collaborative grant will train 40 new speech-language pathologists over the next five years to address this pressing need, specifically with children ages 0 to 3.

"It is extremely challenging to find highly qualified speech-language pathologists and educational interpreters who have the knowledge and skills needed to work with the deaf and hard-of-hearing student population," said Linda Schroder-King, Osceola County Public Schools' coordinator for exceptional students.

The new program also will help meet a new Florida law that took effect this past July. It requires that public schools provide students with access to appropriately trained specialists (<http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2011/1254>).

Chisolm, chair of USF's Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, has been working with children with hearing loss since 1988. She was instrumental in bringing The Bolesta Center, which specializes in developing listening and spoken language in children with hearing loss, into USF's clinic services. Currently the Bolesta speech-language pathologist, Kelly Teedgardin, provides therapy to 20 DHH children from Hillsborough, Pasco and Polk counties, and more could be served if more speech-language pathologists were trained to provide listening and spoken language therapy.

"I believe the program we have developed, including the concept of cross-university collaboration, would serve as an ideal model for other institutions," she said. "By combining our expertise, we were able to develop a unique program meeting a national need."

USF and UCF are recruiting students who will begin the program in January. Each university will be selecting qualified graduate students in speech-language pathology to receive scholarship funding that is part of the grant.