



Bridge Brief

PRACTICAL VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION STRATEGIES FOR TRIBAL AND UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs help individuals with disabilities prepare for, obtain, and maintain employment. They provide services such as career counseling, skills training, job placement, and access to assistive technology, which includes tools and devices (such as screen readers, hearing aids, mobility aids, or specialized software). Together, these help individuals with disabilities perform tasks, communicate effectively, and participate more fully in work and daily life. Research has shown that VR services can improve employment outcomes, economic stability, independence, and overall well-being (Blustein, 2008; Robertson et al., 2019). However, individuals in underserved communities often face additional barriers to accessing and benefiting from these services, including geographic isolation, limited resources, cultural differences, and systems that do not serve all communities equally.

State VR agencies are publicly funded programs operated by each state to serve eligible residents with disabilities. Tribal vocational rehabilitation (TVR) projects are federally funded programs operated by Tribal governments or Tribal organizations to serve eligible Tribal citizens and community members. State vocational rehabilitation agencies have existed since 1920. TVR projects, also called American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) projects, were established later, beginning in the 1970s (TVR Institute, 2020). Both systems serve people with disabilities, but TVR projects were specifically developed to provide culturally responsive services to American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. These services are adapted to fit the client's language, values, traditions, family structure, and community context. In practice, this often means services are delivered closer to home, with stronger community relationships, better understanding of local culture, and greater flexibility around family and community responsibilities. Depending on eligibility rules and local agreements, some individuals may choose to receive services from both a state VR agency and a TVR project.

This bridge brief summarizes practical lessons from research and practice related to TVR. It is based on research conducted by staff from Northern Arizona University's Institute for Human Development, the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Technical Assistance Center, and Northwest Indian College's Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Institute (Boland et al., 2024; Lee et al., in press). While the focus is on AI/AN communities, many of the strategies discussed here are also helpful when serving other underserved populations facing barriers related to geography, culture, poverty, transportation, or distrust of public systems.



Employment Challenges Faced by the AI/AN Community

American Indian and Alaska Native communities continue to face significant employment and disability disparities. In recent years, unemployment rates for AI/AN individuals have remained above the national average (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Disability rates are also higher than those of the general population (American Community Survey, 2023).

Many Tribal citizens live in rural or reservation communities where jobs, transportation, healthcare, and training opportunities may be limited. In some areas, long travel distances make it difficult to access services. Historical trauma, which refers to the lasting effects of events such as forced relocation, boarding schools, discrimination, and family disruption, may still affect trust in institutions today (Methot, 2019).

Before TVR projects existed, many AI/AN individuals were served only through state VR agencies. However, these systems often struggled to meet the unique cultural and geographic needs of Tribal communities. Concerns included limited outreach, few Native staff members, lack of cultural understanding, and office locations far from Tribal communities (TVR Institute, 2020).

TVR projects were created to help close these gaps. They are often located within or near Tribal communities, staffed by people who know the local culture, and designed to blend employment services with community values and culturally relevant supports.

Despite these efforts, many AI/AN clients still face practical barriers that can affect access to services, employment preparation, and long-term job retention:

1. *Transportation and Distance:* Some clients live far from employers, training sites, or service offices. Limited public transit and vehicle access can make attendance difficult (Shawn & Hensley-Quinn, 2006).
2. *Historical Distrust:* Past harms, including forced removals, boarding schools, discrimination, and broken government promises, may affect trust in institutions today (Methot, 2019).
3. *Communication Differences:* Clients may have communication styles shaped by local customs, family structures, or language preferences. Silence, indirect responses, or hesitation should not automatically be viewed as resistance (Locust, 1998).
4. *Family and Community Responsibilities:* Clients may prioritize caregiving, ceremonies, funerals, seasonal responsibilities, or support for elders, which can conflict with traditional work schedules (Morgan et al., 1986). These are important obligations, not signs of poor motivation.
5. *Limited Local Resources:* Some communities may have fewer employers, training programs, medical specialists, or mental health services available nearby. Some state and Tribal VR providers may face funding constraints that limit the implementation of these best practices (AIVRTTAC, 2023).



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Understanding Cultural Views of Disability and Work

In addition to these practical barriers, practitioners should also understand that views of disability, work, family, and community may differ across cultures. It is important to remember that AI/AN communities are highly diverse in language, culture, geography, and economic conditions, and that no single description applies to all Tribes. Greater cultural understanding can help counselors build trust and develop more effective employment plans.

Views of Disability: Some Tribal communities do not define disability in the same way Western systems typically do, with some placing greater emphasis on a person's role, gifts, and contribution rather than viewing disability purely as a limitation. Many Tribal traditions emphasize balance among body, mind, spirit, family, and community. A person may be viewed as having strengths, responsibilities, and gifts even while facing health or functional challenges (Connors & Donnellan, 1993). Family support is also very important. AI/AN individuals with disabilities may rely heavily on family, community, and traditional support systems rather than formal outside services. This does not mean disability services are unwanted. It means counselors should listen carefully and avoid forcing labels that may not fit how a person or family understands their experience.

Views of Work: Many Tribal traditions historically centered on contribution to the community through hunting, agriculture, caregiving, crafts, governance, teaching, or other shared responsibilities. Work was not always separated into a strict "nine to five" model (Burnette et al., 2018). Today, AI/AN individuals work across every sector of the economy. However, some clients may define success more broadly than wages alone. Meaningful work may include helping family, preserving language or culture, serving Tribal government, or balancing employment with community obligations.

Practitioners who understand these perspectives can develop better employment plans and avoid misreading client priorities. These insights have important implications for daily VR practice.

Practical Strategies for VR Providers

Research on Tribal vocational rehabilitation programs has identified several strategies that can help providers improve engagement, service delivery, and employment outcomes. The following recommendations are drawn from two recent studies by staff from Northern Arizona University's Institute for Human Development and collaborating organizations (Boland et al., 2024; Lee et al., in press).

1. Establish Trust: Trust is often the foundation of successful services. Helpful approaches include:

- Be consistent and reliable
- Return calls when promised
- Explain processes clearly
- Keep commitments



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- Attend community events when appropriate
- Spend time listening before pushing plans.

Relationship-building may take longer than in some other settings, but it often leads to better long-term outcomes (Walker et al., 1995).

2. Learn the Community Context: Providers do not need to become experts in every Tribal culture, but they should learn basic local context (Locust, 1998). Examples include:

- Tribal government structure
- Important community values
- Major employers
- Preferred communication styles
- Community events or ceremonies
- Historical experiences affecting trust.

Every Tribe is unique. Avoid treating AI/AN communities as one group or making assumptions about clients' identities (Locust, 1998). It is also helpful to have staff who speak the clients' Tribal languages (Marshall & Cerveney, 1994).

3. Include Family and Support Systems: Family involvement is highly important in many communities. With the client's permission, include family members or trusted supporters in planning meetings, goal setting, and progress reviews (Marshall & Cerveney, 1994). Support systems can improve follow-through, transportation planning, emotional support, and job retention.

4. Develop Meaningful Employment Goals: Employment goals should reflect the client's strengths, interests, and informed choice (the person's right to help choose their goals, services, and providers). They should also respect community values. Examples may include:

- Healthcare careers
- Skilled trades
- Tribal administration
- Education roles
- Cultural preservation work
- Entrepreneurship
- Remote work opportunities
- Natural resource management.

In VR programs, these goals are usually written into an individualized plan for employment (IPE) that outlines services, timelines, and responsibilities. A strong IPE connects economic opportunity with personal fulfillment.

5. Use Holistic Supports: Employment barriers are often connected to multiple life areas. A client may need more than job placement alone to be successful in achieving their employment goals (Locust, 1998; Walker et al., 1995). Useful supports may include:



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- Counseling
- Substance use recovery supports
- Transportation assistance
- Childcare planning
- Financial literacy
- Assistive technology
- Medical coordination
- Traditional healing or spiritual supports when requested and appropriate (described in 34 CFR Part 371, the federal regulations governing TVR projects).

Holistic planning often improves employment readiness and retention.

6. Be Flexible With Service Delivery: Rigid systems can unintentionally exclude clients. When possible:

- Offer phone or virtual meetings
- Schedule around transportation realities
- Respect ceremonial or family obligations
- Simplify paperwork
- Use plain language
- Meet in community-based settings when allowed.

Flexibility should remain consistent with policy while reducing unnecessary barriers.

7. Coordinate State and Tribal VR Services: Many clients may choose to work with both TVR projects and state VR agencies. This can be highly effective when roles are clear. Good coordination includes:

- Shared communication (with consent)
- Clear funding responsibilities
- Joint planning meetings
- Avoiding duplicate services
- Respecting each program's strengths.

State agencies may have larger funding capacity for expensive services, while TVR projects may provide stronger local trust, outreach, and culturally responsive support (TVR Institute, 2020).

8. Support Job Retention, Not Just Placement: Placement is only one milestone. Many clients need continued support after starting work. Post-employment supports may include:

- Transportation problem-solving
- Workplace communication coaching
- Workplace accommodation updates (such as schedule changes, equipment, or communication supports)
- Managing schedule conflicts
- Peer mentoring



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- Follow-up counseling
- Reconnection to community supports.

Retention services can prevent avoidable job loss.

Special Considerations for Counselors

Avoid Deficit Thinking: Do not assume poverty, rural location, or historical barriers mean low ability. Many clients bring resilience, adaptability, strong family networks, and deep practical knowledge.

Respect Sovereignty: Tribal Nations are sovereign governments. When partnering with Tribal programs, approach relationships professionally and respectfully.

Practice Cultural Humility: Cultural humility means remaining teachable, respectful, and aware of one's limits. Ethical codes for rehabilitation counselors emphasize culturally responsive practice and reducing bias (Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, 2023).

Lessons for Serving Other Underserved Populations

The lessons of TVR apply widely. Other communities may also benefit from:

- Trust-building before intervention
- Family-inclusive planning
- Flexible scheduling
- Transportation supports
- Plain-language communication
- Community partnerships
- Respect for cultural identity
- Holistic services beyond employment alone.

Whether serving immigrants, rural communities, or low-income neighborhoods, culturally responsive service often improves outcomes.

Conclusion

Vocational rehabilitation works best when services fit the real lives of the people being served. TVR projects show the value of combining employment supports with trust, community knowledge, family engagement, and cultural respect. Effective rehabilitation is not only about eligibility, employment plans, and placements; it is also about relationships, relevance, dignity, and practical problem-solving. When providers build services around those principles, clients are more likely to achieve meaningful employment, long-term stability, and improved well-being.



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