

## State and Tribal VR Working Together: Partnerships That Allow Students and Youth with Disabilities to Succeed - Alaska

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Today, we're going to hear from the great state of Alaska and learn about their partnership and relationship between the state VR agency and the tribal VR program. Today I have Jim Kreatschman who is the youth transition coordinator with the Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, with us and Gwen Sargent, director of the Kodiak Area Native Association Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Program, TVR. So Gwen, why don't you start by telling us a little bit about how this relationship and collaboration all got started in Alaska.

GWEN SARGENT: Cama'i, my name is Gwen Sargent. And like Christine mentioned, I'm from Kodiak, Alaska. We are located far away from any major hub. And I'm the director of the Voc Rehab program there in Kodiak.

We started our partnership back in 2015 with the Division of Voc Rehab when we had some ideas of how to reach the most hard to reach students, their very remote and underserved population. So Mr. Kreatschman and I got together and had some ideas about how we can provide transition services in each of the villages on Kodiak. And Jim, do you want to explain a little bit about how you became involved?

JIM KREATSCHMAN: Sure. You know, that was right back at the beginning of pre-employment transition services. And when you look at Alaska, we've got like three main urban areas, Juneau, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. After that, it's pretty much you've got to fly to it or take a boat to get to it.

And so as a state agency, we're required to serve the whole state and especially with pre-employment transition services. And so we were looking at, how are we going to be able to take pre-employment transition services to areas of the state that have fewer resources than urban areas? Or in some places, there may be a store, and that's it.

So professional resources and stuff like that are pretty far and few between in rural Alaska. So I was really interested to be able to connect with Gwen and be able to work with her on her project.

GWEN SARGENT: And our project, like I said, started in 2015. And we approached the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, and they were providing seed funding for pilot projects. And so

they funded a portion of this project. We were very grateful for that. We received three years of funding. And then we worked with our partners, not just the State Division of Voc Rehab but also locally on the island.

We worked with our Koniag Education Foundation. The school district was an integral part, the Kodiak College, and then most importantly is tribal leaders and individuals from the local community that had ideas about what they wanted to convey to their students prior to exiting high school.

So we had this grassroots team that we started called the Transition Age Youth Coalition in Kodiak. And we were able to fund this project for five years. And through this project, the state formulated some of their transition camp projects through SERRC. And it's just-- it's been really, really a great experience being part of a wider project to share this type of a model in all of Alaska.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Gwen, could you tell us what SERRC stands for?

GWEN SARGENT: I will have Jim explain that.

JIM KREATSCHMAN: Southeast Regional Resource Center. They're a contractor for us, and we fly them. It's a team of spec ed teachers that we fly around the state, and they're trained in workforce. And they'll go to an area of the state and work with students all about the transition.

It's a project we do that's jointly funded with Department of Education. And we serve a lot of kids that way. But the cool thing, and you know, Gwen's project was like what we do on steroids. It was a no brainer to get involved with Gwen because it's one thing to take a bunch of people from a city and fly them to a rural area and talk about their future.

But we really aren't immersed in that area of the state, that culture, you know. And there's so many cultures here in Alaska. And we just-- we can't do that. We could tell them, well, here's what's available if you leave your village. Here's the things you could do. Here's how soft skills are done in the city.

But that's not really applicable to rural and remote life. And so the idea that I could come-- and really Gwen did all the work. I just wrote the check. But to be able to have, like she said, a grassroots organization, where it's everyone in that community banding together and bringing the stuff to the kids, was really cool. And they brought in outside people, too, from the city. But it was all designed around the needs that that community saw that their kids needed to have.

GWEN SARGENT: And we were able to host five regional events for the students. And we had 165 students roll through the years. And like I mentioned, we had high school students that traveled all the way in to Kodiak. And I say that in that Kodiak is small, but that's the hub for our island. And so we had those students and their chaperones travel into Kodiak. And it was for four nights.

And we had a host of different types of subject matter, and like Jim had mentioned, we did incorporate our language. We had jobs that were specific to each of the villages highlighted in there. We had 80 organizations and post-secondary institutions come and be a part of a job fair. We had government and other tribal entities. We had local businesses.

We talked about scholarships, career and college fairs. We had hands-on. We were able to work with the Coast Guard base. So we had students going out into job experience. We had students go to the vet clinic, to fire and safety, to the Coast Guard base. There was a culinary component in there where they went to a restaurant and learned how to make a-- learned how to make a latte and an espresso and helped with lunch service at one of the smaller restaurants in town.

So they actually-- another one was they were at one of the small airports here where the small bush planes go out, so that was a job opportunity for students in the summertime is to work in the baggage area. So they learned what the weights and balances are and how important that job is.

The Kodiak College still hosts the Kodiak Island Scholarship Fair, so that is something that went on beyond the five years. In fact, it's coming up this month. And it's different organizations, tribal entities, native corporations that come and share their different resources for scholarships or what their support is for the students. So we were really excited when Jim offered and Division of Voc Rehab offered to help to continue this past the three year grant.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Excellent. And it sounds like a really great way to provide culturally-appropriate services in that area of the state. All right. What was the impact that you've seen since that project with the students?

GWEN SARGENT: We had data for the five years that we had the transition camp. And many of the students that I see today in the grocery store, or there's several of them that are in small businesses. One is part of an oyster farm in one of the remote villages of Larsen Bay. And so I talked to him, and I've talked to some of the other ones that I see that are successful and ask them, how did the TAY Event affect you, and how did it contribute to your success?

And a lot of it is allowing those students to get outside of their comfort zone. Even Kodiak is a big city to them. So we had a banquet. We had them get up and talk about their experience at the event so that they built some resiliency skills, and they built some skills how to advocate for themselves, how to interact with other people than the 100 people that are in their village. And I think that gave them the skills to take risks, to take risks as they moved forward into adulthood.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Jim, could you tell us a little bit about Picture Your Future book. I think that is a project that you did in collaboration.

JIM KREATSCHMAN: Good. Yeah, so I guess it's been a number of years that I've been thinking because we do a lot of-- we work together a lot with Department of Ed. And we have an Alaska Interagency Transition Council that's made up of DVR, Department of Ed, Stone Soup, which is

our parent center for the state, and we have representation with TVR and the Alaska Interagency Transition Council.

And we do teacher trainings. And every year, we do a virtual training for teachers all over the state. It's a statewide, I think, on transition. And probably the number one question we have is, what's a good assessment to use? And in transition planning, they're required to use assessments. But a lot of times, they don't.

And if I go on the internet, and I look at the internet, and I look up, say, an interest inventory, I go, oh, that's a great interest inventory. And then I'll look at another one. And I go, well, that's a great interest inventory because it covers this. And so I think teachers really, there's so many resources out there, they can't decide what's good.

And so I really thought, I wish there was something that we had that we could recommend to teachers. And we have a lot of different things that we recommend that we find but something that was more Alaska specific. It was just in my mind.

But then during COVID, when it started and everyone was sent home from school, I had a teacher in rural Alaska-- I'm going to say remote Alaska. This is a small village way out there, Hooper Bay. I think there's 350, maybe 500 people in the whole village. And he called me and said, Jim, I get to talk to my students 30 minutes once a week on the phone because there is no internet. They're outside of the school.

And so the idea that we're going to do remote learning like the rest of the world where everybody's hooked up just isn't practical. And I send him a bunch of resources. And I realize there's no way he could go through all that stuff. And so I don't want to make this about me. This is just my process.

And I thought we need something that we can give these teachers that has that Good Housekeeping seal of approval. Here, introduce this, use this with your kids, don't worry, just put it in motion. And I realized quickly that this was a project bigger than I can do. I can't write this curriculum.

And then, as I was thinking about, well, this is rural, and I can't even approach this. I don't even know the correct words to use. What is subsistence? What is subsistence activities for self-employment? And I didn't want to insult people by taking, I'm going to say, a white man stab at trying to do something cultural.

So we connected with the Mental Health Trust. We hired a lady who is developing traditional curriculums for rural Alaska. And we started working on putting this together. And we were very fortunate to have Gwen and two other TVR people working with Rain, who was the developer, putting this together, providing pictures, content, resources, and really reviewing what she was writing to make sure that it really addressed that.

Because if you're doing an assessment for kids, and the majority of kids don't leave the village after high school, and that's a personal decision, and I really believe that everybody should make their own decision for their life, but they really need to have all the information presented to them. And that's what we wanted to do.

And we wanted a tool that any kid could look at and see their life. You know, this is my community. This is my future. This is the work that my ancestors have done. So we wanted to incorporate all of that as part of the assessments and the surveys and the book has-- I ought to give Gwen a place here because I want to know what I-- I don't think I've got feedback. But I want to know how she feels as a Native Alaskan and what kind of impact she thinks this has in the rural areas.

GWEN SARGENT: As Jim stated, most of the students stay in their village by choice. Unfortunately, there are several of-- two of our villages, our small villages, that population has migrated out. And so schools have closed.

And in our village life, the school is kind of the hub of the community. And so they are graying villages if you will. That's a real sad thing. The ones that decide to remain in the villages, they want their villages to prosper and people to stay there and students to stay there.

So I believe that a curriculum and information that is realistic to that actual village-- how to mend a net-- is important, how to be a good skiff man for commercial salmon fishing, getting involved in the quota industry and the commercial fishing. Tourism is another thing that is big. So all of these tools that have been implemented or designed and that are available for teachers that are in the rural villages, I think it's wonderful because it fosters the students being able to live and make a living in their village.

And it also opens up opportunities for the village leaders, the city councils, the tribal councils to look at economic opportunities in their villages. I know there's a village on Kodiak, the village of Old Harbor, they have a very active corporation and city and tribal council. And they have started agricultural projects in their villages. And they start out having the students really young and then all the way up through high school plant the seedlings and tend to these big huge high tunnel greenhouses so that they can sustain their communities when there is a natural disaster.

COVID broke many of the supply chains. So this village even has bison on one of their smaller islands. So what they're looking at is really fortifying at the village level what they can do to make their village sustainable and operate through pandemics and natural disasters like tidal waves or earthquakes. And so I think that this all just really plays into the right tools to keep people in their villages and to ensure that cultural practices are continued and villages remain viable on our island.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: So the Picture Your Future-- Exploring Your Transition Goals is actually a paper book, correct? You have the student workbook, and you have the teacher handout or guide. And Jim, tell us a little bit about how you rated funding from state VR, tribal VR to put this together.

JIM KREATSCHMAN: Yep. So these are the-- every time, I deal, you know, when Gwen and I talk to developing the TAY, any time I'd be there, I'm learning all the time because life really is different. It's not like oh, in 45 minutes we're in the country, this is 300 miles by air to get to a place. And I learn stuff all the time.

Well, when we developed Picture Your Future, I thought, well, this will be great. Teachers have access to internet. It's limited a lot of times, but they have access. So we'll put this on the web, and teachers can download it and print it and make it for their students.

But when we came out with it and started advertising, we kept getting all these requests like, can I get printed copies? And I didn't really want to go that way because I thought, well, if I print a bunch of stuff, it'll just go sit on shelves. Nobody-- you know, we'll wait. And it's an expensive book.

But I got so many teachers requesting them. And what it turns out, apparently, is that in rural Alaska not only is there no internet, but teachers can't use their printers-- I mean, their copiers like it's a printer. They're limited to getting supplies of toner and paper and stuff like that. And they can't just print a 60-page book.

And so TVR came to me, and said, Jim, we want to distribute them. Let's split the cost. And we'll print it, and we'll send it out to rural Alaska. And so that's what we did. We both went in together. We printed 600 copies and then distributed it throughout the state.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Excellent. Yeah, that's really a great example of using the state VR funds and tribal funds to produce something that's usable to this day. And for our audience, to let them know, we will have that link to that Picture Your Future book and other projects on our Resource page. Any final parting words, maybe about your continuing relationship or, what is it, lessons learned?

JIM KREATSCHMAN: Well, I've got to say that I value Gwen and the role that she's played down in Kodiak. And I didn't realize how much. We haven't done anything solid together since the transition camp. But there's a teacher in Kodiak at the high school who I do a lot of work with. We've run a summer work program with another teacher down there.

And every time I'm on the phone with them, they're, well, let me talk to Gwen. Well, I'd better find out. I'm going to see if Gwen can find some kids for the summer work program. So to me, you know, even though Gwen and I aren't talking every day, she's there. Teachers have an opportunity to have somebody there to talk to, have access to kids, probably connections in the community. So we're still working together, just not sitting in the same room or on the phone together.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: All right. Gwen, any parting words?

GWEN SARGENT: Yes, I just appreciate I always know Jim is there if I have an idea or the region here in Kodiak has an idea. I know I always look to Jim to get some input. And I just think that

this project, the Picture Your Future, has just really inspired the Governor's Council on Disability and the Mental Health Trust Authority in continuing projects that highlight culture.

I know that Rain Van Den Berg. Was just involved and I was just involved in a curriculum that she's doing statewide on different types of cultural projects that can be translated into something that students-- teachers can do with students in the villages. So I think it's just it's really started a movement. And I want Tribal Voc Rehab directors and counselors to know that Division of Voc Rehab is there for you.

We have a great relationship with our shared consumers. And also, their website, I know in Alaska, the website is very useful. We provide complementary services, and in many cases, we'll share some of the consumers that we have. Students that are exiting high school, it's an opportunity to continue that relationship with Division of Voc Rehabilitation.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Thank you both so much for today.

GWEN SARGENT: Thank you.

JIM KREATSCHMAN: Thank you.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: All right. So now, we can go ahead and take questions from the audience. Jim and Gwen are with us. Jamie, do we have any comments in the chat?

JAMIE: No, we do not, not at this time. But I sure would like to invite folks to ask any questions they may have about the program that Gwen and Jim just highlighted. Would anyone like to ask them more about that special project?

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: And I'm going to let you know that we do have a resource slide, where you'll be able to click and see the Picture My Future and get some more information about the great things that have been done in Alaska. Gwen, could you put-- do you have your tribal program website? Could you put that link also in the chat maybe for folks?

GWEN SARGENT: Yes, I sure will. Paula Sinez has her hand raised. So Paula, do you want to ask your question?

AUDIENCE: Sure. Good morning, everyone. It's nice to hear all the different partnerships that are going on. I guess my question is, are these funds based on unspent funding because of COVID or unspent Pre-ETS funding? Or do you think the states are factoring in funding on an ongoing basis to continue to support transitioning youth in tribal communities? I don't know who that's for. But anyway, maybe Rebecca?

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Or maybe Jim?

JIM KREATSCHMAN: What we used to fund the TAY was all Pre-ETS funding. They were students with disabilities. Does that answer your question?

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: And Gwen is back. And if you unmute, Gwen, there you go.

GWEN SARGENT: We have a storm going on right now in Kodiak. So I'm really not sure if I'm going to stay on here. But sorry about that. I apologize. I'm trying to see what the other question was about leveraging with other partners?

JAMIE: Yes, Michelle Markle did ask that question. She wanted to know, how did you leverage community, tribal and non-tribal to support sustaining the project?

GWEN SARGENT: So what we did is we started the coalition. We sent out a mass email to our partners. And we invited them to be part of the coalition. And everybody kind of sat around the table, and we made a commitment to partner and to find out who could fund what portion of it.

And it really was amazing to get all of the support from our partners, not only Division of Voc Rehab but Koniag Education Foundation and our community college here in Kodiak. So we were really lucky to have folks just really wanting to support the project.

JAMIE: And we had another question. Carmelita said, was the project specifically for youth with disabilities, or were you able to open up the population because you had a different funding source involved?

GWEN SARGENT: So what we did because our village schools, sometimes there's only 50 total students, maybe 15 total students in each community, and the high school students, there was a very small cross-section, so we opened it up to all because we had the blending of the funding. And it was students with barriers and students without.

And we felt that that would be more impactful than just bringing students in that had an IEP or a 504 plan. And it worked out really great. It brought the students together, their chaperones, the teachers, and really kind of strengthened their relationship with one another. So we had students from freshman all the way to high school that went through each year of the Transition Age Youth-- we called it TAY-- the TAY event. So we were able to open up to all.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: This is Christine. And I think it's probably important to mention also, Gwen, that this probably required you to keep really good records because, depending on the program, you'd have to be able to delineate, you know, that, hey, I didn't use this pot of money on this population or service.

So I just want to make that mention for folks that this is really a project that requires a lot of detail and probably, again, getting some assistance from your funding sources, whether it's your tribal council, your RSA reps. Anyway--

GWEN SARGENT: We did. What we decided we were going to do was build a template into how other regions and even within the lower 48 could replicate this. And so we do have spreadsheets and tracking. And you're correct. We had to make sure that, when I spoke with



Jim, we were able to bill DVR. And DVR would help with students that met the criteria and the requirements. So there was a lot of detail to the whole event. Yes.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Yeah. Great. Jamie, are we good to go? Is there any other questions? Or can we move on to--

JAMIE: I believe we can move on, Christine. I don't see any other questions.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: OK, great. Thank you guys.