

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

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Hello. Welcome to our Watch Party on State and Tribal VR Working Together-- Partnerships That Allow Students and Youth with Disabilities to Succeed. I'm Christine Johnson, a technical assistance provider on the pre-employment transition team with the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition-- The Collaborative at the George Washington University Center for Rehabilitation Counseling, Research, and Education. We're excited to be with you today.

I'd like to let you know that this training was developed with support from the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation, CIT-VR, also with the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition-- The Collaborative, NTACT:C, and the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Technical Assistance Center, AIVRTTAC. All of these are funded by the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, OSERS, Rehabilitation Services Administration, RSA. This is a list of all our presenters, and you will hear everyone introduce themselves.

So I'll move on to our learning objectives for this Watch Party. You should be able to describe the importance of implementing the memorandum of agreement between the state and tribal VR programs. We're going to hope that you can recognize some examples of the effective roles, relationships, and communication between partners. We're going to highlight some promising programs and practices that can help support students and youth with disabilities. And we'll provide some access to resources that will assist in helping you in the field develop those new partnerships or strengthen your existing partnerships.

So right now, we're going to hear from myself and my colleague and friend Wayne Dager. Wayne.

WAYNE DAGEL: Good morning, Christine. As Christine said, my name is Wayne Dager. I'm the Director for AIVRTTAC. And today, we're just going to have some great discussion about MOUs and the importance of those being developed. In the last school year, 2020 to '21-- that's a tongue twister. Wow-- there were roughly 7.2 million students with disabilities, which is right around 15% of the population of 3-to 21-year-old students. And in that population of 7.2 million, there were about 19% American Indian and Alaska Native students with disabilities.

So we're looking at roughly 1.4 million students that are in rural settings and areas that don't maybe have access to all of the services that are available. And with the AIVRS projects-- excuse me-- the American Indian Vocational Rehab Services projects that are in those areas serving those populations, there's not enough funding for those projects to individually serve every one of those students. So it's really important that they have that collaborative sharing that takes place when you have shared cases between state VR and AIVRS projects. You want to add anything to that, Christine?

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: You're absolutely right, Wayne. We have to work together to serve these students and youth. And the memorandum of agreements is actually in our law and regulations. So we look at 361.30 and 361.24 under the regulations under 34 CFR for the state vocational rehabilitation programs.

And those two regulations actually mandate that there be this agreement between the designated state agency and the tribal vocational rehabilitation program to work together to provide vocational rehabilitation services to significant populations of individuals with disabilities residing in the state. So under 361.24, it really gives us about four things that we've got to really look at in those regulations and what needs to be in that formal cooperative agreement. I won't read the regulations for you. But, Wayne, you want to speak to the 371.21?

WAYNE DAGEL: Yes, as you stated, this is a mandate that is also for AIVRS projects. So this is both sides of the line mandate-- the state has to provide that opportunity, and AIVRS projects have to provide that opportunity to develop these MOUs. And so it's a negotiation between the two agencies.

A lot of the-- there's been a lot of misconception about where the status of AIVRS projects are, are they equal to or not equal to? And by this regulation, it's the status of the AIVRS projects are equal to the state VR project so that we have to work together to provide these services in serving our youth. I also am not going to go into the regulation and read it verbatim.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: But as Wayne stated, this agreement ensures that critically needed services can be provided to Native American and Alaskan Native people with disabilities because that allows both the state VR and the tribal VR program to braid funding and services, kind of have a complete circle of support in those people with disabilities.

WAYNE DAGEL: This commitment and this shared collaborative approach really does provide the opportunity for tribal VR consumers to get that funding that is provided by the state VR services because tribal VR programs are only allowed to provide transition services, where state can provide the pre-employment transition services. And there's a lot of good service provision under that pre-employment transition services. It's hard not to talk in the alphabet. I just realized it's really difficult to spell everything out.

So anyways, under pre-employment transition services, there is the ability for the state and the tribe to partner to get more services into the school because most of the transition services definition focus around working age for tribal VR projects. And in that working age, it varies

state to state, so I'm going to only speak for Montana, which is 16. So that means that tribal VR projects can only work with 16-year-olds and up, where the pre-employment transition services allow you to come in at a little bit younger age and start providing some of those services in preparation for secondary education-- or postsecondary education and employment.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Exactly. So these agreements, as Wayne stated, just allow us to better serve mutual consumers, and especially youth and students with disabilities. And the agreement is really-- gives that opportunity for the tribal VR consumers to have the state VR information translated into their native language since English may not be the primary language for many tribal communities. And it also allows us to learn from each other and to acknowledge and understand diversity between Native American cultures and other minority cultures. Any other points you wanted to make, Wayne, before I transition into our next--

WAYNE DAGEL: I just want to take a minute for the opportunity to learn from each other. This component is really important. There's a lot of historical distrust that's there or mistrust between tribal projects and state agencies. And this opportunity to share that knowledge and to exchange those ideas and have that support go both ways, is very critical in the success of serving the students because at the end of the day, that's really what we're focusing on is helping these youth gain employment or supports to move forward with their life that might not otherwise be available without this agreement.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Great. I will now give you a short little story. We're going to hear stories today. So here's a little story about the memorandum of agreement. So if I have a glass jar, it represents the memorandum of agreement, glass meaning it's transparent. This agreement should be shared with everyone, all the staff at the state VR level, at the tribal VR program, your general public, your consumers. Everyone should be able to see this agreement.

In this jar, I'm going to start to fill it up-- to fill it up. So I'm going to put some big rocks in. These big rocks that I put in that jar represent those important things in the agreement that are in the regulations, the 361.30, 361.24, 371.21. We put the big agreement rocks in there. So now I'm going to ask you, Wayne, do you think that is full?

WAYNE DAGEL: I'm going to say no.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Yeah, that's a good answer. Why? Because now I'm going to go and I'm going to get some gravel. And guess what, folks, gravel is just a smaller piece of those big agreement rocks I'm going to start to pour some gravel in.

I can shake this jar up a little, but the gravel is going to go into the empty spaces. That gravel actually represents smaller things that now further refine how this partnership between state VR and tribal VR needs to work together. Now, Wayne, is the jar full yet?

WAYNE DAGEL: Christine, knowing you, I think you can squeeze more stuff in there.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Absolutely. So right now, I'm going to start to add some sand to fill the gaps in. Sand is nothing but even more refined pieces of that gravel. And I'm going to pour the sand in-- and I may have to tilt this jar-- but it represents those smaller details, minute details on how to implement that agreement. So, Wayne, is it full yet?

WAYNE DAGEL: It's getting there.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: It's getting there. What I'm going to do next, I will pour water to make this jar full. Water represents the fluid ability to allow implementation at that local level because each local office or community can differ. The school district, everything gets a little different. So the water is fluid. And it represents how the local staff can accommodate for differences and fill up that space.

And water can also make this rock and gravel and sand kind of bind together. Over time, the water can evaporate, but we can refill it. We can shake it around a little bit, maybe we add some more sand. But it's a living agreement, and it gets renewed. So now our jar is full, and we're going to hear from some of our states.