

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

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: We are now going to hear from New Mexico, and that will be followed by a Q&A.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

REBECCA HOLLAND: Well, I am really excited to be here today to talk with two incredible people and really highlight an amazing project that was put together in New Mexico and was a great collaboration between state VR and tribal VR. And so before we jump in and start talking about that project, I just want all of us to introduce ourselves so that you have an idea of who we are and what we do.

And so my name is Rebecca Holland, and I am currently working at AIVRTTAC, which is the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Training and Assistance Center. Whew! And I am a VR coordinator there. My previous experience has been working for 14 years at the Pueblo of Jemez Tribal Voc Rehab in New Mexico. And then also, I worked for the state of Montana voc rehab for two years. And I worked for the Veterans Administration, and-- we don't want to get into all the things that I've done, but my heart and my passion is really vocational rehabilitation. And I love working in tribal voc rehab.

So that's a little bit about me. I'm going to launch it over to Charlene, who will introduce herself, and then Marci will do the same.

CHARLENE CHAVEZ: Hello, my name is Charlene Chavez, and like Rebecca, I'm super excited to just be here today on, actually, tribal land, and to actually give information to folks across the nation about how to collaborate with tribal entities, how to have VR work with us. My title is Statewide Transition Manager for New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehab. And I've been in rehab for over 18 years, and my last six have been dedicated to transition. So I'm pretty excited to just be here today and just feel the mountains around me.

MARLENCIA CHEE: Hello, everyone. My name is Marlenia Chee, but I go by Marci. I am the current program manager for Jemez Vocational Rehabilitation Program here in Jemez Pueblo, and excited to be here and to begin the Project HOPE program again.

REBECCA HOLLAND: So today, we're going to be talking about a specific project that state of New Mexico vocational rehab and the Pueblo of Jemez tribal vocational rehabilitation program worked on together. And that project was started in 2019-- obviously, before the pandemic, so you can imagine what the pandemic may have done to the project.

But before I have Charlene give a little bit of background leading up to how did this idea get birthed, what I want to say is that I started at the Pueblo of Jemez in tribal vocational rehab in 1998. And at that time, the relationship between the tribal vocational rehabilitation program and the state of New Mexico vocational rehabilitation program was really fractured. There had been several different VR counselors for the state that had been assigned to the Pueblo of Jemez, and those were rocky.

There were periods of time where maybe a state VR counselor would come out to Jemez maybe twice a year. The communication was poor. The understanding of the differences between state and tribal VR, really on both sides, was not good. And so through my time being at the Pueblo, it was really my heart to figure out, how can we do this better? We are both agencies. Our funding comes from the same place. A lot of the things we do are extremely similar. How do we work together and do it in a collaborative way that really works?

And so Charlene, why don't you take it from there and tell us what happened when you and I had our first meeting?

CHARLENE CHAVEZ: Well, our first meeting actually came in a committee that, I think, Rebecca was part of for several years.

CHARLENE CHAVEZ: And I was asked to actually come into the board meeting and talk about transition activities that are happening across New Mexico. As you all know, pre-employment transition services became a big topic in the nation in 2016. And Christine, you can correct me if I have the wrong dates. So I came along, and like Rebecca, I looked at what are we doing with our tribal entities across the state of New Mexico?

So when Rebecca and I met during our board meeting, I talked about activities that I was hoping to promote across the state of New Mexico. And one of the big things was for me to just come to Jemez and meet with Rebecca and really find out what is it that we could do together to really set up opportunities for our families and our students to really experience that work piece?

We had a big meeting here at the Jemez Community Center. And Rebecca brought in-- I can't even-- the room was full. Everybody that had an impact for transition in the Pueblo was here. Rebecca and I kept going. I kept saying, no, we got to be able to do something in this Pueblo. And then Rebecca, you want to talk about what our next steps in getting people involved?

REBECCA HOLLAND: Yeah. So Charlene and I are two people that won't take no for an answer. And so Project SEARCH said good luck. We hope you figure something out, but it's just not a

good fit right now. And so Charlene and I started talking, and Charlene said, well, why couldn't we do a pilot project that's kind of like Project SEARCH but that involves maybe a pre-ETS contract between the state and Jemez tribal VR? And so we just started to explore that.

And the more we explored it, the more we realized we could actually-- this could happen. And so we brought folks back to the table in the CRC building at the Pueblo of Jemez, and we said, OK, it didn't work out with Project SEARCH, but would you all be on board if we did something similar to it and really got students involved in work experiences and understanding the five core parts of pre-ETS services and really learning? And boy, they were on board.

So I said to Charlene, OK, here's the deal. We can't use grant funds from our tribal VR program, because those funds are specific to what we've written in our grant. And also, we can provide transition services but not pre-ETS. So what can we do? And Charlene said, well, why don't we just create a contract, a proposal to the state of New Mexico VR program and ask that a whole program be funded-- everything from a salary for a project coordinator all the way down to the stipends for the students as they work? And I was like, that sounds great.

What are we going to call this particular program, because we want it to be something that has meaning? And so the staff came up with Project HOPE for Youth. And HOPE stands for Hands-On Preparation Experience. And in September of 2019, we launched the program. We asked the state to start funding it on July of 2019, which they did. We had a very tight timeline. We hit the ground running and instantly, we had businesses coming on board for being work sites for these work experiences. We had schools saying, we'll work with the students schedule so they can do this. I mean, it was remarkable what happened.

And the student response was overwhelming. We had 17 spots for students, and they filled up very quickly. And they filled up not just with Native students, but we also had some other students. And we were able to provide services to them, because the state opened that up for all students with disabilities. And what we would do is pick them up a couple of days a week from the high school, bring them to our program, have them learn principles of those five key areas for pre-ETS. And then on the other days of the week, they would go to work sites, and they would actually do work experience.

And then our project coordinator for Project HOPE was actually going out to these different work sites and providing job coaching as needed and also just making sure everything was going well between the business and the students. And by the time we were full with the number of students we could take, we had other students saying, I want to do it next year. If you do it next year, I want to do it next year. And the schools were just-- they loved it.

CHARLENE CHAVEZ: And a lot of these placements were in their hometown. So it was really giving back to their own community, whether it was in Zia, San Felipe, Cochiti, Bernalillo, here at Jemez. They were going back to where they came, where they lived, and giving back. So I thought that was really important for all our students to see that-- that you could go back to where you grew up and work. And I thought that was important, Rebecca.

REBECCA HOLLAND: Well, and another powerful thing about that was they were being exposed to different careers and job opportunities that they may not have ever been exposed to. And they were talking to other professionals about what kind of education would it take to actually be able to do that work. So it was amazing, and we really saw outcomes. But one of the things that happened was COVID shut everything down, and it stayed really dormant for a while. And I left my position at Jemez, and they hired a wonderful new program manager for the position who really had a heart for the program.

So Marci, you're the new program manager. Well, I shouldn't say new, because you've been there a couple of years. But why don't you pick it up now and tell us what you were able to do from grant writing all the way through to where you're at now?

MARLENCIA CHEE: OK. Yes, I will be here now two years on November 4. So I'm excited about that. So what had happened is when I got on board, it was the end of the grant year-- about five year grant. So it was time to reapply for the grant. So I went back to the grant that was written before, I looked over that, and I talked to the medical director. And she mentioned the Project HOPE program, because at that time, before I came on board, I was at the clinic as a behavioral health therapist. So when I came on board, I hadn't heard about Project HOPE, because I was at a different department.

So I went ahead, and I included it in the grant. So the grant went through. We were approved. We got re-awarded for our five years. So the difference this year will be that all the staff will be involved, because it's been included into our grant. So in the beginning, it was kind of hard to start it last year, because a lot of the communities were still closed. Some of the students were still-- at that time, the schools were still allowing some students to go to class from home online, and then there were some that were able to go to school at the school campus.

So this year is different. Everybody's back in school. So Joyce, who is our VR coordinator-- she was able to start visiting the schools and talk about the program.

REBECCA HOLLAND: Marci, are you also working with Charlene to put together a new contract with state VR to help with some areas that maybe the grant isn't going to cover?

MARLENCIA CHEE: Yes, that's what we were just talking about earlier. I was able to get a hold of the prior agreements in Microsoft. So I was telling her we can go back in. We can start updating those and establishing those. So that's what's also on the list. And then just getting started, getting the supplies we need, getting-- oh, and our program coordinator is looking into purchasing a curriculum that will be used.

So that's where we're at right now. Like I said, I wasn't a part of the program before, but I've heard nothing but good stories about the program and how well it went. So that's the reason why we're excited to get it started again.

CHARLENE CHAVEZ: And I think from VR, we really want to work collaboratively. If any of these students actually apply for VR and apply for Jemez VR, is there a way for us to do some cost

sharing? And I think that's something that we'll flesh out more in the MOA. And then we'll have another contract for some of those supplemental things that you may need, as long as it's regards to pre-ETS. So we're working on that.

And I do know that our VR counselor is coming down here now. I know Rebecca had talked about when we first started years ago, you never saw a counselor but maybe once or twice a year at the transition fair or whenever we were invited. And we're trying to establish a better routine where that counselor is here and working with Joyce or Yolanda or whoever staff is assigned and making sure that we're communicating what we're spending, what we're not spending.

The other big thing that I think we haven't talked about is we do a lot of cultural sensitive training that we actually look to Jemez to come into our agency and do some training on cultural sensitive stuff that we as councilors or any of our staff should be aware of. So that's something that we continue to do when we do what we call our-- I want to call it state training, but it's not. It's our academy. And it's changed a little bit in the last three years because of COVID.

But when we do our academy, we always want someone from one of our tribal entities to come in and really talk about the cultural piece, because we share a lot of clients, and we really need to be sensitive to that and what that looks like. So that may be something we really add to our MOA to make sure that that cultural sensitivity training is included in there.

MARLENCIA CHEE: I just wanted to share a little success story. I was at a meeting a couple of weeks ago. It was a manager's meeting. And I gave my updates on the JBR program. And when I was done with my report, a gentleman who was a new hire-- he asked if he could speak. So I told him it was OK. And he mentioned that he was excited. He had heard about our program, about Project HOPE, and he had a relative that was a part of the program. And he said that he was very thankful that the student was a part of Project HOPE, because the student was able to come out of his shell. He was able to become social with people, talk with people. He was more outgoing.

And at the end, he was telling us that this individual actually went into the military. So this is probably his second year in the military right now. So this was something that-- the family was very happy that he chose something that he was interested in and he pursued it and he's doing very well. So that's one of the success stories of the Project HOPE program.

REBECCA HOLLAND: When we can do things that impact students with disabilities and provide them with just confidence and self-esteem for where they're going after school is over, I mean, that's huge. And so it's so exciting to me to see where you're at now and just really how much that determination to work together is important.

I also want to encourage you-- at the end of this webinar, there's going to be a resource page. And it will actually show you how to go and view the short video on Project HOPE with Youth, just so you can hear from the students themselves-- what was it like? You're going to see them

in work environments. And it's not a long video, but we really encourage you to watch that when you can.

[END PLAYBACK]

So I just want to say-- this is Rebecca, and I just want to say that that was an amazing experience, and I'm really glad we're showing this short video and then following it with a very short discussion or question time. But before we do that, Christine is going to show a few slides of some of the students that we had in Project HOPE for Youth. And I'm going to just share very quickly some of the areas that they were placed so that you can see. And then if you have questions, we encourage you to put those into the chat box so that we're able to respond to those.

Charlene and myself and Marci are all on the webinar today. And so you can direct your questions to all of us or any one of us individually, and then we'll be able to respond to those. And I do want to give a shout out to the Project HOPE coordinator while Christine's pulling up these slides and just let you know that Yolanda Toya was our Project HOPE coordinator. And she went through a lot, learned a lot, and I'm really glad to know that she's back there now doing the same position.

So what you're going to see very quickly is you're going to see a student that was working in the tribal library checking in and out DVDs, and then you see a student who was working in a local supermarket bagging groceries. Next slide. In this slide, you're going to see a student creating fun run walk signs for a tribal event through the public health department, and you're going to see a student bussing tables for a local restaurant.

In this slide, you see a student putting together promotional items for one of the tribal programs, and you also see another student that is working on a computer for the tribal IT department. In this slide, the student is working with children at the tribal child care center and the other student is doing office assistant work at a tribal library. And these were in different communities, not the same tribal community. In this slide, this last slide, you see a student doing inventory at a local high school, and you also see a student working as a bus monitor for the tribal education department.

So that just gives you a little visual of some of the placements that were done. So again, if you have any questions or comments, we invite you to put those into the chat box for us, and we'll take some of those and see if we can respond to them.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: This is that portion of the presentation where Marci and Rebecca and Charlene from the state agency available to ask questions of them, or they can share maybe some other information.

JAMIE EMANUEL: I just wanted to invite Christopher Zilar. He had put a message in the chat box earlier. And Christopher, if you'd like to expand on your comment about MOU and your relationship between tribal VR and state VR where you are in Washington State.

CHRISTOPHER ZILER: Thank you. Yes, I'm Christopher. I am the director of Vocational Rehabilitation for Spokane Tribe of Indians here in Wellpinit, Washington State. We have quite a few tribal voc rehab programs throughout our state. And we have a cooperative agreement with our state. We all participate in the memorandum of understanding process each year. So instead of our state having a separate memorandum with each tribe, we all gather together each year and discuss our MOU.

So what we did a few years ago that I mentioned in the chat box is that we were able to add language to our MOU that defined the roles and duties of a tribal liaison, because our state does assign one of their voc rehab counselors in each area to be a liaison between the state and tribal voc rehab program. So each of our tribal voc rehab programs have our own liaison. We might have two liaisons depending on where we're placed in the state. So for example, our voc rehab program has two liaisons assigned to us. One handles more rural areas and one handles the more urban area in Spokane.

So anyhow, our liaisons mostly are there to make sure that we can have somebody who knows all of the different shared cases and who can expedite things or at least help us get more cases where we are sharing. The big push we have right now is to have Washington State do a better job of referring their clients to tribal programs, because in the past, if you went back maybe five years ago and beyond, you really only saw the shared cases come from tribes asking the state to share a case and zero coming where the state actually initiated that request.

But now, we do have some shared cases in our state where the state has actually reached out to a tribal program and asked, hey, can we share this case? This person identifies as Native American. So that's a big win for us. We're looking forward for other things. There's a couple of things on our plate that we're wanting to expand on that idea.

Us personally, one of the things we do is we have-- one of our tribal liaisons actually comes to our office in Wellpinit and holds office hours here one day a month. And if she's not meeting with a client, then we do some technical or administrative work with her to constantly strategizing how we can get more shared cases. We make sure that the voc rehab counselors who have shared cases spend time with her to make sure everybody's on the same page as to what we're doing.

And lots of times, though, it's great, because we've got maybe a shared case that is sitting down with both the state and the tribe voc rehab counselors together at the same time. And that is helpful for the client, because then they don't have to have a meeting with the state and a meeting with the tribe virtually doing the same thing. So is that basically what you wanted to hear?

JAMIE EMANUEL: Thank you so much, Christopher. That was a very thorough description of how you all handle your MOA in your area. We've got several wonderful comments in the chat box. I see Betty Schoen is here with Arizona. She's the RSA region one transition specialist. So great to see Arizona VR on here. Wonderful comments. Yes.

REBECCA HOLLAND: Tammy, if I could just jump in-- this is Rebecca. I just wanted to say that some of the questions that have been put in the chat box we can actually answer directly. Like for example, Michelle Markle, you asked some specifics. If you will put your email address in the chat box, I can reach out to you directly. And then I also wanted to mention, because someone asked about how much this pilot project cost, we put together a contract for \$150,000 that covered it for a year. And so you can see there wasn't a lot of money in it, but it went a long ways. So I think that may have hit most of the questions that were in the chat box.

JAMIE EMANUEL: Tammy Woolridge did have a question about how extensive was the MOU to share the pre-employment program with the tribal VR program. Do you want to ask your question, Tammy?

TAMMY WOOLRIDGE: I was just wondering how long it took to get that MOU done and if there was a lot of different parties involved for that-- if it was higher level at the state and/or higher level at the tribes. I know a lot of times when we do any kind of MOUs or anything like that, we have to have our tribal council OK things like that if the tribes are involved. And since we are a consortium here at North Intertribal, I always have to ask how extensive that is, because that would be something that would take a lot of time and effort to get the coordination done for all the parties that would be involved.

REBECCA HOLLAND: So I think that Charlene and I would say that we put that together pretty quickly. There were lots of levels involved in that. It was an extensive contract, but we were able to really hand it off to the next levels and get that moved through pretty quickly. And that's in New Mexico, but it's going to be different in each state.

JAMIE EMANUEL: All right. Excellent.