

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

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: We will now hear about a summer youth program from the state of Wisconsin. Joining me is Tom Draghi, a WDA 7 and 8 director for the Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. And he's joined by Kristine Meyer a VR specialist with Wisconsin Division of VR and Maria Novalla, a counselor with the Northwest Region Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council Vocational Rehabilitation for Native Americans. Welcome everyone, and thank you for sharing your story today.

Tom, I'll start with you. I understand you've been doing this summer work based learning experience every year since 2018. Can you tell us how you came up with the idea?

TOM DRAGHI: I think the idea really spawned from Maria and from one of my counselors at the time in Ashland, Wisconsin. And my counselor and Maria worked quite closely on two reservations, the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. And they brought the idea to me to start a summer youth program and really service the youth in those two areas. And so I started thinking about the why. Why we would we do this?

And it was good for business, number one. First and foremost, I knew that right off the top. And so as I started to look into this a little bit more, there was a lot of really good reasons. Number one, we were able to serve tribal youth in tribal communities with disabilities. And part of our comprehensive needs assessment at the time said Wisconsin DVR wasn't serving underserved populations which included Native Americans.

So I thought, what better way to grow that experience and really help meet our comprehensive needs assessment by serving tribal youth. Secondly, I looked at it and said it's going to help Wisconsin DVR spend money on pre-employment services to in our transitional youth dollars. And thirdly, with the inception of our business service consultants in Wisconsin, I also looked at it through that lens by serving and working with tribal employers who would benefit not only the youth and show them the experiences that they can gain and working on the reservations but also our business services consultants in that we had the ability to serve employers on the reservations.

And lastly, and I think this is one of the most important pieces is it really gave students with disabilities that live on or near the reservations the ability to build hard and soft skills. And I think that was critical because all too many times, our native youth leave our reservations for other jobs outside. Some return, some don't, but I really wanted to grow that inside ability to show that we have a lot of different types of positions on the reservations that have a lot of different experiences and educational levels.

And what better way to do that than really create a summer youth program and have these students work within their communities and see their culture and see adults working and living. So really, that was the why, and it was a very easy sell.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Maria, tell me how you eavesdrop on Tom's conversation.

MARIA: Yeah, so Tom and I were attending a CANAR conference in Shakopee, Minnesota that year. And I had heard Tom talking about that they were going to work with one of the local tribes, Lakotarae and that they had passed on the summer youth option that Tom was talking about meeting the pre-et. They had rolled a grant. And so they had received their own money for that. And I happened to be sitting next, and I heard that.

And so I asked him I said, well what did they pass up on? And he told, he explained and I said, well I would love for Bad River to be able to do that. And so that right there is where we started forming our ideas. And we got back to our district the following week and set up a little meeting. And I called our tribal chairman up, and I said, you would you be willing to help sponsor and find places to put these kids to work and supervisors if I can bring in the state of Wisconsin to help out?

And they said, absolutely. And so then we started setting up several meetings. I think they were biweekly. And we started pulling in the school district. We started pulling in Northwest SEP and the youth program and of course tribal leadership and of course, DVR councilor Mackenzie at that time and Christine Meyer, a VR specialist. We started networking and working really well together. And that's how it formed.

TOM DRAGHI: Christine, the important piece I think that Maria talks about was the collaboration and trust that I think tribal leadership had in her and our relationship as a state agency as Wisconsin DVR because we have been providing services on the reservations for a period of time in collaboration with Great Lakes Inter-Tribal council and the other tribal programs in Wisconsin. These ideas of working with our tribal DVR partners isn't anything new.

I know the Oneida tribe about five to seven years ago also did a summer youth program that was a little bit more in depth with our Green Bay office. And so these relationships have been formed through many years of collaboration and trust. And I think that's the most important thing is having our tribal partners and our state partners come together to recognize what good we can do for our communities. And I think for us, our niche here was youth living on or near the reservation.

We just didn't serve Native youth. If there was not a native youth that wanted to participate, we certainly would entertain that idea because it was really about exposing students to work and employment on the reservations. So I think it was really critical for Maria to share that experience that this collaboration was really about meeting the needs of our students and our communities. But we did that working with two different school districts and an employer of record Maria mentioned Northwest. And so it was really a collaboration among a lot of different agencies and school districts, two separate tribes to really make this happen.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: And I'm going to jump to Christine Meyer. Because I think Christine, when you got involved, you were a brand new counselor.

CHRISTINE MEYER: Well, I'm not a counselor. I'm a vocational rehabilitation specialist. But yes, I was barely employed with DVR for more than two months when we started having the meetings. So I learned very quickly. [CHUCKLE]

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Tell me a little bit about the relationship that you and Maria built and how you work together to coordinate all of this. Because the two of you were actually the boots to the ground folks, really working with the students.

CHRISTINE MEYER: Most definitely, especially Maria, she was really the boots on the ground. She was the one that would go out, and she would follow up on the applications and the potentially eligible form and get parents signatures. And she really made that happen. Without Maria, the numbers wouldn't have been as high. But she was able to really go out and use her relationships and to be able to get that information.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: That's really critical to hear that Maria, you were able to kind of hand walk things through the process to get especially parents signatures, which we oftentimes is a barrier because the paperwork gets lost. The parent doesn't know about it. So yeah, talk a little bit about how you both managed all of this.

MARIA: Well, born and raised on Bad River and living there, I knew these children, I knew their parents, I knew their grandparents. And I knew pretty much where everybody lived. And so it was easier at that time to look at the application, , see the name and say, I know where this auntie lives, or I know where this family lives. And it was easier for me to jump in the vehicle, take that application with the papers that needed to be signed and go right up to the house.

And so that evening, when we started doing this, that's exactly what I did. I just drove to everybody's, the students' homes and knocked on the door and had a cup of coffee with them, joked around with them, a little bit of laughter. And that's how we got the signatures.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Great. How long was the program for the summer duration?

CHRISTINE MEYER: I think eight weeks the first year.

TOM DRAGHI: Yeah, I think we started out with the baseline of eight weeks. And I think through we've been doing this now five years. And it's been somewhat customizable. We've had some younger students who are 14, 15 who might only be able to work four to six weeks. So we kind of focus it and really individualize it to those students. We had some students who could work 12 weeks. And so we've really kind of pushed it anywhere from four to 12 weeks.

The one caveat we've held for this program is that number one, we want the students to be students. And we want them to be kids. So we never had them working within the first week of exit school or the last week of entering school because we wanted kids to still have time to grow and be kids. And so really, it's been very customizable. It's had a VR focus very individualized to meet their needs. But if we were to put an average on it, I would say, eight weeks is pretty standard is what we do.

MARIA: Another barrier that I do remember, I was with Northwest SUP, and when Tom mentioned our younger students, we had the 14 to 16. And we needed working permits at that time, too before they could start. And Northwest SUP was the one that had those permits for us to get the working permits. And if I remember correctly, we had little, was it, right around 38 students that first year. And half of those were 14 to 16-year-olds. And we needed those working permits.

And that was a barrier. I started thinking, how am I going to get all these families and these students of parents, guardians up to Ashland to sign for these working permits. And fortunately, the director of Northwest SUP, I called him up. And he made it work. He made his workers come out to the reservation and set up at the local community house. And then all the parents were able to come there. And that's when Christine and Wanda and the school district, everybody was there in one spot.

So it made it convenient and easy for these parents to sign off on these forms. , And so just little tiny barriers that we had but we did overcome them.

TOM DRAGHI: Christine, I think Maria brings a really good point to the table is that in northern Wisconsin, it's a large area. But we, everybody in the employment and training, the vocational vocation field, we know each other. It's easy for us to pick up the phone and make things happen. Because we really rely on each other in our rural area to be able to complete tasks and get things done that relate to our consumers' clients.

And really, I think that shows some success between an outside agency who's kind of a third party to us and really being advantageous and saying we're going to meet you where your needs are. And it takes a lot to be able to do that and come to the reservation and share our experiences. And I really, my hat's off to all of our partnerships that we have in the summer program for our students.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Well, this is a regular summer happening now. Christine, what do you-- have you seen as far as outcomes for your students?

CHRISTINE MEYER: One of the things that I started doing that first year was basically, I had a running list of those that had signed up and that participated in the program. And I've been kind of tracking how many, which kids are coming back for a second year or a third year. . And that in itself is a huge success because they obviously enjoyed it enough that they wanted to come back for a second year or a third year. And we've had a couple that have gone four years in a row.

And that's success. So that's one of the things that I just, I get very excited about is those kids that have come back every year. And even some of them did during COVID.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Oh, yeah. Maria, what kind of outcomes have you seen?

MARIA: Exactly what Christine's seen, I've seen a lot of our students come back year after year because they have greatly enjoyed it. But one of the other positive outcomes that I have seen was during COVID. All of our students had to attend virtual online classes from home. And a lot of them fell behind. It made for a big struggle. And we were unsure if a lot of these students were going to meet graduation credits to graduate.

And so a very good example is this year, this past June, we had quite a few of our summer youth students who went through all four years. The school district looked at what type of jobs they did, whether they worked with the summer feeding program, . Or they worked social services maybe they worked in the food sovereignty or maintenance.

And so if a student was behind in say, history, and they worked at the preservation Temple office and helping them go through our cultural history of their tribe and categorizing and cataloging documents, they gave those students an extra credit or two for history. Or if they worked with the summer feeding program, and they were short in math, they looked that to make those food recipes, there's a lot of measurements and a lot of math that was done.

And they gave our students those credits so that our students could graduate. And now, this fall, we have some of our students that went four years, they're signed up and in college. That is a huge, huge benefit.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Yes, absolutely.

TOM DRAGHI: Christine, could I add a few outcomes to this?

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Sure.

TOM DRAGHI: One of the things, we started this in 2018, and we just finished up here this last September of 2022. And since that time, since the inception, we served over 290 students living on or near the reservation. I think that's huge in terms of just the skills and abilities. And you've heard Christina Maria talk about some of the successes. But one of the things that I like to look at and see is the future success of what's happening with students.

For us in DVR, you obviously everyone knows that you open up cases. You develop an IPE. One of our students started with us back, I think, in 2018 or 2019 in the summer youth program. And this individual was an open case with DVR for a period of time. We just closed them back on February 2, I think, of 2021. And what we did was, this student came out of the summer youth program. And we assisted this individual with reimbursing them some expenses for a peer support specialist exam, providing some training.

And the consumer who came through the summer youth program became a recovery house peer support specialist at the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa back in October, I think, 26 of 2020 and making a very good wage working almost full time and really looking at the personal fulfillment and financial freedom. And it really built this person's self esteem and just the human connectivity of working with people in recovery and just knowing that we were a part of this as a student helping that individual grow and learn what work is about.

Those are the successes that sometimes we forget. And just having somebody learn through our program, that's just a tremendous piece. And now working back on the reservation, serving his community in a very good way, I think that's very impressive to the work that all of our staff, Christine, Maria, Mackenzie, our counselor some of the past employees of our programs. Those are the things when you talk about outcomes, those are the things that make me feel really good about what we're doing is we're building capacity locally, internally, and we're helping our own communities.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Excellent.

MARIA: That's definitely. I would just like to maybe hit a little story off of that.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Sure.

MARIA: I had a student that we had a student that went, I think, three years in the summer youth program. And he was stationed in different areas. This last year, he was stationed with our maintenance program. And he decided that he really loved fixing things and things that were broken and fixing, and he was fascinated with aircraft. Now, he is not part of DVR, I know. And he's not part of the VRNA program.

However, because of this summer youth program, he was high risk. He was behind. And but the hard and soft skills that he did learn, he is now stationed in Corpus Christi right now in the United States Air Force right now in their maintenance department to work on aircraft. So he didn't become a client of ours. But that is a success because it is if he didn't, he very well could be on our caseload for other reasons. So to me, even though he he's not a client, it's still a high success story to me.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Yes. And Christine, do you have any last words you'd like to give?

CHRISTINE MEYER: It has been my greatest pleasure to be working on that summer youth program. And it's a lot of work to help collaborate with our youth directors and with Maria and

Northwest SUP. But I really have to say how much I have enjoyed every step of it. And I have so enjoyed working with Maria.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Well Thank you all so much. Thank you so much for sharing your story.

TOM DRAGHI: Thank you.

CHRISTINE MEYER: Thank you.

MARIA: Thank you.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: All right, we now can take some questions and answers with our folks from Wisconsin, Tom, Maria, and Christine. Jamie, do we have any questions for them?

JAMIE: No, I don't see any questions in the chat. Thank you Betty for sharing that she's an Air Force brat, too. [LAUGH] Thank you for that comment, Betty. Also Janet said excellent presentation. Thank you so much. I believe that's all that we have in the chat at this time.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Well folks, we knew we would probably go over, and we did a lot sometimes. So I thank those of you that are on. We just have a few points here that we would like to share. And then if there's any more questions, we're here to answer them. But right now, I'm going to be joined back with Wayne Dangel. And I want you to reflect on some of the strategies and opportunities that you've heard in these stories that the state agencies and tribal programs got together on to make this happen.

I'll mention a few of these bullets. So the state VR agency has the ability to use the pre-employment transition services funds available to them under their formula grants. And if the state can demonstrate that they have funds remaining, they can use pre-et's authorized activities that are available under that state VR program to provide, perhaps co-training on transition to VR counselors, the TBR staff and to local education staff and do this statewide.

So that is one opportunity to get everyone on the same page using some funds. And again, this requires that you as a state agency talk with your RSA fiscal liaison and take advantage of the new set aside determination guide and talk to us at NTACT C on how you can make that happen. Wayne?

WAYNE DAGEL: Thanks, Christine. There's a lot of stuff we heard today that were great collaborative opportunities. And some of the biggest things that I picked out are what we identified here, and that's invite tribal representation. , And but that goes the other way too. We need to invite the state into the TVR meetings as well. I'm also really impressed with the use of peer mentoring. This is great.

Bringing, when you have a peer group, and you can get that peer group involved in moving forward with different activities, supporting cultural strengths and values and that social behavior, that's very powerful. It's more powerful than what the parents can do in a lot of

situations. So having that peer mentoring is very important. And they collaborated with your Boys and Girls Club, most communities have a Boys and Girls Club. And it's a great place to do group services to these youth.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Absolutely. Yeah, really reinforcing that self advocacy and leadership skills, and I think we've heard from all three states these success stories with the students and youth who have participated and gone on to some great things. And, they are the natural folks that as an agency you would reach back out to them and say, hey, could you come back and talk to our next group of summer work kids that are here? Can you tell them what you learned?

So students really respect hearing from their peers. And that's a great strategy. And finally, don't forget, working in partnering with Title I youth programs so that you can serve Native and non native students and youth, and that's in Wisconsin utilizing workforce and businesses. We heard in Alaska, they were working with the education folks and also with the state mental health authority. So again, there's looking for partners and opportunities all over.

So moving right on, we just have basically this will be in your handouts. You'll be able to access this. Not too many resources, we have the Project HOPE video. We have the picture your future exploring transition goals and then the preparing for the future the success of the Red River and Red Cliff summer youth program out of Wisconsin. So those links are good. And then, of course our technical assistance centers are all listed on this.

Thank you to all my presenters. This was a big project to try and wrap our hands around and get on there. But Wayne, don't we have something else to share like a preview of coming attractions will be in 2023?

WAYNE DAGEL: Well, coming in 2023, that was my best imitation of a voiceover that I've got. On March 8, we are going to have a follow-up webinar. So please be watching for that as we move forward.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Absolutely, absolutely. All right, any

JAMIE: And I would like to share, also. Christine, I'm sorry.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: No, go right ahead. I see some hands up so go ahead.

JAMIE: I just wanted to share with the group that in March of 2023, so it's not very far away, we're they're going to dig a little deeper dive into this topic, youth transition services and collaboration with tribal VR and state VR. And Christine is going to be joining us for that. So just kind of if want to put it on your calendars, March of 2023 we will, AIVRTTAC will be holding another webinar on this topic.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Yes, along with CIT-VR and the NTACT C, all these acronyms, all our technical assistance centers combining our resources so that we can bring you some really

great information. And please don't forget to do the evaluation. Let us know what you think, what worked? What didn't? What do you want more of? That's what we're here for.