

Eastern Utah District, Division of Rehabilitation Services: State VR Program Helps Businesses Improve Bottomline

By John Sargent and Julie Clay

Karl Kranc is the district director of the Eastern Utah District, Division of Rehabilitation Services in Price, Utah. The Eastern Utah program was selected as a model state VR program serving American Indians as part of a training project conducted by the American Indian Rehabilitation Research and Training Center at Northern Arizona University.

Mr. Kranc has been the director of the eastern district since it was formed in 1976 to serve seven counties, which encompass about one-third of the state of Utah. The district is proud of its reputation for providing culturally relevant services to tribal members living on and off of the Uwintah-Ouray Ute reservation, Navajo reservation, and the White Mesa Ute reservation. Two Navajos work for the Eastern Utah VR office, but four employees speak Navajo.

1. What approaches in your vocational rehabilitation program work well with the American Indian population?

We have worked very hard to be aware that in reality, the term “American Indian” is probably no more significant than the term “European” because an Italian is incredibly different culturally and linguistically than a Swede. The Navajo are a distinctively different ethnic group or cultural group than the Ute. We understand the cultural differences of the American Indian groups with which we work.

We make it a point to be aware that you don’t treat people as Indians. You treat them as individuals, who may be Navajo or Ute. Each person has a distinct set of cultural characteristics.

Once we establish a relationship with our clients, we attempt to get them involved in the vocational rehabilitation process, in their own success. We make sure that our Native American clientele have the same opportunities, in the same programs, as all of our other clients.

If moving off the reservation is something that a Native American individual wants to do, we make it happen. There are a great many circumstances where someone has to relocate off the reservation to receive training. Many American Indians have the overall objective of returning to the reservation to live and work. Some people say, “The reservation is the only place I want to be. I don’t want to leave here. What can you do for me?” We work diligently to tailor programs to meet the needs of people, in a place they want to be, and in a setting in which they want to be served.

We believe in employing people with disabilities. Three individuals who work out of my Price, Utah office are completers of VR programs. They were individuals who were determined eligible for rehabilitation services, went through the program, and subsequently became employees. Two of the staff members at our Blanding, Utah office are individuals who have completed VR programs. These are people who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and worked hard to achieve what they did.

We are very sensitive to the idea of employing individuals with disabilities and I think we are spreading the message. Probably 35% of the elementary and secondary

educators in Carbon County are completers of VR programs. Half of all of the American Indian educators in San Juan County are completers of VR programs. About 30% of the health care professionals, short of doctors, are completers of VR programs. We have only one doctor and one dentist who completed a VR program and came back. And we didn't pay for medical school. We got them through pre-med. A large number of completers of VR programs also work with the Department of Child and Family Services in our area as well as the state agency, Workforce Services.

2. What does your vocational rehabilitation program do that is innovative regarding services to the American Indian population?

Macro-job placement drives what we do in terms of program development. We have developed a large number of programs and courses taught at the community college. We are responsible for the development of the heavy equipment and trucking program, the criminal justice program, and the diesel mechanics program.

The concept of macro-job placement can best be defined by the Ely project. A company called BHP Copper operated a very large open pit mine in Ely, Nevada. I was approached by a Nevada VR director to seek information on accessing BHP Copper as a prospective employer for our clients. The director had attempted on a number of occasions to gain access the facility for his consumers, to get a foot in the door, but had not been successful.

I had a reputation for developing mining-related programs for rehabilitation clients and had been successful in getting people placed. I spoke with their chief personnel officer and asked what they needed in terms of skilled employees. They had a four and half hour paper and pencil screening test. You had to have a minimum score before they even considered giving you an interview to work for the company.

I got talking with my buddies up at the College of Eastern Utah mining department. We looked at the skills necessary to be employed at the BHP mine and decided that we could develop a training program to build those skills.

Involving an educational institution is one of the key elements of macro-job placement. Macro-job placement is all of those services and activities that are directed toward creating employment opportunities for a client on a more global level, rather than actual individual placement, or job referral.

We put together a team, including two members from the College of Eastern Utah mining program, and flew to Ely, Nevada to tour the BHP facility. We talked to managers and employees about what their wants and needs were in the prospective people who interviewed for positions. We looked at their screening process. Then we came back and designed a program that we thought would turn our rehabilitation clients into a quality product that these folks could not resist.

We had a number of Native American and Anglo students, both male and female, in the trucking program here in Price. We inquired whether any of them had an interest in working in the gold mining field, which would involve driving large dump trucks and other vehicles. We picked up an applicant pool of about twelve who wanted this experience; six of them were Native American.

The training program included comprehensive life skills instruction (e.g., how to manage a checkbook, resolve conflict situations) and intensive remedial education. We

also created a whole new course, a haul pack orientation class, that taught clients how to operate the large dump trucks that carry 60-100 tons.

Out of the twelve who entered the training program, we took ten applicants to the mine site for the screening test. We would have had eleven, but one man's parole officer would not let him leave town. Eight of the ten passed the test, and all eight were offered interviews.

The bad news is that the copper market collapsed immediately after the interns and the BHP mine shut down. The good news is, that it did not matter. These folks were so well trained in industrial skills, that all eight got other jobs.

The key principle is to involve industry and an educational institution in the design of a training program that will take interested clients from where they are skill-wise, to where they need to be, in order to meet the needs of that industry. The training programs for future mine workers and truck drivers have resulted in greater employability of our clients.

Another thing that we do that is truly innovative and includes Native American clients is fostering self-employment. We sponsor more small businesses in this region than probably the entire state of Utah combined.

My business-orientation and the lack of jobs around here propelled us to create jobs in the form of self-employment. The unemployment rate in Carbon County is 8%, but that figure does not include American Indians. I estimate that about 50% of American Indians in Carbon County are unemployed.

We had a 22-year old Choctaw lady who lived out here, far away from her family members. She was able to get the restorative services that she needed for her disability before writing the best business plan I have ever seen. We helped her set up an automobile upholstery business. She decided to do the "tuck and roll" interiors that were popular years ago and made you "cool." We invested \$1,500 in a sewing machine. The young lady is now netting about a \$1,000 a month and paying her own way.

We also helped a young Navajo man establish an auto body and repair facility on the Navajo reservation in Monument Valley, Arizona. He went through the Small Business Development Center course, wrote a business plan, and was approved for a grant to start his business. He is a remarkable man. His success is largely due to the high quality product he produces.

We involve businesses in our work as potential employers and help create business opportunities for those who wish to be self-employed. We also involve ourselves in the business community. We live with the attitude that it's important for us to be involved with the business community, rather than them being involved with us.

Too often, I think government agencies like ours present the position to employers that they need to be doing this or that as part of their public service. A VR agency might say, "We represent people with disabilities and you owe it to us to be involved with us." We take the approach that we want to be involved with you, with whatever is going on in the community. We want to know you. We want to work with you. We want to help you. We want to see how we can positively impact your bottom line. That makes us much more important to them, and makes them much more indebted to us and willing to listen to our message.

3. Tell us about one of your greatest successes in placing a consumer in a job?

This young Navajo lady with a disability chose to work in the mining industry. We sponsored her for two years in the college of Utah Mining Training program. She was phenomenal. There were times when she struggled and times when she was down and out. She was a single mom and required a lot of support. She graduated and earned her Associate's Degree in mining safety. She walked down to one of the reservation mines, presented her papers, and was hired instantly at \$35,000 a year. That story repeats itself, time after time.