

Choctaw Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program An interview with Mary Lundy Meruvia, Project Director

Mary Meruvia answered questions about the Choctaw Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program that she directs. The Choctaw program was selected as a model tribal program as part of an American Indian Rehabilitation Research and Training Center training project.



Choctaw Vocational Rehabilitation Staff

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

Our program is located on the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indian Reservation, a checkerboard community of about 8,000 tribal members. Our office is in a place where people are accustomed to receiving services.

We have a wonderful staff, and are lucky to have 11 employees who are Choctaw Tribal members. Having staff from this community is very important in the credibility we establish

for our services. We are up front about rights, eligibility, and order of selection. We practice what we preach. People know that they can trust us, because we do what we say we are going to do. We really focus on building this trusting relationship. "Don't say it, if you can't do it," is our motto.

Our staff knows what the eight Choctaw communities are like. The Tribal staff members are aware of how people are living and they know about the people's needs. They know the families. The staff might go to a person's house in order to meet him half way, rather than demanding that he come into our office. The Tribal staff members know what it's like to travel 40 miles without a car or money. A lot of our people don't have telephones. We don't try to put expectations on the consumers that are not going to work for them.

English is a second language to most people here. Therefore, the Choctaw language is used with most clients. Eleven out of 14 of the vocational rehabilitation employees are tribal members who speak the Choctaw language. Speaking the language as a non-Choctaw person is not really looked on favorably. I think that it appears like you are trying to be someone you are not.

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

We use a lot of on-the-job training for people who want entry-level jobs but don't have the necessary skills. Our vocational evaluator and our rehabilitation counselor are good at working with people to truly understand their interests, abilities, where they are in their lives, and how much time they're able to invest in becoming employed. Our field trainer supports people on the job. Employers trust her to provide the support that will make an individual successful in work.

We began providing supported employment services a few years ago and it's been very successful. Instead of working forever to help solve any issue that a person with a most significant type of disability had, we just jumped in with both feet and solved the problems along the way. The idea of waiting for job readiness, as expected in traditional VR thinking and

practices, sometimes never comes to pass. We found that some folks never got job-ready. Supported employment has solved that problem.

We've experienced challenges as well. For example, most supported employment providers have agreements with established agencies for the agencies to provide long-term support. It is not like that on the reservation. There are no agencies that provide extended services or long-term support. We get family members or co-workers to sign an extended services agreement and act as job coach. The signed paper says, "I'm going to notify VR if this person starts having employment-related problems and I'm going to provide this person with supports while they're working, if it's needed." We gradually fade out the job coach. Before the job coach quits his/her job, we enroll another person to serve in a natural support role and have him or her say, "I will be the person's support role. I won't let this person lose his job if I can do anything to help it."

Sometimes, job requirements change once a person begins work. We try to solve problems right away. Things are harder to fix if you let them go.

Another thing we do that I think is helpful is providing career exploration services during the vocational evaluation. We did a survey of our completed IPEs and noticed that there were three primary jobs that everyone picked. We felt that people didn't have enough information to make choices about jobs, so we decided to start a course for consumers on career exploration.

Our first career exploration instructor had a hard time teaching the career exploration class many years ago because jobs were scarce on and near the reservation, most of the materials we found were for high school kids, and all the materials we found were not made for Indians on reservations or people with disabilities. Our instructor had to do the best he could with what he had.

We have a new grant from the Developmental Disabilities Council, a state agency under the Department of Mental Health, to develop a career exploration product - it will be a curriculum set for use in courses like ours. The curriculum will contain videos, worksheets, and a curriculum guide. We are going to disseminate it to other tribes next year with the help of AIRRTC.

We want the curriculum to be for all levels of people - a course in career exploration, for people who do not know what they want to do as far as a job goes. We started filming in March 2002 and have begun editing the video resources.

The curriculum planning committee meetings began in November of last year, and will continue throughout the project. The committee is made up of five of the VR staff members including myself, our placement specialist, our VR counselor, our vocational evaluator, and our instructor as well as consumers, family members of consumers, and other community leaders.

Our course will be taught for four weeks. Class will meet four days a week, for three hours a day. Our course will be taught in a classroom here in the Pearl River community. Due to the fact that most of our clients do not have computers, our course will not be web-based.

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

A consumer came to our program with multiple significant disabilities. He had physical impairments, including blindness, as well as cognitive limitations. We went through a long period of evaluation to help the person decide what was feasible for him. His mother communicated for him at each meeting. He later experienced work habits training and work adjustment training and was demonstrating good work habits. Our trainers and work adjustment counselor had worked well with him while he was still in school.

One day at the VR office, we asked this consumer to shred some paper for us. We discovered that he was not only good at shredding paper, but that he liked shredding documents. Unfortunately, there weren't any jobs for paper shredders...yet.

We celebrate a "disability awareness week" every year. During this week, we sponsor an event that includes lunch and an awards ceremony. At the event, we recognize an employer who has made great strides in hiring people with disabilities. Many employers from our surrounding communities attend. We try to instill in the attending employers a desire to want to be recognized at the awards ceremony and do more to help employ our consumers with disabilities.

During lunch, I spoke with this businessman who was new to one of the companies in the area. This man asked me how he could help people with disabilities that were involved with my

program. I said to him, "Think about developing a job that doesn't fit into any existing job." I then gave the example of the man who liked shredding papers. I mentioned that the consumer was blind, and therefore the confidentiality of what he might shred for someone would not be an issue.

With the hard work of our placement specialist in following up on this idea, this employer took the idea and ran with it. He created a paper shredder position at his work place and hired our consumer who liked to shred papers. The man with disabilities fit into his new job a little easier with the help of a job coach assigned by our office. The job coach faded from the scene after a year and a half. Our consumer is doing wonderfully!

The original job of paper shredder has since been enlarged to include routine machine maintenance, such as adding oil periodically. An assistive technology vendor put a special attachment on the machine so that the consumer would be able to pour oil into a large funnel rather than directly into the existing small hole. Job enlargement has led to an increase in the consumer's self-esteem and respect from his co-workers. Everyone's happy!