

**EVALUATION OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN  
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES (AIVRS) PROGRAM**

Contract No. ED-99-CO-0127

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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June 30, 2002

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 31, 1999, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) of the U.S. Department of Education awarded a contract to Development Associates, Inc. of Arlington, Virginia to conduct an evaluation of the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) program. The AIVRS program provides grants to governing bodies of Indian tribes located on Federal and State reservations and to consortia of such governing bodies to provide vocational rehabilitation (VR) services.

The AIVRS program has expanded rapidly in recent years, from 16 projects in 1992 to 64 projects in 2000-2001. Nine of the 64 projects in 2000-2001 initiated their program activities beginning October 1, 2000. One project had previously received funding, but has not operated with Federal funding since September 1988. These ten new projects were not included in the evaluation. Approximately 40 percent of the 2000-2001 AIVRS grants were between \$300,000 and \$349,999, and 70 percent were between \$250,000 and 399,999.

The major objectives of the evaluation were:

1. Describe and analyze the characteristics, services received, and outcomes of Native Americans with disabilities.
2. Identify the degree to which Native Americans are not served or are underserved in the AIVRS projects' services areas.
3. Describe the organizational structures and management of the projects.
4. Describe the projects' vocational rehabilitation (VR) practices, regarding: vocational assessment, determining eligibility for services, developing plans for services, fostering consumer choice, and delivering services.
5. Identify the cost-effectiveness of established AIVRS projects.
6. Describe the economic and resource environments of the projects.
7. Identify best practices and make recommendations for program improvement.

The evaluation included five data collection activities:

1. A mail survey to the 54 AIVRS projects with funding in FY1999 and FY2000
2. Site visits to 29 of those projects
  - Interviews with the project director, tribal representative(s), advisory group members, service providers, and local State VR staff member(s)
  - A focus group with project staff members
  - Case record reviews of 30 closed cases and 20 open cases
3. Telephone interviews with 3 other AIVRS project directors
4. Telephone interviews with Rehabilitation Services Administration staff members
5. Comparison of AIVRS case records with State VR case records

Among the findings of the evaluation were:

#### Community Contexts

- A typical project (as defined by the median value) had a service area of 2,265 square miles and a Native American population in that area of 7,250.
- A typical consumer of an AIVRS project (also defined by the median) lived 43 miles from the closest State VR office and 52 miles from an urban area with a range of human service providers.
- The median unemployment rate in the AIVRS projects' service areas was nearly five times as high as the median rate in surrounding areas (32.5 percent versus 6.6 percent).

#### Consumer Population

- The AIVRS program served 5,562 consumers during fiscal year 2000.
- A typical project served 64 consumers in the year and 50 consumers at one time.
- Substance abuse was the most common disability of those consumers who were served.
- The subpopulation of Native Americans that was most frequently mentioned as needing but not receiving services from AIVRS projects was persons with physical disabilities.

#### Organizational Structure and Management

- The most common organizational locations for AIVRS projects were in a separate department or in the education department.
- Of the 270 staff members of AIVRS projects, 88 percent were Native Americans and 78 percent were tribal members.
- AIVRS case records were more likely to include information on consumer backgrounds, consumer choice, and eligibility than information on service plans, consumer outcomes, and consumer costs.
- The most common implementation problems for AIVRS projects were recruiting and retaining staff, dealing with tribal governments, and developing methods and systems of operation.

#### Vocational Rehabilitation Practices

- AIVRS projects were fulfilling the legislation requirements concerning consumer eligibility.
- All of the projects had consumer appeals processes, but there were few appeals by AIVRS consumers.

#### Vocational Rehabilitation Services

- According to records, the services most often received by AIVRS consumers were vocational counseling and guidance, vocational assessments, medical consultation and treatment, and substance abuse services. In addition, AIVRS projects indicated that they provided transportation services to many consumers.
- A typical consumer received three different services.

### Consumer Outcomes

- According to projects, 64 percent of AIVRS consumers who received services under an Individual Plan of Employment (IPE) and whose cases were closed between October 1, 1999 and September 30, 2000 had successful employment outcomes. The comparable rate for Native American consumers in the State VR program in FY98 and FY99 was 53 percent.
- Of all closed cases reviewed (including those not eligible and who did not receive any services under an IPE), 25 percent had successful employment outcomes. This is comparable to the rate for Native Americans served by State VR agencies.
- At the project level, the professional staffs' years of vocational rehabilitation experience was positively related to the proportion of successful outcomes. The number of years that projects had received federal funding was positively related to the number of successful outcomes.
- The consumers with successful outcomes were generally older, had more education, possessed more work experience, and were more likely to be previously served by AIVRS than the consumers with unsuccessful outcomes.

### Program Costs

- AIVRS projects spent approximately 45 percent of their budgets on staff salaries, 28 percent on purchased services and other consumer costs, and 27 percent on other costs.
- More established AIVRS projects were more cost-effective than the newer projects.

### Assessments of the Program

- Common effective features of AIVRS projects according to project directors were cultural sensitivity to consumers, consumer involvement in planning services, a consumer-centered approach, teamwork among staff, effective coordination with other agencies, cost-sharing, and extensive staff training.
- The major areas identified by non-project staff for project improvement were staffing, facilities, additional funding, and interagency coordination.

Based on the results of the evaluation, Development Associates developed the following conclusions and recommendations:

### Conclusions

1. **There is a very significant need for vocational rehabilitation (VR) services for Native Americans on or near Indian reservations.** Disability rates are higher than average among Native Americans, and rates are reported to be particularly high for those on or near reservations.
2. **Tribal governments offer a unique resource for providing VR services to Native Americans on or near Indian reservations.** For a variety of reasons including remoteness of reservations, poor State-tribal relationships, and cultural differences, State VR agencies have faced serious challenges in serving Native Americans living on or near reservations. Many of those challenges are addressed by having tribal governments provide VR services.

3. **AIVRS projects face considerable challenges in providing VR services due to geographic, economic, and cultural factors.** In most cases, they are in rural areas where there are limited resources for service provision and limited numbers of job opportunities. Their service areas have very high unemployment rates, even compared to the surrounding rural areas. They are serving consumers who have disabilities that are difficult to ameliorate (e.g., substance abuse), who have cultural barriers to employment off of the reservation, and who face discrimination in employment.
4. **New AIVRS projects face particular challenges due to the lack of guidance and systems for implementing their programs.** New AIVRS projects have developed their programs with very limited regulatory guidance and limited technical assistance from RSA. They have needed to decide to what extent to adopt or adapt the policies and systems of their relevant State VR agency(s), and have reported that they often felt that they were “reinventing the wheel.”
5. **Many AIVRS projects face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff members and in developing appropriate relationships with their tribal governments.** The combinations of skills required for project director and counselor positions in AIVRS projects (VR knowledge, cultural knowledge, management skills, and personal/ counseling skills) are extremely difficult to find in Native American communities, and persons with those skills have a range of job opportunities.

Some projects also have difficulty in maintaining the autonomy needed to implement VR requirements, because tribal officials desire to have management control. Projects sometimes have difficulty in applying VR eligibility standards, maintaining the confidentiality of consumers, and efficiently controlling project resources to meet the needs of consumers.

6. **AIVRS projects are generally applying established VR principles and methods to providing services.** Despite the fact that many of the projects are new to VR, projects appear to be providing services that are comparable to services provided by State VR agencies. They are applying VR eligibility criteria, developing IPEs, involving consumers in decision-making, and providing a range of rehabilitation services.
7. **The quality and completeness of case records is satisfactory at a majority of AIVRS projects, but there are record-keeping weaknesses at a number of projects.** There was wide variability both in the quality of record-keeping systems and in the implementation of those systems. Projects that worked closely with the State VR programs appeared to be more likely to have effective record-keeping systems.

8. **The functioning of AIVRS project advisory groups could be strengthened.** AIVRS projects are not required to have advisory groups. Where there are groups, project directors and advisory group members reported some confusion about the groups' roles, and reported problems with attendance. Native Americans have experience participating in tribal government structures, but not in advisory groups.
9. **AIVRS projects are generating appropriate levels of successful employment outcomes at reasonable costs.** Given the challenging environments in which they work, the rates of successful closures by AIVRS projects should be considered as very good. They are comparable to rates for Native Americans served by State VR agencies, who often live in areas with more positive economic environments. The costs per consumer are also reasonable, especially for more established projects.
10. **AIVRS projects in geographically remote areas face the most challenges.** Projects in remote locations were working in service areas with higher unemployment rates, had fewer resources for services, and had lower rates of successful closures. They needed to be particularly creative in providing VR services to meet the needs of their consumers.

#### Recommendations

1. **Consideration should be given to developing orientation materials and training for new AIVRS projects, including materials for tribal officials.** Many new projects have slow start-ups, at least partially because of the time needed to learn about VR. RSA could facilitate project start-ups by developing a manual for new projects, developing orientation materials for tribal officials, and holding an orientation session for new projects.
2. **RSA should develop training guidelines for AIVRS counselors with limited backgrounds in VR.** Many of the persons serving in counselor positions in AIVRS projects have limited backgrounds in VR. Projects provide a great deal of training to address the needs of these counselors, but the content and design of that training varies widely. RSA could assist AIVRS projects by developing guidelines for the types of training non-certified counselors should receive.
3. **RSA should develop monitoring and evaluation guidelines for AIVRS projects to strengthen internal project assessment and reporting to RSA.** It would be useful to projects if RSA would provide guidelines for monitoring and evaluating their efforts. Such guidelines could define the types of objectives that might be measured, methods, procedures, and schedules for measuring progress, and possible roles for project staff and others in implementing monitoring and evaluation activities.
4. **RSA should develop an initiative to increase communication and cooperation between State VR agencies and AIVRS projects.** Many AIVRS projects work

closely and well with their relevant State VR agency(s), but others do not. RSA can facilitate such communication and cooperation by encouraging contacts, by providing information about the AIVRS program to State agencies, and by disseminating effective models of collaboration to State agencies and AIVRS projects.

5. **RSA should provide training to AIVRS project directors on the development and effective use of advisory groups.** Advisory groups can be a useful mechanism for getting input and reactions from community members and service providers on project services. Advisory group training could address such topics as the composition of effective groups, useful roles for advisory groups, how to train advisory group members, and how to motivate effective participation.
6. **RSA should identify and publicize models for improving transportation systems and developing small businesses that can serve and employ AIVRS consumers.** Many of the AIVRS projects are in areas that lack transportation infrastructure and small business opportunities. RSA's technical assistance providers could identify and publicize creative approaches that have been used to address these issues.
7. **RSA should increase on-site monitoring and technical assistance by RSA staff to AIVRS projects.** Both AIVRS project directors and RSA staff members indicated that there was a need for more on-site visits to AIVRS projects by RSA staff. Such visits provide useful monitoring information for RSA, encourage self-evaluation by projects, and increase the visibility of the projects among tribal officials and the community.