

# Miniwakan Waonspekiye News



## SPIRIT LAKE CONSULTING, INC.

P. O. Box 76, 314 CIRCLE DR.

FORT TOTTEN, ND 58335

(701) 351-2175

<http://www.spiritleakeconsulting.com/>

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## My Experience as a 121 Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

By: Irene Bear Runner

My experience began in the fall of 1997. At the time I knew very little about working with people with disabilities. The 121 Project at Turtle Mountain was very intriguing to me because I would be working with my own tribal people. At the time I was very interested in learning about the needs of people with disabilities and what services were out there that could be utilized to assist them with their needs. I admit that I had a personal need to know about these services because my Mother had suffered from a stroke that left her paralyzed on her entire left side of her body. Through the years she struggled with trying to identify services that could assist her in daily life needs. I became aware of the many struggles that all of the people with disabilities have to face.

As a 121 VR counselor I met many people young and old that shared the same struggles because they had a disability. In the beginning I worked primarily with people that had a learning disability. They struggled with the label of LD, feeling that this label was a death sentence to their goals and aspirations for the future. I felt as a counselor it was my job to help them understand that having a learning disability was not a death sentence to their vocational dreams. It was only a stumbling block that needed to be dealt with. That together counselor and client would find all available resources to assist them in achieving their dreams. Most of the time this was not accomplished in a day or a week's time it usually took longer and sometimes the path had to be changed.

When I began working with people with physical disabilities I began to understand the bigger struggles that exist for them in just trying to get into the resource places that they needed to utilize. I also learned that all federally recognized tribes are exempt from ADA.

As a 121 VR Counselor I began to understand the many struggles that people with disabilities face especially on the reservation. The resources are not always there and when they do exist they are very limited. This is where creativity comes into play for both counselor and client.

When I was asked to write about my experiences as a VR counselor I didn't know how to explain the many experiences that I have encountered through the years. Each and every person is unique so as a counselor, I have had to take the time to listen and be observant when my clients were explaining what they wanted from their vocational services. Sometimes VR was not able to assist with an unmet need. This is where the referral process would begin. Referrals were made to local agencies whenever possible and a lot of times regional resources were utilized.

The techniques that I use as a VR counselor are very simple. I always make sure that I listen reflectively and observantly and I always treat the client with respect. The best description that I have for my experience in working as a VR Counselor is that I have gained so much knowledge from my clients, I can only hope that I have helped them as much in achieving their vocational goals.

### **An Example of a VR Success Story**

By: Irene Bear Runner

Marie was a young lady that had just graduated from high school. She applied for vocational rehabilitation services because the school counselor referred her.

During her intake she indicated that she was wanted to enroll in the pre-nursing curriculum. When her reports came back she had been diagnosed as MMR (Mild Mentally Retarded). She had graduated from high school under a monitored special education curriculum.

This situation is always a hard one for the VR counselor to have to decide what course of counseling will be taken. When Marie came back in to do her IPE (Individual Plan of Employment). We discussed her cognitive disability and what courses were required to become a nurse. At first she was very upset because she thought Voc Rehab was trying to discourage her from her dream. I sat and talked with her about her disability and explained to her that everyone has a disability of some kind that limits our choices in some way. It is not the end of the world and that small steps should be taken. I wanted to know why she had chosen nursing. She told me that she liked working in the hospital. I suggested to her that there are many jobs in a hospital environment. I suggested that she take some of the required courses in the first semester to see how it would go. If she felt that they were difficult to complete there were assistive services that could be utilized and if they did not work something else could be tried. The one thing I did not want her to do was to walk away without telling me her struggles. Together we could take those barriers away. Marie did not go into nursing but she graduated with a two-year degree in medical transcription. She later got a job working at a local hospital.

She later told me that she wanted to give up after she could not get through those first couple of required courses. She may have if Voc Rehab wasn't there for her

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## **Voc Rehab Experiences & Techniques**

Bv: Willie Davis, SLC Consultant

My knowledge and experiences as a Tribal 121 Project Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor comes from over 10 years of working with tribal members with disabilities, stemming from all forms of disabilities - learning, deafness, cerebral palsy, chemical dependency, etc.

I have found that working in a tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Project has been very rewarding. Not only have I been able to help other disabled tribal members, through vocational or employment training. But, I've had the opportunity to meet many individuals who without vocational rehabilitation services, would not be able to live independent and productive lives. I have tried to be open and sincere in working with clients. I knew when to reference my personal disability, so that the client was able to build trust in my feedback. I also, knew when to just listen to the client's needs and not give personal comments.

Throughout these years of experience I have developed some techniques and styles on how to best work with local tribal members. For example, many individuals with disabilities living on a tribal reservation will come into your office, most times reluctantly, not because they do not like you or your agency. But, rather they are somewhat shy, unsure and, most of the time, lacking self-motivation. Many times, family members, friends, or school personnel will refer or bring that individual in for services. The best way to help them in this situation is through example and leadership.

Also, by given them more responsibilities and accountability in performing the objectives in their Individual Employment Plan (IEP), they will become more independent without giving it much thought or realizing it. You need to make sure that they understand the laws and regulations that are required to help individuals with disabilities, regardless of race.

In summary, you should always keep in mind as you work with individuals with disabilities, especially if you are not a person with a disability that understanding, from a point of reference where they are in their life is vital to opening up communication. Trying to help someone by providing services, modifications or accommodations is only a small part of being an effective and many times affective Counselor. This can determine how receptive your client will be to a working relationship, as well as believe in your program and that the services will help them in the end - training or employment outcomes.

As far as specific suggestions or techniques, the following is a list that has worked for me, when counseling a disabled individual seeking employment and/or training opportunities:

- Provide the individual with 100 % of your attention - stay away from answering the phone or door!
- Ask questions, especially during the application process!
- Follow up with letters, phone calls!

You need to be concerned about why they are coming in for services and how vocational rehabilitation services can help them -they need to know from the onset that this is an employment program and that services are tied to an employment outcome.

- If you are not able to assist then you must refer. Do not leave them hanging or go out the door feeling that you did them a disservice. After all, the program's integrity and reputation can be affected negatively if not appropriately represented. Vocational rehabilitation cannot help everyone, but you can often help them find who can help them. Try to send people out the door better in some small way than when they came in, even if it is just a phone call to another agency to be sure they are the right service.



- Be genuine and honest. This is very important if you will be working with a client sometimes up to 5 years or more.
- Focus on one objective per client at a time. Do not try and do too much at once.
- Space out the activities for each client on a schedule or matrix. So that each has timelines and checks/balances.
- Keep in mind that when trying to find employment outcomes, that many of the clients are on Social Security and that giving up this assured monthly income will effect their lives. Given they had to establish evidence to receive it and many times waited months for eligibility.
- Many of the tribal members will have some difficulty asking for help or be reluctant to receive modifications or accommodations.
- Understand that clients may take time to decide on their goals they are establishing in their own lives until they have an opportunity to reflect, just as I have in my own life. My Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor worked with me to develop personal objectives in my IEP that assisted me in my life to become more independent. Give your clients the time and support they need to decide on their own objectives. It can be an empowering experience.

## **Vocational Rehabilitation Resources**

<http://www.mvaw.org/>

Minot Vocational Adjustment Workshop, Inc. is a private, non-profit organization accredited by The Council on Quality and Leadership. They offer support for individuals of 18 years of age or older with developmental disabilities. Services are provided throughout central and Northern North Dakota.

<http://www.nd.gov/humanservices/services/disabilities/vr/>

North Dakota Vocational Rehabilitation helps those with disabilities by providing training and employment services to individuals to accomplish competitive employment as well as improved independence.

<http://www.jobsnd.com/>

Job Service North Dakota is involved in all areas of workforce development. Including and Unemployment Insurance Program, assisting businesses in obtaining qualified individuals, a job seekers program as well as Labor Market Information.

<http://www.ndcommerce.com/wfd/wdc/index.html>

The North Dakota Workforce Development Council was established under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. Its purpose is to provide services for workforce investment throughout the state and local systems. They counsel the Governor and the public on issues concerning the nature and scope of workforce development within North Dakota's needs and resources.

[www.canar.org](http://www.canar.org)

Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation is an agency that provides services to progress rehabilitation services for North Dakota's Native American persons with disabilities.

## Spirit Lake Consulting

314 Circle Dr  
P.O. Box 663  
Fort Totten, ND  
58335

Phone:  
701-351-2175

Fax: 800-905-2571

Web Address:  
[www.spiritleakeconsulting.com](http://www.spiritleakeconsulting.com)

E-Mail:  
[info@spiritleakeconsulting.com](mailto:info@spiritleakeconsulting.com)

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## Vocational Rehabilitation Resources Continued

[www.rehabnetwork.org/canar/native\\_american\\_rehabilitation.htm](http://www.rehabnetwork.org/canar/native_american_rehabilitation.htm)

The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation serves 1.2 million people with physical and mental disabilities within the States, District of Columbia, and territories.

[www.nichcy.org/stateshe/nd.htm](http://www.nichcy.org/stateshe/nd.htm)

Provides a list of North Dakota State Resources.

[www.ndcrn.com/students/training/voc-rehab.html](http://www.ndcrn.com/students/training/voc-rehab.html)

The North Dakota Career Resource Network helps those with disabilities to make informed decisions when it comes to their career and educational goals.

[www.nd.gov/cap/](http://www.nd.gov/cap/)

The North Dakota Client Assistance Program offers Vocational Rehabilitation Services and Independent Living Services to those with disabilities.

[www.workforcesafety.com/workers/typesofbenefits.asp](http://www.workforcesafety.com/workers/typesofbenefits.asp)

North Dakota Workforce Safety and Insurance is committed to making the work environment the safest possible while making hardships for the employee decrease as well as high claim costs.

[www.addictionsearch.com/treatment\\_facilities/north-dakota-state-vocational-rehabilitation-office-state-hospital\\_16.html](http://www.addictionsearch.com/treatment_facilities/north-dakota-state-vocational-rehabilitation-office-state-hospital_16.html)

Addictionsearch.com provides a free 24-hour helpline for those who need assistance and counseling.

[www.hirenetwork.org/admin/clearinghouse.php?state\\_id=ND](http://www.hirenetwork.org/admin/clearinghouse.php?state_id=ND)

The National Hire Network offers resources and assistance for those in North Dakota with criminal histories to find a potential employer.

[www.ndcaa.org/](http://www.ndcaa.org/)

The North Dakota Community Action Association offers programs and services that give low-income families and individuals the confidence and know-how to become self-reliant.

[www.ndkidscount.org/](http://www.ndkidscount.org/)

North Dakota Kids Count seeks to improve the community by encouraging policy decisions and networks to support those families with what is necessary to raise children.

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