



CREATING AN AIVRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

An advisory committee is not required under the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) program. However, in order to gain community input, some AIVRS programs have established an advisory committee. The involvement of an advisory committee, comprised of consumers and professionals, is a common practice in the delivery of social services. The use of advisory committees is especially relevant for administering rural vocational rehabilitation programs (Harley, Rice & Dean, 1996; Larsen & Foley, 1992), for strengthening the delivery of services (Fry, 1996), and for assessing the needs of American Indians with disabilities (Marshall, 1994).

Contribution of Advisory Committee to an AIVRS Program

Advisory committee members identified their personal contributions to the program as:

- Providing information;
- Assisting with outreach activities;
- Bringing diversity to the project;
- Giving guidance to the project services; and
- Listening.

AIVRS Program Directors identified the purpose of the advisory committee as:

- [Observing] and [assessing] the progress of the program;
- Reviewing policies and procedures;
- Reviewing the types and focus of services to various disability populations;
- Increasing access to additional support services; and
- Increasing disability awareness.

One basic concept of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (the Act), is to ensure that people with disabilities have a voice and opportunity to participate in general policy development and implementation related to vocational rehabilitation service delivery system, and implemented in the Special Application Requirements (34 CFR 371.21(f)). One way to ensure that American Indians with disabilities have a voice in the vocational rehabilitation service delivery system is to provide an opportunity to participate on an advisory committee. It is recommended that a proposed plan for developing an advisory committee is included in the Quality of the Project Design section of an AIVRS grant proposal to address consumer involvement in AIVRS program operations.

Functions of an advisory committee may be to advise tribal leaders and local state vocational rehabilitation agencies of the unique cultural values of the community, suggest creative and culturally sensitive approaches in outreach methodologies, and advocate for AIVRS consumers. Possible advisory committee members may include, but are not limited to: current and former AIVRS consumers, tribal program directors, case workers of social service programs, tribal council members, parents of children with disabilities, tribal elders, educational representatives, employer representatives, vocational rehabilitation representatives, and community agency representatives.

Note: An advisory committee is one of ten Special Application Requirements (34CFR 371 (f)) that a tribal applicant must address through its assurance statements and include in a separate section of an AIVRS grant proposal. Addressing this Special Application Requirement does not include information on the composition of an advisory committee.

It is up to each AIVRS program that wishes to develop and implement an advisory committee, to design a structure for an effective advisory committee that will ensure that American Indian people with disabilities are

afforded the opportunity to be involved in system change, such as the vocational rehabilitation policy development or outreach activities.

Advisory Committee versus Board

It is important to know the difference in responsibility between an advisory committee and an advisory board in order to prevent an inappropriate use of the committee that could result in serious consequences.

Advisory Committee

Advisory committees typically have the following responsibilities:

- To perform in an advisory capacity with no monetary compensation for meeting attendance, meals, or mileage reimbursement.
- To make recommendations, but cannot take action to enforce a recommendation.
- To participate in outreach and advocacy activities to promote and sustain the AIVRS program in the community.
- To review AIVRS program reports and consumer satisfaction surveys to provide feedback.
- Optional: To establish committee officers (President, Vice-President, and Secretary) that support consistent and purposeful meetings with the understanding that the AIVRS program will be fully responsible for facilitating the advisory committee meetings, such as to develop the meeting agenda, record and distribute meeting notes, follow-up assigned tasks, and so forth.

Advisory Board

Advisory boards have the following characteristics:

- The board is elected or appointed to act as representatives of stockholders to establish corporate management related policies and make decisions on major company/organization issues.
- The major company/organization or program is responsible to their board.
- The board will establish officers, including President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer.
- The board has the authority to make decisions for an organization.

An advisory committee takes time to assemble and become educated about the AIVRS program. The AIVRS program will monitor and report on the effectiveness of the advisory committee in the annual performance report to RSA. Many AIVRS programs have tried to establish an advisory committee, but find it difficult to continue with meetings since members may attend a few meetings and then dropout.

AIVRS programs which have had success in developing an advisory committee strongly suggest the need for the committee to have goals and objectives that interest the committee members and support the mission of the program. Developing an interesting and compelling agenda for the committee with a focus on solving problems, concerns, and barriers faced by tribal members with disabilities in the community to obtain, retain, and maintain gainful employment will empower members to contribute to topic areas on which they are familiar and experienced.

Some AIVRS programs have reported that people resist participation in advisory committees because they do not want to *“be blamed for things that go wrong.”* It is critical that the AIVRS programs clearly announce recruitment of members for an advisory committee and then ensure the public that the AIVRS program is responsible for making all decisions.

Advisement: Advisory committee regulations 34 CFR 369.45 have been rescinded, with the majority of the regulations being incorporated into the revised 371 regulations. Please contact your Project Officer for more information.