

American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Technical Assistance Center

Smoke Signals

Issue 8: Traditional Healing Services

Summer 2026



AIVRTTAC is a National Technical Assistance Center serving all AIVRS projects through education, training, and technical assistance to ensure the provision of culturally appropriate vocational rehabilitation services.

Introduction

Developed by the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Technical Assistance Center (AIVRTTAC), this Smoke Signals practice guide focuses on integrating traditional healing services into American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) practice to help participants address barriers to employment and achieve meaningful vocational outcomes.



Background

The 94 AIVRS projects funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration operate across 26 states, serving Tribal members with disabilities who reside on or near designated Tribal service areas. These projects support participants in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining employment.

Unlike State VR agencies, AIVRS projects may support access to traditional healing services that reflect the participant's Tribal culture, community practices, and worldview. Traditional healing services are culturally based wellness practices identified by Tribes and participants that support emotional, spiritual, physical, family, or community well-being. These services, offered through recognized Tribal healers or cultural providers, can help participants address personal, emotional, spiritual, mental, and wellness-related barriers that may affect employment readiness and success. AIVRS staff may facilitate access to these services through referrals, service coordination, allowable financial supports, transportation assistance, scheduling support, or inclusion in the participant's Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) when appropriate.

Many Tribal languages and cultural traditions understand disability differently than the standard Western model and may not have a direct equivalent of the English term "disability." Rather than focusing primarily on diagnosis or impairment, participants may describe their experiences in terms of imbalance, loss of direction, grief, stress, family disruption, spiritual concerns, lack of engagement in cultural practices, or disconnection from Tribal identity. This highlights the importance of discussing healing, strengths, balance, and readiness for work in culturally relevant ways.

To better understand how AIVRS projects provide culturally responsive services, including traditional healing services, the AIVRTTAC Traditional Cultural Guidance and Support Liaison, Dr. Lee Gaseoma, facilitated monthly Talking Circles with participants in the Circle of Wisdom Keepers (CWK). Talking Circles are a culturally grounded approach used by Native Americans to create respectful, trusting spaces where participants can listen, learn, and share experiences in support of common goals. They promote teamwork, collaborative problem-solving,

and shared decision-making while fostering mutual respect, open communication, and meaningful connection among participants. Talking Circles also ensure that individual voices are heard, helping participants share lived experiences, strengthen a sense of belonging, and support self-direction, learning, and professional growth.

The purpose of the CWK Talking Circles was to learn from individuals with personal knowledge or experience in the use of traditional practices to help Tribal members with disabilities find their place within their communities, and to explore how those practices align with standard vocational rehabilitation services that support participants in achieving meaningful and culturally relevant employment outcomes. Dr. Gaseoma also conducted additional sessions with projects receiving intensive training and technical assistance.

With permission, Talking Circles were audio recorded, not for research or evaluation, but to preserve and better understand participants' lived experiences. Dr. Gaseoma reviewed these recordings to gain insight into Tribal perspectives on disability and to document practices that support individuals in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining employment, including traditional healing services.

Integrating Traditional Healing Services into AIVRS Practice

Traditional healing services are often holistic, addressing mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, as well as the participant's family and environment, rather than medical issues alone. Services vary by Tribe, community, healer, and participant preference. They are typically provided by recognized traditional healers whose roles may be affirmed through Tribal custom, community trust, elder endorsement, family lineage, or established local practice. Traditional healing services may include

- participation in ceremonies such as smudging or sweat lodges
- use of culturally significant items such as medicine bags containing sage, sweetgrass, cedar, or tobacco





- herbal remedies
- prayer
- opportunities to reconnect with cultural teachings, language, and community practices that strengthen identity, belonging, and wellness.

Because employment barriers may involve grief, trauma, substance use recovery, anxiety, identity loss, family instability, or community disconnection, these healing supports can improve readiness for work and long-term success. Traditional healing services are not separate from employment goals, and may help participants address barriers that affect readiness, retention, confidence, and long-term success at work.

The use of traditional healing services within AIVRS projects should be provided consistent with Tribal protocols, participant informed choice, and applicable Federal, Tribal, and AIVRS Program requirements. Participation in traditional healing services should always be voluntary, based on participant choice during the joint development of their IPE with the AIVRS counselor, and aligned with project policy. Staff should obtain appropriate consent before sharing participant information with healers, family members, or cultural providers.

AIVRS counselors can facilitate access to traditional healing services in several ways:

During Intake

- Ask participants whether they would like cultural or traditional practices considered as part of their services, including healing approaches, ceremonies, language, or other community-based supports.
- Use interpreters or culturally knowledgeable staff who speak the Tribal language and understand Tribal values, beliefs, and traditions to improve communication and trust during the intake process.
- Explain available traditional healing services in a respectful and accessible manner, including how such services may support mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.
- Recognize that some participants may describe barriers in terms of imbalance, disconnection, family concerns, or spiritual needs rather than using clinical or disability-based language.
- Create a welcoming environment that acknowledges the participant's cultural identity, family relationships, and community context.

During IPE Development

- Include traditional healing services in the IPE (the participant's written employment plan that outlines goals and services) when they align with the participant's preferences and cultural values.
- Identify how traditional healing services may support employment outcomes by improving well-being, confidence, focus, stability, motivation, or readiness for work.
- Collaborate with the participant to define culturally meaningful employment goals, including self-employment, subsistence activities, traditional arts, community roles, or other viable career pathways.
- Support participants who were not raised with traditional teachings but express a desire to reconnect with their culture as part of their vocational journey.
- Consider participant needs that may affect employment, including mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, family, and environmental factors.

During Service Delivery

- Coordinate with traditional healers, Tribal elders, spiritual leaders, or cultural programs to provide services in a respectful and appropriate manner.
- Facilitate the participant's access to ceremonies and cultural activities such as sweat lodges, smudging, powwows, language classes, and community gatherings that strengthen belonging and identity.
- Support use of culturally significant items, such as medicine bags containing sage, sweetgrass, cedar, or tobacco, when appropriate and requested by the participant.
- Discuss with the participant how traditional healing may include identifying root causes of challenges, use of herbal medicines, spiritual guidance, and restoring balance and wellness.
- Use AIVRS project funds, when allowable, to support traditional healing practices through necessary items, transportation, or culturally appropriate forms of payment. In some communities, gratitude for healing services may traditionally be expressed through food, goods, or other offerings rather than standard fee-for-service payment.
- Ensure all services outlined in the participant's IPE are delivered in a culturally respectful manner that follows Tribal customs and protocols.



During Follow-Up

- Check in regularly on the participant's experience with traditional healing services and whether those supports are helping address barriers to employment.
- Adjust services and supports as needed based on participant feedback, changing vocational goals, or recommendations from AIVRS counselors and cultural providers.
- Provide culturally responsive VR services that reinforce connections to community, family, language, and cultural identity as ongoing strengths that support long-term employment.
- Recognize progress in holistic terms, including improved personal well-being, confidence, cultural participation, and readiness for employment, rather than immediate job placement outcomes.
- Continue collaboration with Tribal and community partners to help sustain the participant's employment and long-term well-being.

When working with traditional healers and cultural practices, AIVRS project staff should consult with Tribal leaders, elders, or cultural advisors when they are uncertain about appropriate customs or procedures. It is important to respect Tribal protocols related to ceremonies, sacred items, and the roles of traditional healers within the community. Staff should also recognize that traditional healing often focuses on identifying root causes of challenges, restoring balance, and promoting overall well-being rather than addressing concerns through a strictly Western framework. When permitted under AIVRS project policies, staff may also support culturally appropriate forms of payment or offerings to traditional healers, such as food, goods, or other non-monetary expressions of gratitude.

Conclusion

No two AIVRS projects are alike; each reflects the unique culture, traditions, and priorities of the community it serves. Together, they demonstrate a range of integrated approaches that support Tribal members with disabilities in achieving meaningful employment, economic self-sufficiency, and full participation in community life. For example, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, in consultation with Tribal elders, uses the term Oun'iyekiyap (meaning

“finds their place”) as part of its AIVRS project name. This reflects the broader goal of helping Tribal members with disabilities achieve gainful employment while aligning Tribal vocational services with cultural identity and purpose.

The impact of AIVRS projects extends beyond employment outcomes. Providing culturally appropriate and responsive services requires a team-based approach, in which staff work alongside participants throughout their vocational journey. This partnership reinforces the importance of ongoing support, cultural respect, and shared responsibility in achieving meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

Contact Information

For further support, please reach out to:

Wayne Dagel, AIVRTTAC Director
wayne.dagel@nau.edu or Tribal Vocational
Rehabilitation Institute Director Laura Maudsley at
lmaudsley@nawic.edu

