

## **Northern Arapaho Vocational Rehabilitation Project**

*Donovan Antelope*

The Northern Arapaho Vocational Rehabilitation (Voc Rehab) Project has been providing support for Wind River Indian Reservation tribal members since 2001.

The Voc Rehab Project's goals are to help all Native Americans with disabilities find and/or maintain employment, learn the skills needed to live independently and give on-going support (to those who are severely disabled) in maintaining or obtaining employment. By providing support, Voc Rehab hopes to increase appropriate employment placements for American Indians with disabilities. They also hope to help improve the local community's economy. Voc Rehab hopes that whatever support they offer helps increase every applicant's self-confidence and self-esteem by once again becoming productive and independent members of the community.

The staff at the Voc Rehab Project is made up of four counselors: Evelyn Jimenez, Elizabeth Trosper, Ben S. Ridgley, and Sheila Fletcher; the Records Manager, JoAnn Arthur and the Project Administrator, Veronica Gambler.

The Voc Rehab Project is now under the direction of Veronica Gambler. After reorganization last year, Veronica was hired in April of 2008 to be the new Project Administrator. Veronica has spent the last nine months getting familiarized with the project and everything that has been done before her arrival. She admits at first that the transition into the project was a little rough, mainly due to the fact that she was new and had to get up to speed on everything. But she credits her staff for making the transition a little easier. "They're a great group and really work hard at their jobs," she says. "They work late hours when they have to and really go above and beyond. All the work and effort they do is very much appreciated." The main goals of her position are to ensure the project runs smoothly, that they are working within the guidelines of their grant, guaranteeing that all parties are accountable for their actions and promote individuality among the staff members and consumers. Like any Director or leader, Veronica makes sure the project is going at an optimal level and that everyone is on board.

The Voc Rehab counselors work with the various applicants who approach the project for assistance. The applicants are referred to as consumers rather than clients. They do this in order to make the clients feel more welcome and not seem like someone who constantly needs help and supervision. Evelyn and Ben work

with the older age group; Elizabeth works with the corrections group, and Sheila works with the 14-21, or transition, age group. Each counselor is trained in their specific area and this helps the project keep all the case files in order and ensures that wires aren't crossed and that there is no confusion between the counselors.

Consumers who are eligible for services are Alaskan or Native Americans who are enrolled with any Federally or State Recognized Tribe; that they are physically or mentally handicapped and that their handicap is an impediment to gaining employment; that they are presumed to benefit from Voc Rehab's services after an extended evaluation of services and that they reside on the Wind River Indian Reservation. Those who are not eligible are non-tribal members, tribal members who live off the reservation; consumers who, after the evaluation process, are deemed incapable of benefitting from Voc Rehab services in obtaining employment.

The individual counselors first determine if the consumers are eligible for Voc Rehab services through an in-depth application process which takes about 60 days to complete.

During the course of the application process the consumers are shown a video to learn more about the program. Depending on their age and/or situation, they meet with the appropriate counselor to discuss support and employment options when and if they qualify for Voc Rehab services.

If they do qualify for services, then the counselors help the consumers develop an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE). The IPE contains the consumers plan for their goals, expectations and employment options. The consumers and their counselors explore all their employments options, taking into account their disability.

After going over all their options, the consumers and their counselors begin applying for employment in the community. Depending on their situation, the counselors will send their consumers to employment readiness classes at the Wind River Tribal College or to take FAFSA and Scholarship readiness courses. They also assist with funding if their consumers are interested in areas such as vocational training or obtaining their CDL's.

Once they have successfully obtained and maintain employment, their counselors consider them a success and close their case.

The Voc Rehab Project is extremely beneficial for all Native Americans living with disabilities because it helps them become more independent, improves their self-esteem and makes them a productive member of the community. Native Americans living with disabilities shouldn't have to feel that they cannot work or cannot be of service in the community. Voc Rehab helps them reach whatever employment goals they may have.



Jo Ann Arthur



Sheila Fletcher



Evelyn Jimenez



Elizabeth Trosper



Veronica Gambler



Ben Ridgley