



DISABILITIES

American Indians and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people have the highest rate of disabilities and the lowest opportunity to access programming.⁸³ AI/ANs with disabilities deserve comprehensive care, including culturally sensitive programs and quality resources. State-led and non-tribal programs feature multiple barriers for individuals with disabilities living on or near reservations and villages, including a lack of cultural awareness, research, accommodations, and opportunities. Services needed by individuals with disabilities range and overlap with the need for transportation, home modification, LTSS, and other crucial supportive services.

A critical program established for AI/ANs with disabilities is the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) through the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). This program was established through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, amended in 2015 (as amended P.L. 114-95), to establish and promote workforce programming for individuals with disabilities. Congress recognized in Title I that work “fulfills the need of an individual to be productive, promotes independence, enhances self-esteem, and allows for participation in the mainstream of life in the United States.”⁸⁴ However, Section 121, which provides employment opportunities for AI/ANs, is critically underfunded leaving many individuals with disabilities unable to access these services.

Key Recommendations

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Labor, HHS, Education Appropriations Bill

Rehabilitation Act – Title I

American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services

- *Provide \$3.6 billion for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services*

Consistent with Section 121(c) of the Rehabilitation Act, the Department is required to reserve a percentage of funds for vocational rehabilitation state grants to support training and technical assistance to tribal governments under the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) program. Specifically, the Rehabilitation Services Administration is required to reserve not less than 1.8 percent and not more than 2 percent of the funds set aside from the State VR program for the AIVRS program to provide training and technical assistance to tribal nations that have received AIVRS grants under section 121(a) of the Act. AIVRS awards grants to a select number of tribal nations to assist them in increasing their workforce capacity while providing culturally focused vocational rehabilitation services for AI/ANs with disabilities on or near a reservation. In FY 2019, there were 88 AIVRS programs across 26 states. Every year, in a staggered system, tribal nations that are ending their five-year grants must reapply. However, funding has been inconsistent and the number of grants have fluctuated. AI/ANs with disabilities should not have to fear that after five years they will no longer be able to access services because of reduced funding or a grant's termination. It is critical that AIVRS is well funded to provide for individuals with disabilities that need vocational rehabilitation.