

National Disability Forum

Removing Barriers to Accessing Services in Tribal Communities

Part Two

November 13, 2024

James Edrington: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Social Security's National Disability Forum on removing barriers to assessing services in Tribal Communities, Part 2. I would now like to turn it over to Kilolo Kijakazi, Principal Senior Advisor to the Commissioner at Social Security Administration.

Kilolo Kijakazi: Thanks, James Edrington, and good afternoon, or good morning to those on the west coast. Thank you for joining us today. I am Kilolo Kijakazi, helps to hear it twice, Principal Senior Advisor to the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration. I have the pleasure of welcoming you to our 29th National Disability Forum: Removing Barriers to Accessing Services in Tribal Communities, Part 2. These forums are a cornerstone of our approach to better understand and address the needs of the communities we serve. First, let me review some housekeeping items. The National Disability Forum is a public forum and may include representatives of the press. So, any statements or comments made during the forum may be considered "on the record." This virtual forum is being recorded and will be available on the National Disability Forum's website within four weeks after today's forum. Second, we have disabled the chat, microphone and video feature of our attendees. If you dial into the Microsoft Teams meeting, please use your phone's mute feature. Third, we are offering two accessibility features today. We have an American Sign Language interpreter and a closed captioning. If you would like closed captions please go to your MS Teams toolbar, select the three dots titled

"more," select the language and speech option, and select the turn on your live captions option.

We appreciate your participation. Before I introduce Commissioner Martin O'Malley let me quickly outline our focus areas for today: Ticket to Work; Work Incentives Planning and Assistance; Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security; Rehabilitation Services; American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation, and Employment Support Services. For more inclusive, accessible, and equitable Social Security programs and services, communities require ongoing commitment and collaboration. I'm proud of the progress we're making to remove barriers to access for all tribal communities, but I know there's more we can learn from our panelists and from everyone joining today. Commissioner Martin O'Malley is unable to join us live, but he has recorded brief remarks. Martin O'Malley was nominated by President Biden to serve as Commissioner of the Social Security Administration in July of 2023. Following confirmation by the U.S. Senate he was sworn into office on December 20th, 2023. He served as Governor of Maryland from 2007 to 2015 following two terms as Mayor of Baltimore. Commissioner O'Malley is a life-long public servant and a pioneer of using performance management and customer service technologies in government. He has written extensively about how to govern for better results in the information age by measuring the outputs of government on a real-time basis. Now, let's hear from Commissioner O'Malley.

Martin O'Malley, Commissioner for the Social Security Administration: Hello.

Commissioner Martin O'Malley here. And I want to thank you for joining today's important discussion. Although I'm unable to join you in real-time today I wanted to recognize our Office of Native American partnerships, which was established by Dr. Kilolo Kijakazi in 2022 and is now led by Renee Ferguson. In May, I had the privilege of traveling to South Dakota and

co-hosting a tribal consultation with the Oglala Sioux Tribe, co-hosted with Tribal President Frank Star Comes Out. We had a chance to listen directly to tribal members about improving customer service in South Dakota which is hours away from any Social Security office. To ensure tribal voices continue to be heard, we're establishing the Commissioner's Tribal Advisory Committee to serve as a direct channel for tribal leaders to provide recommendations on policies and programs affecting their communities. And this benefits the Agency as well because we'll have first-hand knowledge to help us address the specific needs of tribal communities and overcome barriers. But in addition to sustained dialogue and in-person consultations, we're using technology to better connect SSA's programs and services with your communities. So, we're reducing wait times on our 1-800 number and working with partner agencies to improve internet collectivity and remove other barriers to accessing services online. And we know language is also often a barrier, so we're incorporating native languages into our materials and services and honoring the rich cultural heritage of tribal communities. But to help us carry out this work we're also aiming to actively recruit native students through internships, scholarships, mentorship programs, and invest in their retention, within SSA. The Office of Native American Partnerships is also offering specialized training sessions to ensure that tribal government employees can effectively assist community members in navigating Social Security benefits and services. In closing, many thanks to our esteemed panel members for sharing your expertise, including strategies for vocational programs, like SSA's Ticket-to-Work, which supports career development for people ages 18 through 64 who receive Social Security disability benefits and want to work. Renee Ferguson and other agency leaders are listening closely for potential solutions we can deploy to assist tribal members who are disabled get back into the workplace.

And so, I encourage tribal members and leaders to reach out to Renee if you're interested in partnering. Thanks very, very, much.

Renee Ferguson: Thank you to the Commissioner. We appreciate his support for today's important panel discussion, and to Dr. Kilolo Kijakazi for her remarks, the former Acting Commissioner for Social Security and for her support to tribal communities. If the audience would like to and you can do so now, submit questions for our panelists. And you can submit us an email to NationalDisabilityForum@ssa.gov. Please let us know your name and your email and your question, and we will get those to the panelists during today's forum. So, with that, as with all National Disability Forums, we provide a platform for our stakeholders to share their unique insights directly with us at SSA and the policymakers within the agency. SSA's participation is for the purpose of gaining insight by listening to the panelists and their responses to audience questions or comments. With our expert panelists sharing their thoughts and their experiences, they help SSA shape the future of Social Security in an effort to strengthen our disability policy development and contributing to our continued effort to address equitable access to our programs and services. During today's forum we will focus on tribal communities for the major topics that were introduced by Dr. Kilolo Kijakazi in her opening remarks. After the panel discussion we will host an open question-and-answer session. So please go ahead and submit those questions for our panelists: [National Disability Forum@ssa.gov](mailto:NationalDisabilityForum@ssa.gov). Now I would like to introduce our moderator Dr. Stephanie Fryberg. She has offered to moderate today's expert panel. Dr. Fryberg is a James E. Johnson Professor of Psychology and the founding director of the Research for Indigenous Social Action and Equity Center at Northwestern University. She has received numerous honors and awards for her years of study and research including an induction in the Multicultural Alumni Hall of Fame at Stanford University and election at the academy,

American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Fryberg also provided testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs regarding the impact of racist stereotypes of Indigenous people, and she served as an expert witness in the Keepseagle versus U.S. Department of Agricultural class action lawsuit. Please learn more about Dr. Fryberg, our expert panelist and SSA executives on the NDF homepage on the website. So, Dr. Fryberg, we welcome you, and the floor is yours.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Thank you, Renee, for the warm welcome. I join SSA in welcoming our panelists and attendees to the National Disability Forum on Removing Barriers to Accessing Services in Tribal Communities, Part 2. Today we will have a closed discussion with five panelists, experts in their field. After the discussion, we will accept questions via email as time permits. I will share your questions with the panelists. If you wish to ask a question, and I know we keep saying this, but it's important because we want you to know how to do this, but please provide a comment by email, add your name and location in your email question. The appropriate email address is NationalDisabilityForum -- all one word -- @ssa.gov. The chatline will not be open during the discussion segment. All questions must be received via email. So, before we begin this afternoon's discussion I'd like to set the context for our panel. As we navigate the forthcoming landscape, the role of intercommunity support has never been more critical. With the uncertainty of resources and the economic constraints we are currently facing for our most vulnerable communities, the world presents both challenges and opportunities for growth in partnerships. As we look to the future it's clear that the path forward lies in collaboration, community-driven solutions, and other aspects of working together for a better future. By fostering partnerships between government bodies, like the Social Security Administration and local communities, we can create more responsive and effective support

systems. These partnerships can help bridge gaps in access to essential services and resources, ensuring that no one is left behind. The goal is not just to create safety nets for times of crisis, but to build sustainable empowering systems that allow all community members to thrive. This involves reimagining how services are delivered, leveraging technology, and most importantly, centering the voices and needs of the communities themselves in the decision-making process. It is in this spirit of innovation collaboration and community empowerment, that we have brought together our distinguished panelists today. They will be discussing strategies for Removing Barriers to Accessing Services in Tribal Communities, with an eye towards creating a more inclusive and resilient future for all. As we now move into our panel, let me start by introducing our panelists. First, we have Larissa Cummings. She works with Alaska Work Incentives Planning and Assistance. She's the project director and Micro Enterprise Fund administrator. She's at the University of Alaska Ingrid Center for Human Development. Benita McKerry, Advocate and Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries with Social Security Coordinator. She works in the Native American Disability Law Center. August Martin, Vocational Rehabilitation Program Specialist. American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Rehabilitation Services Administration in the U.S. Department of Education. Next, Peggy Jo Archer, the Director of Elder Justice projects at the International Association for Indigenous Aging, IA2. And last but not least, R. Joshua Drywater, a Director of Native Initiatives with the Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. Their extensive bios can be found on the National Disability Forum's website, again at ssa.gov/ndf. Okay, so let's begin today's conversation. I would like to start the conversation looking first at work incentives, planning and assistance. So, we have several work incentive planning and assistance and protection in advocacy for beneficiaries of Social Security organizations that have made successful contact

with tribal organizations in their service area, but not all have been successful. What recommendations can you offer that might help the provider's SSA funds to improve outreach to the tribal populations in their service area? And I want to start today with Larissa.

Larissa Cummings: Hello, good morning from Alaska. I would say that Alaska being as large as it is and as widespread as all of the little towns and villages are, it is a particular challenge in being able to reach folks in those far-flung areas. But as far-flung as they are, it's really important I think to be present. Communicating via distance can work and we have made it work. We made it work long before the pandemic, but it does take a little bit longer, I think, to establish trust. And working with Indigenous cultures in the smaller villages requires some really heavy-duty listening skills. It means not asking as many questions, allowing for silences as information is processed, and that is a way of showing respect. So, in order to improve outreach, you need to be able to listen and build that trust. There's a lot of tips there. Facial expressions are subtle but very important, and so it's important for providers to learn that and to be sensitive to that. And even when you have requirements that you have to meet its best if you can work to meet those objectives with input and collaboration from the community. So, for example, when I do outreach events for the WIPA project, I reach out to a DVR office that might be in the vicinity of that village. I usually work through hub cities. And so, I'm reaching the villages that surround that larger town, but I'm working through the DVR offices in that town and collaborating with them to reach out to the beneficiaries in that town and in surrounding areas. Collaborating with agencies who are already present in rural communities is a really good way to start to build that trust and allow people to communicate with you more easily.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Larissa, I wonder, you know as each of you come into the conversation if you want to provide just a little context around the work that you do, assuming maybe

everyone hasn't read your full bio, I think it will help. And if we can just do it the first-time people speak just to help everyone understand the perspective you're coming from. I don't know if that helps. I feel like we jumped into the question but didn't give you the opportunity to introduce yourself. And I think that might help us see where some of the comments you're making come from, and really just add depth to what you're saying.

Larissa Cummings: Thank you, I do think that's important. So, I am Larissa Cummings, and I am the Project Director with the Work Incentive Planning and Assistance or WIPA project in Alaska. More importantly, I actually have spent time and lived out in rural Alaska and went to high school out there and lived there a little bit through college. So, I've actually lived in the areas that I'm speaking of, and we serve those areas. So, I've been with the WIPA project for 16 years and have done outreach out into a lot of villages in Alaska. In Alaska we have larger villages that are surrounded by smaller villages, so those hub villages. And in those rural area's subsistence is a really strong way of life. That has to be taken into consideration with the services provided. So, I'm not sure if there's anything else I can add.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: No, I just was sorry we hadn't given you that opportunity to begin with. So, thank you for sharing that information. It helps us put your response in context, and I think that's really powerful. So let me just add to the question here and pull in some of our other panelists. And Larissa, this is obviously very important to you, so I'll also circle back. When we think back during the last Work Incentives Planning and Assistance competition, we conducted outreach through various channels to improve the diversity of applicants including asking the Rehabilitation Services Administration, American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Program to send an announcement to all of their grantees to alert these organizations to the funding opportunity. We did not receive applications from any tribal organizations. So, we put

[inaudible] until we complete the Cooperative Agreement Program in 2026. How can we make WIPA application more attractive to organizations that serve tribal populations? And this question is very related to what can we do that might help providers improve outreach to tribal populations? And so, I just want to bring that in additionally, and I'd like to turn the conversation to August.

August Martin: Good morning, everybody, on the west coast. Good afternoon, everybody on the east coast. And, a good day to everybody in between. My name is August Martin. I am a member of the Central Council of [indiscernible] and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. Our region in Alaska is southeast from Yakutat all the way down to Ketchikan. I grew up in a small village in southeast Alaska called Kake, which is 80 miles south of Juneau, the Capital. And I started my career as a Vocational Rehabilitation Project Director for my tribe, served as Project Director for four years, and have experience out in the villages of southeast Alaska, and I've been with the Department of Education since 2006. So, my Tlingit names are [indiscernible] and [indiscernible]. I come from [indiscernible] hit house. I am from the Chookaneidi Clan of the Tlingit Nation. That's who I am. I'm also the son of [indiscernible]. My apologies to the interpreters. I imagine those words are very hard to spell out. So, to address this question, I do have two bullet points I'd like to go over real quick. First of all, I think a targeted outreach program to speak specifically to the governing bodies and consortia [inaudible] bodies regarding WIPA would be beneficial to the tribes and the process to become a cooperative agreement grantee. Attendance to indigenous conferences such as the National Council of American Indians, NCAI conferences, the Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation Conference, they have a conference biannually, and visits to reservations would help build trust and confidence. One thing I noticed as I read through the WIPA web page and

saw the number of representatives at offices within each state, Alaska, particularly, which is tremendously huge, I only had one representative, and I think additional work incentives would assist as well as how to get the word out to exactly the benefits, the Work Incentive Planning and Assistance Program. The second bullet point I would say is a targeted outreach program to inform indigenous nonprofit and tribal organizations of the eligibility criteria to apply and to enter into as a cooperative agreement. I don't know how much tribal organizations or non-profit organizations that are tribally run know of this program or understand this program. So, I think a targeted outreach program specifically for 501(c) (3) tribally run programs would help spread the word and hopefully build some benefits for our tribal members living in rural and remote communities.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great. Peggy Jo, can I bring you into this conversation?

Peggy Jo Archer: Yes, thank you for having me. My name is Peggy Jo. I'm the Director of the Elder Justice Project@iasquared. And throughout one of the initiatives that I direct is addressing elder abuse in tribal communities and that is to a cooperative agreement through ECL under the Title VI funds. And so, under the Title VI department they addressed nutrition, support services, caregiving, and elder justice. So, from the lens that I'm coming from I often work with different departments within tribal communities, depending on where their adult protective services initiatives are coming from. Because in each nation they are in different departments. Some are within the Domestic Violence Department. Some have their own stand-alone EPS. Some are in Social Services. So, I have had a wealth of experience developing partnerships with different departments on nations. And under the NAEJI which is our Native American Elder Justice Initiative we are tasked to work with all nations, not just a certain region. So, we do have that experience with working with all nations and every nation is different. So, when we're talking

about developing partnerships, for me, what I have found very beneficial is that it's not just a one-time reach-out, we have to build that trust. So, it's going to be several times reaching out, several times showing your commitment, and to being authentic and genuine. That shows right off the bat that you're not. If you do one time and then you don't ever reach back out, there are high turnover rates which in my line of adult protective services, high turnover rates, anywhere. So that means that sometimes I am reaching out more than once, but because I am aware of that very stressful job of adult protective services and that turnover rate, that doesn't mean the nation is not responding to me, that just means that there's probably someone new and I don't have the correct contact. So, developing relationships and being committed to that I have found important, and I have found very much success in that. But also, when we're talking about having tribal nations responding to some of those grants or opportunities understanding the structure of the community is important. So, what we have seen -- in some of the work that I've done, we have worked with strengthening workforce, and through grants, we've put out grants out there to share. But some of the nations have processes that we're not really accounting for, so they have to get a resolution, or they have to get approval through their counsel, but on top of that they have to be able to be on the agenda for the council. So, it takes longer than the additional 30 days that we normally see. So sometimes what would be best practice in my mind is really understanding how the nations go about being able to apply for these opportunities. And it might be that it takes an additional 60 days because that tribal council agenda could be full for the next two months, but that doesn't mean that they are not interested. Did I answer the question? If there's any other questions to follow up, I definitely want to do that. But also, one last thing is too that I find that ensuring that the person that you have going out making these partnerships and developing these opportunities have that cultural lens. It's again, for me, I've been working in

this space for a very long time and I'm still continuously learning because there are 574 federally-recognized tribe -- many state recognized tribes and I'm not an expert in all of that, so I continuously have to do my job in researching and understanding and making partnerships continuously.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Very good. I think before we move on -- thank you so much, Peggy Jo -- I would like to just open it up in case Joshua or Benita would like to comment on this section.

Josh Drywater: Hello, Stephanie. Hi, this is Josh Drywater. [speaking native language]

Hello, everyone, my name is Josh Drywater. I am currently the Director of Native Initiatives at Virginia Commonwealth University. So, I reside in Richmond. I'm originally from Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the capital of the Cherokee nation. I am a Cherokee nation citizen. I spent a lot of my early career working in workforce development for my tribal nation before being the program manager of the Disability Employment Initiative through federal funds, through the Department of Labor. And then, entered the academic world working with -- as a program manager at the University of Arizona on native initiatives for the 22 federally recognized tribes there. And now on more of a national approach, working with a lot of the same tribal communities, but operating out of Virginia and working with the seven federally recognized tribes there on initiatives similar to what we're discussing. And you know, I just wanted first to say thank you to Larissa and to August and Peggy Jo for really hitting on like the main points I think of the question with having the cultural appropriate services and, you know, creating the opportunities for the tribes and the individuals to have the knowledge of the programs. With kind of the first part of the question, I wanted to add too about, you know, we talk about the cultural lens and I would like to see how many of the organizations are hiring Native American individuals working within the tribal communities as well, because I think it's going to be a recurring theme that we feed through our

discussion, is you know, tribal citizens prefer and would like to receive services from other tribal members, you know, whether that comes to health care or vocational rehabilitation and things like that. So, with the organizations that, aren't directly tied to those tribal organizations, you know, increasing the amount of Native American representation that they have within there, and then the tribal organizations themselves, you know, just like, Peggy Jo mentioned, you know, there is a different process that is different from the federal process, not to mention the capacity. You know, I'm not -- I haven't worked with the tribes in Alaska to the same extent, but you know, there's a lot of tribal nations there in a wide area, as August mentioned. And then, just understanding that with 574 tribal nations, capacity is sometimes an issue when it comes to operating something complex, like with a program or an employment network.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Thank you so much, Joshua. Benita, do you want -- I'm happy to move on to the next and then pull you in at that point. I just don't want to move forward --

Benita McKerry: I was just trying to figure where the mic thing was. Good morning.

[speaking in native language] Native American Disability Law Center as an [inaudible] advocate. I started out as an intake specialist many moons ago and have learned and agree with the two previous panelists of what they said with the changing of our tribal council within the Navajo Nation and I will be speaking in regards to the work that we do with the Navajo Nation, the Hopi Nation and the surrounding tribes. There are -- every four years, they change -- we have an election. We have a Navajo Nation president. So, every time we create these alliances and relationships with any other council delegates, for example, and with our government liaison, there's that new face that comes about and we have like to basically start all over. And again, the consistency of showing up in rural communities is basically, you know, the essence the way you want to show some form of commitment with those elders, and to try and create these allies with

tribal chapter officials. There's 110 chapters within the Navajo Nation. So, we try to reach out to these leaders and inform them of who we are. And just again, showing the consistency. And like Peggy Jo mentioned if you just show up once and leave, they are not going to take another look at you and take you seriously. So, I'm in agreement to that. It's like building relationships, building that trust, sharing your native language, the cultural aspects, basically food and brings all the [inaudible] community members together. So how to make [inaudible] making those friendships last. Thank you.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Thank you. So, I want to -- our panelists have very, very, clearly stated that having a cultural lens is very important to doing this work. Another issue is historical trauma which may foster a negative perception of governmental programs. In your experience what approaches can we teach our service providers to use to build trust with tribal communities that may increase their willingness to access services? And here I'm going to turn to Peggy Jo.

Peggy Jo Archer: Thank you. Yes, always having that understanding of cultural or the historical trauma is very important in everything that you do in working with tribal communities, especially when working with the elders or the older adults. I think some of the best strategies that I have given out is to do -- in your department -- to take some kind of cultural competency training and it has to be -- there's not just one out there that would encompass all of the 574 federally recognized tribes. And I know that's not a good answer, but that's the truth. There's not one that is going to help you understand all the nations. So, what we say is if you are specifically working within policy or working within administration around a nation, reach out to those nations, do your research in those states or with those nations, and understand what each nation has gone through or what each nation is about, because there's a vast difference. I always tell people like one day I could be working with nations in Alaska and then the next I'm working in

Oklahoma, and they are vastly different, and I can't use the same approach. They didn't experience the same things. They are different in terms of what their cultural values and beliefs are in what they eat and what they do. And so, I have to really take the time to research. And my research isn't on the computer, it's really building relationships and talking to people in the community. That's the type of research that I have found to be successful. So that's some of the things that I do. And then the historical trauma piece, a lot of people feel that there's -- nobody is still around, that went through boarding schools, and that is totally not true. So, you have to be very mindful of your language to not put the boarding school experience or the historical trauma like it was a long, long time ago because that's not true. A lot of people that you're working with are survivors or their mothers or grandmothers or grandfathers or family members that are still living today are survivors, and that have been raised by them. And so, be mindful. Whoever you're working with, you could be working with a younger adult, but they were raised by somebody that was a survivor of that historical trauma and those historical experiences. So, it's really just not making that something that's not relevant because it is still relevant in tribal communities.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Thank you, and it makes me think about the work of Amy Bombay and really recognizing the way that that historical trauma gets passed down and how it can shift through relationships that we have with one another. And, you know, we learn -- you think about the boarding schools, you think about the increased foster care, right. In many cases we're dealing with families who lived in cycles of historical trauma that have been passed down at no fault of their own, literally helping our families get out of that cycle and learning how to have different ways of interacting and undoing the oppression that we've experienced and learn to turn

on one another. It comes out in so many different ways. Thank you, Peggy Jo. Can I open the floor to Larissa?

Larissa Cummings: Yes, thank you. I do want to comment circling back to what Joshua Drywater mentioned about hiring tribal members. There are some things, not just that suggestion, but there are other things that would probably be more supportive of reaching some of the rural Indigenous people in all over. But it would mean some serious revisions of the terms and conditions of the WIPA project so that that would take some real thoughtful intentional review to change those terms and conditions so that some of those things could be implemented. And for example, Alaska has one of the smallest WIPA allotments and we don't really -- not only do we not have enough money to be able to hire multiple people, but also they have to perform a certain percentage of work in order to maintain their expertise and skill in what they do, which is valid, but also problematic if you're in a small beneficiary state. So, I just wanted to mention that to bring that up. And then in terms of historical trauma and the distrust of government agencies, I have found, just personally in my practice, that I don't emphasize the project or that it's a government project. I really try to emphasize the relationship between myself or my staff, and what benefits the program can provide to folks and what support it can provide. And so, I try to emphasize the positive and the personal and the relational, and really don't focus on, oh, this is a government project, it's funded by Social Security. And I mean, they know that, but I don't emphasize that. So that's really just my small way of working around that distrust. And also, to some previous points that have been made multiple times, that, yes, you do have to show up more than once in order to build that relationship with people and in order to be able to provide those services, so yes. Thank you.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Yes. Benita, can you join us on this, and I think really pulling in both approaches and tools that have been used that you have used in your work?

Benita McKerry: Okay, so one of the tools that we have made our approach is to the rural community to see and that's just basically consistency, showing up. I'm Navajo, and I go into these rural communities doesn't mean, you know, automatic acceptance. There are five agencies within the Navajo Nation and each -- even though we have different languages the eastern language is different from the western agency, central and [inaudible] they do see, for example. They are all different. Our cultural beliefs are also very different. And again, trying to work with these communities, and the Navajo Nation in itself is as big as the State of West Virginia. There's 27,000 square miles. And trying to make the connections into the rural communities requires long-distance driving the majority of the time, and that's a whole day event. And again, trying to create that relationship, stability, and trust, that doesn't happen overnight. The changes in staff, high turnover rate, that's just like -- it's like a never-ending cycle of trying to build those relationships over and over again. But being consistent, bringing -- you know, being respectful of the language, the cultural aspects of how each community, their wants, and needs -- that's basically how we go about trying to build those relationships with the rural communities out on Navajo and Hopi as well.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great, thank you, so much. August, I wonder -- I mean, I appreciate how we continue to bring in other variables as we're talking through this. So, thinking about different approaches to being, building support, thinking about, you know, specific tools or strategies -- and Benita, I really heard you, very specific, approaching tools to meeting with people, rural, urban. As we think about this, I guess, I wonder how we start to pull in strategies that people can hold, given the very diverse population. Like we, you know, America's native

populations, like there are as we've mentioned over 500, almost 600 tribes out there. And we are extremely different. So, for those of you who work across different tribal communities, it would be very interesting, you know, whether it's through your position where you've met with others or through the communities you've served, but really trying to disentangle some of the different tools that have helped you as you have worked with different communities to really highlight the diverse needs of our communities. So August, not to put you on the spot. If that's not your area that's okay, but I'm just really seeing that, you know, as we're coming through this, we're pulling out a bunch of different, really important socio and cultural dimensions that are worth highlighting. And I just want to keep emphasizing this as the panel continues their discussion.

August Martin: Sure, you know, there are two things that I've gathered from the conversation around this area so far. And I think one of them can be captured in the language that is used when addressing us American Indians or Indigenous. I think a lot of times language as used can be cliché, you know, falling back on old stereotypes, and that can really affect how a relationship is built. And I think the relationship that can be built has to be based on sustainability, and you've heard several speakers say that as well. You know, you can't just come into a community with a message that you're going to save everybody, that this is a new day, this is a new light, and we're going to have all kinds of resources for you and make promises that cannot be kept. Many of us Indigenous who have grown up in villages, have grown up in remote rural areas have had government representatives come in and make those promises and never come back. So, I think sustainability of continuing to come back to communities to build a relationship and to come in with the mindset of saying, I know I'm an outsider, but I want to become one of you, I want to be a member of your community. Teach me to become a member of your community so I can better serve your people and we can make a difference for those in this community. I think if you're

coming in with a mindset to become a member of that community, I think it will go so much farther than coming in with promises and language that's saying we're going to make the future a really bright place. Well, you know, that doesn't always happen immediately. So, I always start by, here, let me become one of you, let me help you, and teach me to become one of you so I have a better understanding in how better to serve and how to make a difference in this community. I think capturing that -- that's what came to mind when I was listening to our two other esteemed speakers, discuss the historical trauma and building trust between the federal agencies and our tribal nations. There was one other thing, but in my roborosity I kind of lost it, it's out there somewhere. Someone will run into it and say I wonder where that thought came from. So, I'll just leave it at that.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: That's okay. It may come back to you later and you can pull that idea back in. Joshua.

Joshua Drywater: This is Joshua again. Yes, you know -- the main points have all been covered and it's been really great conversation. You know, I just wanted to kind of echo more of the -- having the communities invested as much into the programs that are being offered, you know. A lot of times, and again with the tribes that I've worked with, just like August said, kind of having that humility to go in and say that, you know, I am an outsider, you know, I may be Indigenous myself, or nonindigenous, but I'm working with this community and I want to be a part of it, you know. And that often involves more of, instead of a business partnership, more of a friendship where, you know, that where you're actively involved, even outside of work often, whether it be being seen in the community, going to powwows, going to cultural events, being fine with asking questions and wanting to know more about the culture, because the more you're invested in seeing that the more trust that is built. I mean, because, you know, historically, I mean there is

reason for that distrust. So, I mean, it is something that has to be worked at. And then, you know, just to kind of continue that a little bit, and again, I think this will be brought up more, but potentially looking to modify, you know, we talked about certain governmental procedures are a certain way, but looking for ways that we could modify the program guidance that incorporates more of the tribal thought or the tribal's goal, you know, with their self-governance of what programs they would like to see and being willing to modify the activities or the grants that are being offered that take into more consideration or add that freedom for tribes to really take a program, make it their own, or incorporate those cultural values that we discussed that are so important for that trust and that acceptance, but finding ways to be able to open up some of the guidelines or the rules that incorporate more of the cultural values into it.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: All right. Thank you. So, I wonder if we could take this conversation and get more specific on, in terms of vocational training and career choices. So, how do these cultural and historical factors influence vocational training and career choices in tribal communities? And if it's okay, Joshua, I'm actually going to pull you back in. I feel like we keep getting to you at the end and I want to give you the opportunity to be a first speaker here. Did I lose you?

Joshua Drywater: No, I'm just wanting for my camera to pop back up. Sorry.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay.

Joshua Drywater: This is Josh again. I think this is an area that specifically with vocational, that we worked on, but, you know, oftentimes the tribal organizations or the tribal governments may be on reservational lands or might be in the rural communities. And one of the main themes that seems to be addressed with a lot when it comes to vocational training or employment, is that idea that in order to have a successful career one might need to leave the reservation and go to more

of these urban settings. And I think that that's something that really needs to be adjusted as far as some of the vocational training opportunities and really, you know, utilize some of the technology, but also the needs of the tribe as far as, you know, running their tribal governments and developing employment pipelines or vocational training that guides individuals into roles that are on there. And also, you know, economic development outreach to some of the businesses that could utilize individuals on tribal reservations, such as remote work is a big technology aspect that I think that is really moving more into the right direction, as well as entrepreneurship and kind of third-party contracting that allows individuals to receive vocational training, but also stay on the reservations where they want to be with their families, you know, because I, you know, from my experience, no one really wants to leave their community, wants to leave their home in order to look for, you know, career opportunities. And also just to caveat off of that, also, too is really understanding what the term successful means for the particular tribal individual which may mean being able to, you know, with that collective ontology approach and being able to better support their community and provide for their tribe as opposed to, you know, get married, make as much money as I can, and move off to some place. So, really, having discussions around vocational and training and employment that again, take into focus more of that, that tribal mindset with the cultures and things like that.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Yes, thank you. Benita, would you like to add to this?

Benita McKerry: In regards to, I do a lot of visits to congregate homes. The Navajo Nation does have a VR program under the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. And a lot of the work when we tried to work with the VR counselors, a lot of the individuals with disabilities in congregate homes, the high-functioning ones, we do try to make referrals. And a lot of the times in rural communities there are not enough employment agencies or services that

are being provided to these individuals. A lot of the times they are required, and they can go through the whole VR training process, go through the whole orientation, and again, employment's not there, it's not readily available. They would have to go to the border towns. And in a lot of these places, transportation is an issue for individuals with disabilities. A lot of the agencies do not want to employ individuals with disabilities as well. And those are just some of the things, the little things that we have come across in trying to promote vocational rehabilitation services on Navajo and with Hopi as well. Hopi is very remote. The nearest town that they have would be like Flagstaff, Arizona to the city, some of the tribal entities that they have as well. And a lot of the folks do contribute to self-employment. There's a lot of artisans, craftmanships, you know, providing how to be financially stable, how to create budgets. Those are some of the things I think as more successful than being an entrepreneurship art, is having somebody to be self-employed. And a lot of our Native American artisans are very creative, and that just shows, you know, those are some of the self-sustainability that they can go about seeking employment on the rural reservations that we work with Navajo and Hopi.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great. Thank you. I wonder if we could move up to Alaska, and Larissa.

Larissa Cummings: Thank you. I think there's, in Alaska, in any case, there's a really large difference between western and tribal communities and the type of work that's available and the attitude toward work. In the more tribal and rural communities, subsistence is a very large part of the work and working collaboratively or communally is a way of life for folks out in the villages, and also the type of work available, like western type jobs, as you will, that might be available in the villages. Many people think they need to leave the village and their families to find work or actually do need to. I think with the advent of distance technology and the acceptance of working

remotely that there could be more of a focus on jobs and careers that could be performed via distance, and that would allow people to remain in their village and with their families and yet still find satisfying employment. And also, just as Benita said, the reluctance to hire people with disabilities which we continue to work on, kind of breaking that barrier, and as we make progress on that, I think that will help also.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay, Peggy Jo.

Peggy Jo Archer: Yes, just something to add to that is, what we have done right now we're working on creating a tribal APS toolkit and it's for a toolkit to help any tribal APS program that is either starting or already existing and just needing extra help on some of their stuff. And one of the things that we have heard from a lot of our focus groups is having job descriptions. So we have helped -- we have worked with a lot of nations to revise job descriptions to actually meet the needs of the community and that really drew a lot of good talent to those job descriptions and they weren't -- we had to kind of take that western lens off of what a job description was because it wasn't appealing -- it wasn't -- people weren't really interested in that. So, once we really took all of that lens off and really worked within the community to see what would be the talent that they would seek for these positions, we saw some successes and people applying for those jobs are being even interested when there are going to be new positions. But on the flip side of that, you know, sometimes we're working with funders who are reviewing these deliverables, part of the grants, and they are giving some of the nations a harder time of saying, no, you need to have a master's degree or no, you need to have this. And we push back and say no, that's not part of the community, that's not what that community values or sees as a good professional, especially when working with elders, especially working in the space of elder abuse or any caregiving. And so, I did sit on a board for a few months, it was called a APS Retention and Recruitment Board

and we did talk about a lot of this and we shared this with our APS working group and got their perception on it and it was the same, that they need to be changed to be tailored to the community.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Good, very good. Thank you so much. So August, I am going to open this question up to you, but I'm also going to add a little, because I think this other -- I want to bring in the issue of current legislation, regulations and processes, like, how can they evolve to better address the vocational training needs of tribal communities? And I think you're well-versed to answer this question.

August Martin: Oh, boy, that second one is going to be big. My first comment is really going to emphasize what Benita has already stated. Most tribal communities have very minimal labor markets, very few industries. Oftentimes, the only labor market on some reservations is the tribal government themselves. And so, many tribal communities rely heavily on entrepreneurship and small business development. Some of the unique training needs in the Indian country really is centered on building the skills and abilities necessary to successfully operate a small business, self-employment ventures, or my fellow Alaskans subsistence as an employment outcome. As far as legislation is concerned, I think -- I got to refer to my notes. My apologies. I need to find them real quick, so forgive the dead air. Oh, okay, so the most effective way really to improve legislation, regulations, or processes, is to directly involve the tribal communities. And we've already heard several of our panelists refer to this in the review of the development of existing or new legislation, regulation, or processes before they are implemented. It should never be assumed that the federal agency knows what is best for the tribal communities if they have not had direct ongoing dialogues with those tribal nations or communities. Examples of this type of effort is the White House Convening that we had back in October of 2023. We had 17 agencies

come together to discuss how policies can be modified to benefit tribal communities and tribal members who both live on a reservation and off the reservation in urban areas. I think that initiative in and of itself helped shape some of the discussions within certain federal agencies in developing or looking at their policies. There are a lot of historical policies that have been in place that have been detrimental to tribal communities and tribal nations unknowingly. So, I think building that communication with each of those tribal communities and tribal governments, definitely would assist in shaping that legislation so it's literally coming from the tribal communities on how best to meet their needs. There's just been an overabundance in history for the federal government stepping in as the saviour and saying, here we're going to make things better for you without really consulting tribal governments and tribal nations.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Right. It's a big problem. So, I do want to move on to some other issues, but before I do, are there other suggestions for how we might change current legislations, regulations, or processes? And please feel free to just jump in.

August Martin: I know I just spoke, and I'm sorry if I'm jumping in again, but I think if federal agencies would -- I don't know how many federal agencies actually do this, there are probably quite a few -- but federal agencies would employ tribal liaisons or develop a tribal liaison office or tribal liaison position within other agencies to assist in the communication between the federal agency and the tribal community. I think that would definitely smooth out communication efforts because we do have as Indigenous people, we do have protocols that are necessary when entering into a tribal community, and if a federal agency or federal leader or program director or whatever title they might have, does not understand or know what those protocols are, then there's a tendency to inadvertently insult the community that you're actually trying to help. So, a tribal liaison position or position that actually opens the dialogue between federal agencies and tribal

communities I think would definitely help push legislation and policies in a more beneficial direction for tribal communities.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay, thank you so much. So, I'm going to move on to protection advocacy for beneficiaries at Social Security. So, disability as a [indiscernible] differs greatly across cultures, can you all help us understand ways to frame the term "disability" so that we can communicate to our grantees how to improve their cultural sensitivity working with Indigenous people with disabilities? And I'm going to open this to Benita first.

Benita McKerry: Thank you, again [speaking native language]. Speaking in terms within our Indigenous tribes, a lot of times there's not a word for disability. When we translate in Navajo it comes on a different meaning [speaking native language]. So, if you translate that back into English that sound is totally different. And I'm sure that's probably across all the 574 tribal Indian nations as well. And what the dominant community references as a disability may not be seen as such in that regard. And we want to encourage grantees to involve people with disabilities in the development of programs and services, ensuring their perspectives are central involving tribal communities that elders -- how do we approach certain projects? And again, you know, defining the word "disability" in native language, again, that's the hard part. And when I first started trying to address these issues, in our rural communities, it was quite difficult for me, and I'm sure it was quite difficult, you know, for others as well who work with different tribal communities as to explain what disability means across the board.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Thank you, Benita. Peggy Jo, would you like to comment?

Peggy Jo Archer: Yes, I echo a lot of what Benita said is that particularly coming from our organization, we do a lot of work in Alzheimer's and dementia care and we find the same thing, is that there's not a word for dementia in many tribal communities, and therefore that impacts the

ability to raise awareness, provide education, and then also have tribal elders seek services because of that topic. And I've also seen that in the elder justice space too and in the terms of how do you talk about abuse and how is it culturally in trauma formed in being responsive. So, some of the things that we have done and some of the best practices, we do a lot of listening sessions with different nations, and it's not really for an exact project, but it's just part of our processes. It's to continually do listening sessions around the work that we're doing just to gain new insights. We see a lot of people doing listening sessions because they have specific projects, but I think it's a best practice to continue doing that and have that as a part of your process, to constantly try to understand the nations. And so, that's one of the solutions that I have seen, but also just having that cultural humility and saying hey, we don't know the best language to use here and seek those nations out to say, hey, what can we use here that would be most beneficial for your community.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great, thank you. You're hitting all the things that I see impacting my own community, so I appreciate both of your comments so much. Joshua, I feel like you come at this with a different perspective, and we would love to get you involved in the conversation.

Joshua Drywater: Hi, this is Josh. You know, I know -- I mean, I really echo again what the other speakers have said. You know, it's very important with the number of tribes to not try to look at disability as a homogenous term that's going to apply to all tribes, and as was mentioned, extremely difficult if not impossible, to find a tribal language that has a word for disability. More what I've seen in my experience is it's discussed as this individual may need additional assistance in something, but you know, in that same regard I also need additional assistance. So, it goes back to that collective ontology or that approach that within the tribal nations there's more of a collective "we" instead of a "me" type of mentality to where everybody helps each other out.

And that goes even deeper with some of the service provision and the service providers working in the tribal communities as you'll often see that they are wearing multiple hats, and they are doing more than maybe just what their job title is. And I think it really -- it goes back to the cultural piece even more, it's just that there's more that, you know, wanting to help in any way that we can and move things together. As far as like our outreach with some of the initiatives that I've done in different tribal communities, you know, as I mentioned, it often differs. But we've also tried to reimagine the services that we're providing as being beneficial to anybody who may need that assistance. And, you know, because often as we've talked about with employers and things like that, there may be a stigma associated with disability or identifying as having a disability, specifically. Sometimes when we work with the tribal communities we may ask you know, do you have any citizens who identify as having a disability, and the tribal leaders, you know, may know one or two who have different disabilities, but it's not until you get into those deeper conversations that we've already kind of brought up with generational trauma and substance abuse and mental health that we really started identifying different disabilities that aren't necessarily just labeled or categorized under that. It's more of that the individual's within your community that need assistance or that struggle, and ways that we can help them better their struggle is kind of the approach that we've taken with a lot of our programs and seen success.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great. Larissa, I wonder if you have other things that haven't been mentioned, but also perhaps if you could make some recommendations about how Social Security Administration could address these barriers?

Larissa Cummings: I don't really have anything to add to what was said. I'm actually learning a lot from what I'm hearing. Again, I feel that the Social Security Administration, it's hard to have custom language and custom programs for different places within one large agreement. And

I can only go off of my experience with the WIPA agreement. They do seem to be pretty good about waving things or kind of customizing things for individual projects, but if you don't know to ask for that or you don't push for that, it's an area you might miss. And so, I think maybe just some really intentional and thoughtful looks at the terms and conditions, and how those could be changed to make it more flexible for people to be able to work with the different tribal nations.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay. Very interesting, good. And August, same, if you have some additional ideas that haven't been mentioned, would love to hear them, but also if you could speak to the recommendations and how we might address these barriers.

August Martin: It's hard to expand on what's already been said. I think everything has been very well said. I think if we narrow it down, I think there are several universal values that Indigenous people have, one being the respect for life. We all respect life. We believe as Indigenous people that everything is alive, and it should be respected as being alive. And the other value is we value our elders, and we value those who can't get for themselves. Now in my tribe, the Tlingit tribe, when we go hunting, if we get a deer, if we get a seal, or a ptarmigan or a grouse -- when we go fishing if we get a halibut, if we get a salmon, we always give our first catch or our first kill to the elders first and then to those who can't get it for themselves. We recognize that people who have acquired disabilities need a little bit more assistance. And like my other esteemed panelists, in my language there is no word for disability. We have several phrases. One is obviously those who can't get for themselves, and the other phrase is a different way, people who live a different way. So, I think recognizing that those values exist and some of those values are universal across Indigenous peoples across this country, I think will definitely guide you to better ways as far as developing policies and procedures when working with Indigenous peoples. It's not that disabilities don't exist, it's just that we don't recognize it as diminishing a person's value within

the community. In many communities, like my own, people with acquired disabilities have more esteem than those who don't, because for us, they have actually reached a different realm of existence. They have touched -- from our point of view, they have touched the other side, and they are still with us. So, they have a bit more insight in life than those of us who have not. So, I think -- I don't know how much that will guide you in the policy development, but I think understanding us as a people, understanding our values and understanding how we view this world, our world view, I think definitely will help guide you in maybe shaping some of those policies.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great, thank you, August. Before moving on, Benita, I'd like to circle back to you. I think your center is very much involved with how people -- like helping people to overcome and address these barriers, particularly in this domain. And I'd just love to open the floor to you to speak a bit more about how, you know, what barriers your organization helps people to overcome and any recommendations you have for SSA.

Benita McKerry: Thank you. So, the region served by the Native American Disability Law Center is roughly, as I mentioned, the size of West Virginia. That's the old Navajo Nation, the surrounding tribal communities, the Hopi Nation. The size of this region creates significant constraints because of limited staffing. To fully serve our community requires long-distance driving, as I mentioned. The weather. The time creates challenges to fully serve all of our communities. It is very challenging also when tribal vocational rehabilitation programs is hesitant to collaborate with an organization like the Disability Law Center to support Native Americans with disabilities. There's a difference in priorities between tribal VR program and the Law Center. They don't recognize us as a client assistance program to provide legal remedies such as advocating for individuals with their rights and services. The Law Center's approach

focuses is on the right space models. We should both work together to provide community collaboration on how to access VR services, like providing information about their rights and the Rehabilitation Act. And this has been ongoing, and I see that the Social Security Administration also has tribal beneficiaries. I just came across a book Tribal Benefits Coordinators. And there was a resource guide that provided a great wealth of information, and I'm wondering, you know, where are the tribal benefit coordinators that could come to our tribal communities across the board. That could be very beneficial to indicate, you know, some of these services and provide in a, I guess cultural way, to acknowledge in their own communities what some of these services are being provided or could be provided in working with the tribal communities.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great. Thank you so much. So, I'm going to switch to vocational rehabilitation. Joshua, I wonder if you could speak to the current state of vocational rehabilitation tribal communities, including strength in areas for improvement.

Joshua Drywater: All right. This is Josh again. You know, just me personally I think that tribal vocational rehabilitation is the greatest thing on the planet because of their ability to incorporate the traditional healing and cultural methods within the healing process to get more of the holistic ability or holistic approach. You know, so as far as, I could probably talk all day long about all the things that I like about tribal VR, and it goes back to one of my initial comments where it's tribal individuals who are providing services to other tribal members, it opens up the opportunity for the discussion that we're having here for those cultural-appropriate services being provided by services by somebody within the community. It even further brings along that community approach or that collective ontology that we talked about. And as I mentioned, you know, VR counselors are often wearing many hats to where they may be the counselor, the employment coach, and you know, often benefits counselor are at least giving resources to where they can

find those things. Just real quick, and I feel like others could really add a lot more depth to that as far as issues that I currently see generally are revolved around funding, and I'm sure we can talk about that. You know, there's less than 100 tribal VRs that have to compete for their funding every five years. So that's tribes competing with other tribes on funding. And just having to re-compete for that. Often tribes have a tribal VR program, and in the event that maybe they don't get that funding for the next five years, they go from having this culturally-appropriate system that works within the community, and has a lot of positive results to not being funded at all, you know, which I feel is often a real danger. Just to look at the parallel of that, dates don't compete against each other for it. So, I would like to see, you know, more funding that, because you know tribes don't want to necessarily compete with other tribes for, you know, and I, in the same sense you know, you have organizations like KNR that make sure all the tribes are really talking together, and you know, with AIVRTTAC and RSA really coming together to ensure that there is that communication that is happening. So that goes back to another positive of the whole tribal VR system. I would just really like to see more funding that would open the opportunity up to other tribes to add the programs, and then as well as of course with the smaller tribes the capacity to run a tribal VR program is often not there. So, you know, I'd also like to see maybe some of the more consortiums of the tribal nations coming together to write for tribal VR programs. I think I'll leave it at that because I know there's a lot that other panelists can add to that.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Yes. I, you know Larissa, I wonder if you, if the issues here seen, in Alaska are similar or -- I know this may not exactly be your area. If you feel it's not, it's okay to say that, but I would be very interested because the issues are so different in Alaska.

Larissa Cummings: Thank you. It's not my area of expertise, but I did have a thought while Joshua was speaking about, we have the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and then we have tribal VR. And it just occurs to me that on a national level, funding for those types of programs, because I see the value in having the tribal community members serving each other, just from a point of better understanding the issues of their particular communities. So, I think that would really have value as well. And that was just a thought I had while Joshua was speaking, is that other programs such as WIPA, PABSS could maybe have the national program as well as a tribal or even just work, I don't know, somehow work together to be able to offer that, right. We have situations that I think it might be the same for down in the lower 48 where we have the big cities where we need to provide services, but we also have the reservations or the villages where we need to provide those services effectively as well for all of the programs. So those are just my thoughts.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay, thank you. August?

August Martin: Yes, wow, that's a big can of worms because I do work with the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services program. I think the experiences across the country vary because we do have 93 grantees receiving grant funds to provide VR services to their tribal members. And I think the greatest strength as Joshua said, is that the [inaudible] grantees have their cultural connection and their commitment and investment into their own communities. And part of the implementing regulations for this project, for this program requires or makes room for tribes to give preference to tribal members for positions to provide vocational rehabilitation, and more importantly, tribal members with disabilities. And I think that the beauty of our tribal counselors or TVR, we call Tribal Voc Rehab, TVR, our TVR counselors, their ability to identify with the people they are serving on both a cultural level and on a disability level, I think

really improves their ability to achieve success for those individuals striving for some level of employment or self-sufficiency, whether it's through self-employment, a job, or subsistence as an employment outcome. I think that ability to identify with the people serving makes the biggest difference. I think areas of the improvement center really on external factors such as adequate training, either in specialty areas or in broader scope of disabilities, community resources to assist tribal members with disabilities, and believe it or not accessibility of community resources and locations. Many tribal communities are not the most accessible for people with disabilities, especially people with mobility factors, mobility limitations, let alone technological barriers, you know. The technology in Indian communities are definitely not as robust as those in urban areas, so you have lag times in Wi-Fi connectivity, very limited cell phone connectivity. I was on the Hopi Reservation last year visiting the Hopi Nation on their vocational rehabilitation program, and once you reach a certain point in the desert, you lose cell phone connection. So, you know, then you get on to the reservation. And we had to ask, I was with another person, we had to ask them for the Wi-Fi connection just so we could get some cell phone service off of that. So, I think technology definitely is a big barrier as well that could be remedied. So, I think as far as vocational rehabilitation, I appreciate everything Joshua said, the Section 2 of The Rehabilitation Act talks about the purpose of The Rehabilitation Act, and it includes a portion that mirrors our Indigenous respect for life, and I think that's really grabbed me. I've been in Vocational Rehabilitation Services for 25 years. I started in 1999 as a project director and just never left. This program definitely has a lot of aspects to it. VR counselors and VR project directors need to be cognizant of a lot of different disciplines as well as community resources. So, I think vocational rehabilitation is in a progressively growing state. I think there are still areas that we can improve on. I heard everything Benita said regarding the Disability Law Center and would

love to reach out to her as a AIVRS program officer here so we can hopefully make inroads on improving relationships there. So, I hope I answered the question. Like Joshua, I have 100 things I could probably say, but I will stop there.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great. Thank you so much. So, our time is coming to a close, but I do want to take the opportunity to talk about Ticket-to-Work real quick, so I'm interested in what suggestions the panelists have for improving opportunities for tribal organizations to participate in Ticket-to-Work programs as employment networks. And I guess I'd like to open that up to Peggy Jo. I know you may also have some suggestions of conferences or outreach opportunities people might look into.

Peggy Jo Archer: Yes, I can start with the conference opportunities. So, through the Title VI initiatives they are always hosting Title VI cluster trainings, and then they do a national one every year. And these are geared towards nations who are receiving Title VI funding, and usually the topics are different depending on what Cynthia is seeing the need to have a discussion on. They are hosting one in December. I believe it's still open to register for in Minneapolis. I think it's December 10th through the 13th. But these cluster trainings happen often, and they move all around, they are not always in one location. This one is in Minneapolis. We've had them in DC, Arizona. They move around and the topics vary. So even if you are trying to do a listening session, that would probably be a good place to do a listening session, where you have tribal professionals who are funded by Title VI but who are working in this space with elders and are often answering these questions for elders or working within those programs. So, I would say do Title VI trainings and then you can always reach -- look at our website, we are always sharing that, on our social media as well, sharing conferences that are there. There's an upcoming one, Indian Nations Conference that we plan on presenting. We've been a part of it before, there

wasn't a big discussion on older adults or elders, and so we are excited to bring that topic again, and we're hoping that there are more topics there as well. So, there are several opportunities. And then the first question, could you read that back to me again?

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Oh, it was about suggestions for improving opportunities for tribal organizations to participate in the Ticket-to-Work program.

Peggy Jo Archer: And I think the suggestion is to really understand the nation. They are not working on tight timelines as well, or they might be working, either/or, so please be flexible in those dates. And, again, account for their processes, like tribal council and the processes that they have to go through to receive these opportunities or to even be a part of it, because some nations that we have worked with, they can't even as a whole in their department decide they want to do that without the Council approving that. And another thing that I wanted to mention earlier is that sometimes you have to look at the infrastructure of each nation because sometimes we see those missed perceptions. A lot of the nations have infrastructure, they have a lot of resources. But there are some nations that do have the strong infrastructures and a lot of resources, and then there's other nations that don't see a need to be able to write policies, write these opportunities that can support nations that have robust programming, have robust funding, and then also for nations who do not have that as well, because we've seen where some nations do not have those existing infrastructures and the call for these opportunities, say these are musts, and that's not true for a lot of nations. But some nations might have that.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great, thank you. So, I know there's more to be said about this issue and maybe we can circle back to it in the open discussion, because I just know you all have so much to say. But I want to thank all of you for your time and for the great discussion. Let's open the conversation for questions. As a reminder if you wish to ask a question, please include your

name and location in your email question. The appropriate email address is NationalDisabilityForum, all one word, @ssa.gov. So, in the questions we received thus far, to the panelists I'm going to put a question out. You, if you can signal me. Otherwise, I'm just going to call on you and you can -- I'm sorry if I hit the wrong one, I'm trying so hard to pay attention to your different areas. But feel free to deflect. But at the same time, I want to get everyone involved. So, because travel is so expensive for many on tribal lands who may live long distances from the location of meeting sites, are there ways to reimburse travel expenses through Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, for nonmedical services, like work incentives planning? Does that speak to anyone?

Larissa Cummings: I don't have -- go ahead. Sorry, this is Larissa. For work incentives planning and assistance, we have long provided those services via distance, either via telephone where we mail -- we have a written report that we do -- we mail it out to the person, then we make an appointment to be able to meet with them. In the beginning it was over telephone because we didn't have much internet infrastructure and people didn't have computers. Now with the advent of Zoom and more internet out in the villages, we are actually able to meet via Zoom also if they prefer that. I don't know of any way, at least through WIPA, to be able to reimburse travel, and I don't know about Medicaid either. I just know that this is how we have addressed it because in Alaska, those travel distances are really long and extremely expensive. So, we've been able to address that by providing those services via distance, and it's been fairly successful.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Benita, you've also spoken about distance as an issue today. Do you have thoughts on this question?

Benita McKerry: Since the pandemic you'd think Zoom has been something we have utilized. And a lot of times whether [inaudible] due to the weather, the infrastructure, we just basically have relied on Zoom, that I'm not familiar with that to address the question fully. Thank you.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay, anybody else have thoughts about this question?

August Martin: August

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay, go ahead.

August Martin: Yes, this is August. If the services are directly connected to vocational rehabilitation and that travel is required in order for that person to achieve their vocational goal, then the Vocational Rehabilitation Program would be able to pay for that travel to attend those necessary appointments. Otherwise, if they are not directly connected to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, yeah, I have no idea what other resources might be available, but if they are receiving Voc Rehab services, then I would encourage them to talk to them, their VR counselor, to see if that can be a service placed on their individualized plan for employment.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay, thank you. I'm going to move on to the next question. What vocational rehabilitation services are tribal communities most in need of? How would a vocational services provider for SVR also become a vendor for AIVR? Who can an employment network contact in the tribal community to present the employment services and support they offer? Joshua?

Joshua Drywater: Hello, just waiting for my -- I'm having a little problem with the internet. Can you -- okay. So, you know, and this goes back to the last question that was addressed as well, is that maximizing of resources, that we have the potential to do because, you know, an individual has the ability to be involved in a client of tribal VR as well as state VR. And I think if I'm saying correctly, you know, part of the tribal VR requirements is an MOU of working with

the state. So, I think, you know, it really comes down maybe to communication efforts to really bring in all of the communities or agencies that are involved to maximize the resources, but you know, I think, especially as we kind of talked with some of the funding things associated with tribal VR programs that it's best to, for tribal VR clients to also be clients of state VR that can, you know, as long as there's not double dipping and things like that happening, but having those discussions with the partnerships between the tribe and state's VR programs to see what services they can provide that can be an add-on to what tribal VR services offer as well as freeing up some financial opportunities for tribal VR to focus on an area where the state VR can't, which is those cultural and traditional practices that we talked about being extremely important.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great. We have a lot of questions. So, would anybody else like to add to the response to this or I will just keep moving on? We're good? Okay. How can community partners help in overcoming barriers to accessing employment and benefit services, and I'm going to pass this one to Peggy Jo.

Peggy Jo Archer: Sorry, you cut out at the end. Can you reread that?

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: How can community partners help in overcoming barriers to accessing employment and benefit services?

Peggy Jo Archer: Okay, so I think that, how can they overcome it is really just creating those effective partnerships, really -- goes back to everything that I've said -- is really do your research, do your due diligence of having that commitment. And the commitment has to look like not just within yourself, the commitment has to come from the organization as a whole. So, when we're looking at, you know, policymakers, really writing that or having that lens when you're writing those policies to ensure that your professionals are also able to work within that, because that's something that I see. A lot of times is that maybe the professional [inaudible] has that good

intention and that commitment, but their policy doesn't support them or maybe even does the opposite. It impacts the relationship -- impacts their ability to create those networks and partnerships. So that would be something that I wouldn't be able to share on that.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great, thank you. Would anybody like to add anything? I'm just going to throw it out to one person. Okay, this is working, great. What are effective methods of outreach to native communities that demonstrate you want to build trust/actually help? And I would turn this to Benita.

Benita McKerry: So, all of the work that we have been doing, just again, consistency, creating and building those alliances with the tribal leaders or the tribal elders. Even though you go to an event there's only like a few people that show up. You know, there's maybe just one of them that will share your message and information. And again, just the consistency, building that trust, it doesn't happen overnight, but keep showing up, people will start showing up as well, and they get to see who you are and know that they have respect for their cultural and beliefs. I think that's a great way to build those alliances within the tribal communities.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Great.

Peggy Jo Archer: Dr. Fryberg, can I share something on this one as well?

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Absolutely, I would love that.

Peggy Jo Archer: Something that I wanted to share that's also effective in this is really going in with the lens of understanding sovereignty. We often are in spaces where people are trying to work with nations, organizations are working with nations, but they don't even have a general understanding of sovereignty. And that already, when you're at the table and you don't understand that and you're not working within that, then it's hard to develop that commitment, that trust, that partnership with the nations because they can hear it in your voice, they can see it

in your policies and they can see it in your methods and the way you want to go about creating partnerships with them. So please, go into those conversations partnerships or even when you're creating policy or creating anything, have that sovereignty lens because we see that that almost automatically is the first thing that will disrupt that relationship.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: You know, to add to that, what I have seen is when people come in and don't understand that tribal leaders are leaders of nations and don't give appropriate reference to them, that they are not understanding the power that they hold in their tribal community. And you know, I think there's this stereotype about tribes as primitive that leads people to think they are coming in to save us, but in fact many of our communities are quite complex and intricate, and to work in our community you really need to know how to approach tribal leaders, approach leaders in different areas of the community, but also to understand who are the elders, who are the leaders in the communities, and the young people. And those are just powerful pieces. And I think tribal sovereignty is such an important part of that, that you know, really understand who you're working with. So, thank you so much for that comment. So, we have another about strategies. What are some strategies to provide culturally sensitive vocational and financial planning and support services to individuals within tribal communities? Larissa, can I pass this to you?

Larissa Cummings: Sorry, I had trouble finding the microphone. I don't feel that I really have any expertise in the area of VR. I have ideas from having worked in the field and having partnered with VR quite a bit, so I'm sure that there are other panelists that can probably speak to this better than I can, but I think everything that we have spoken about so far in terms of showing up, consistency, building trust, and even what Peggy Jo just stated about understanding

sovereignty and who the leaders are in the community, all of those things speak to building strategies to be able to work successfully in that place.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay. I'm sorry that I keep pulling you in. I just feel like you speak from an important part, and I just keep wanting to make sure that your voice is included in the conversation. Joshua, would you like to speak to that question?

Joshua Drywater: Yes, this is Josh again. And I think that I can kind of speak to both the previous discussions and really add something here, especially with the tribal sovereignty and the tribal governance piece. A lot of the times the questions, whether it be financial planning, or vocational programs, or bringing in federal programs to get more tribal participation, and really wanting to find these ideas or methods to increase it, what needs -- I think that what needs to take place is very much what's been said is, each tribe is its own nation, and I assure you, because, you know, with the tribes that I've visited and worked with, there are amazing programs and initiatives and things that are going on in each one of these tribal organizations, with these tribal governments that they are -- they know what their people want, they know what their people need, and they are doing their best to provide those services and build those programs. So, I think really, you know, looking at it more from a concept of not necessarily, you know as was mentioned before, this is the services that we have, how do we get it to the community, but really start looking at what programs and services does each of the tribal communities and tribal nations have going, and how can we incorporate the services that we are wanting to provide that we can provide into the practices and the programs that are already taking place, and looking to build the capacity and the sustainability of the operations that are already occurring, or that tribal nations want to see happen for their people. And look at ways to modify or adjust or look just to incorporate into what is already taking place within the tribal nations.

Speaker: You are on mute.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Well, that doesn't make for good moderation. So there are some questions here that are similar that I would like to throw out, and I am just going to say I don't know who should answer them, but what are some ways one can get equipment for clients at no cost to remove barriers to employment and, are there grants available to provide services to native people in their communities? I'm just leaving that open. I don't know who to call on.

August Martin: This is August. I will say there is one resource available that can conduct an assessment on tribal nations to determine the level of accessibility within that community, whether it's within the government structure, headquarters, and that is the U.S. Access Board. They do have a website. But they do conduct evaluations and assess the accessibility of communities. So, they have been looking for ways actually to get into tribal communities to better benefit those tribal communities. And I'm sure that they would have -- could point those tribal nations in the direction of resources to help assist, defray the costs of those assessable requirements. And I forgot the other part of the question.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: It was grants and resources.

August Martin: Oh, grants or resources for vocational rehabilitation and our services to groups, individuals as a possibility. But that would be a discussion between the tribal VR project director or counselor in the tribal administration, and they would have to determine or assess the level of accessibility within that community to determine what devices or what might be required to make the community more accessible. On an individualized basis, vocational rehabilitation can pay for specific equipment that can help us, can assist in the individual access, their communities better, but that's on an individualized basis.

Dr. Stephanie Fryberg: Okay. All right. Unfortunately, we do have to wrap up because of time. So, thank you Larissa, Benita, August, Peggy, and Joshua for your valuable time and the feedback you provided to assist Social Security in strengthening their disability program. I trust everyone joining us today found it both beneficial and informative. I want to thank Social Security for the invitation and allowing me to provide you with some important information. Now let me turn it over to Renee Ferguson, Director for the Office of Native American Partnerships. Thank you, everyone. Renee?

Renee Ferguson: Thank you, Dr. Fryberg. We would just like to extend our sincere appreciation to you and for the complexity of this panel. The panelists -- August, Joshua, Peggy Jo, Benita, Larissa -- thank you for participating in today's discussion and for allowing us to record this. For those who are not able to join us, there's many events going on in Native American Heritage Month right now, and so, I know everyone's time is limited. And so, we did record, that will be available soon. This was an excellent discussion. And thank you for all the participants who joined us. If you're in a tribal community and you want to know more about these topics that we covered today, please see the list of references that we provided on the National Disability Forum homepage: ssa.gov/ndf. If you click on today's discussions and you see the list of panelists, below that you can find references to the Ticket-to-Work website for service providers and other references. In the coming weeks we will post the link to the recording of this forum on our website. You'll be able to go to the ssa.gov/ndf and you'll be able to find the video recording under previous NDF's section. Also, those who registered and joined us, you will receive an email. We hope you will evaluate this forum so that we can improve upon our future forums. Thank you again for joining us. Stay safe and enjoy the rest of your day.

James Edrington: This concludes the Social Security Administration's National Disability Forum on Removing barriers to Accessing Services in tribal communities, Part 2. Thank you for joining us today. Stay safe and have a wonderful day.