



Chapter 3

Context of the Vocational Rehabilitation System and Asian Americans



The Asian American Reality in the Context of Vocational Rehabilitation

Research done by mental health and psychology professionals that focuses on Asian Americans with disabilities (AAWDs) reports time after time that this group tends to underutilize formal resources and to be underserved by the mainstream U.S. service system. This is especially true of the VR system in Illinois. Many AAWDs face discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion from social and economic aspects of life, in their own communities as well as in the mainstream (Hasnain & Leung, 2010).

As a result of the four types of neglect or inattention (see sidebar; Hampton, 2000; Hasnain & Leung, 2010), Asian Americans often underuse VR services. For this reason, case workers and VR providers have a unique opportunity to address these data collection and service delivery issues and start to develop effective strategies to connect AAWDs to the rehabilitation process and foster their integration into their new American life.

Lack of Ethnic-Focused Research

Little research has been conducted on the needs and capacities of AAWDs and employment from a VR perspective. Nor has information been collected about their particular experiences of living with a disability (Yang, Leung, Wang, & Shim, 1996). Only one publication, by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR, 1999), summarized findings by Smart and Smart (1997) that mention refugees for the first time. These researchers observed that "most Asians and Pacific Islanders do not fit the disability or socioeconomic profile of other minorities" (p. 10), but they did not extend this observation to other groups. They also stated that recent immigrants, including Hmongs, Laotians, Vietnamese, and Cambodians, are exceptions because many tend to be both poorer and less well educated than other Asians in the United States.



More disability research is needed on Asian American communities, businesses, and cultures.

Four Types of Asian American Neglect or Inattention

- Attitudinal, physical, cultural, and social barriers may keep them from being identified or counted in data collection efforts, or they may be excluded from or unable to access mainstream assistance programs (e.g., VR programs, independent living centers). Also, Asians may not be exposed to the wide variety of specialized and targeted services offered by DRS.
- If little is known about the actual numbers of AAWDs, even less is known about the impact their disabilities have on their immigration experiences. In fact, many community organizations that advise and support AAWDs do not capture data on this group because they do not record immigration statuses, impairments, or disabilities.
- Unlike many people with disabilities who rely on VR services for help in attaining employment, educational, and independent living goals, few AAWDs are referred to mainstream VR services to help them become integrated into American life.
- AAWDs in mainstream VR and independent living centers are frequently overlooked, primarily because they lack a collective voice and knowledge of their rights.

Importance of Employment as a Means to Improve Social Integration

Although most VR professionals agree that active consumer participation and collaboration in the rehabilitation process is desirable to promote social integration, there is little agreement on the best ways to ease access to VR services and employment for Asian Americans. The few studies that have been conducted suggest that AAWDs want to work but lack the skills to find jobs in the new environment or are given limited information on where to get assistance. As a result, AAWDs constitute a minority population in this country and a client minority population in current VR systems (Hasnain & Leung, 2010).

This issue must be addressed. Rehabilitation service providers and researchers continue to report that Asian Americans and other minority populations have not received adequate VR or employment assistance services compared to their White counterparts (Hampton, 2003). We can speculate that similar inequities exist for specific Asian ethnic groups with disabilities who have settled in Illinois. A lack of VR and employment access keeps many individuals with disabilities, especially Asian Americans, from participating fully in society because employment is of crucial importance to a person's economic, social, and psychological well-being.

Employment provides financial security and helps to build a sense of economic well-being and motivation to pursue new goals. It can provide greater social interaction and connections that reduce isolation and build social integration. This is especially important for AAWDs, who generally are less likely to participate in many social and community activities due to cultural, community, and system-level barriers (Zhan, 2003). In all societies, employment helps create a sense of personal confidence and social integration that contributes to life satisfaction. For these reasons, employment plays a critical role in the social integration of this group.



**Asian Business Forum held on
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Underuse of Vocational Rehabilitation Services Caused by Personal, Community, and Institutional Factors

Although AAWDs want to work, evidence continues to suggest that they underuse VR services (Kim-Rupnow, Park, & Starbuck, 2005). Moreover, although community-based organizations have employment specialists to help Asian Americans find work, few organizations are designed to support the needs of Asian Americans with disabilities. Given this trend, AAWDs are far more likely to underutilize mainstream VR and employment supports. This underutilization stems from a variety of causes, including cultural perceptions of disability such as shame and stigma, language barriers, and cultural styles of help-seeking behaviors that use resources to solve personal problems that the mainstream culture considers "alternative" (ADOPT fieldwork findings, 2010). Moreover, the Asian population tends to hold views on disabling conditions, causal factors, and related supports and services that are quite different from those held by mainstream Americans.

Perceptions of Disability

Because of the particularly sensitive nature of disability issues, ADOPT has begun to show how these perceptions affect the notions of employability and access. Underutilization of VR service is also caused by organizational or institutional barriers, the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach and services, lack of sensitivity among providers in mainstream disability service systems, and lack of information about disability at immigrant/refugee agencies. In addition, the demand for access to culturally appropriate employment and VR services for AAWDs is increasing given the growth of this population in the United States. Because the diversity of Asians in the state is increasing, it is critical that community agencies and mainstream disability agencies become culturally aware of the changing and increasingly complex group of consumers it is their job to serve. This project begins to address these issues.

Vocational Rehabilitation's Cultural Bias

VR and employment are highly influenced by the values, policies, and goals of mainstream, middle-class White culture. U.S. culture is highly individualistic and places particular value on personal autonomy and independence. This deeply rooted Western notion of independence contrasts strongly with the beliefs of many Asian groups, which emphasize family and interdependence (Leung, 1996; Hampton, 2000, 2003; Hasnain & Leung, 2010).

Need for Culturally Appropriate Outreach and Service Access

Access to VR services and supports that are culturally sensitive has been identified as a significant area of need for AAWDs. To further complicate the process, even when individuals rely on a community-based agency or agencies to link them to services and support that help their integration, staff in these systems often know little about the disability and VR options available to these people. In addition to the systemic barriers, VR agencies themselves often promote values and ideologies that differ from those of the immigrant and refugee experience.

Because VR providers and agencies often emphasize self-determination, independent living, and self-advocacy, AAWDs may be isolated if providers do not identify or translate relevant terms and concepts in ways that are understandable to Asian clients. This narrow approach to service delivery is a major impediment to use of the VR system by AAWDs (Hasnain & Leung, 2010).

This focus group comment reveals some potential cultural barriers and why VR service providers should realize that not all clients coming to them are the same.

"I don't think a lot of the different cultures feel comfortable coming to a government agency requesting services while not being sure of which is going to be acceptable: if they are going to be welcomed, if they will be looked down on, or if we will make it easy for them. So having these other agencies that they trust already, I think that is really key."

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