

Employer Involvement Key to RTW Success

(Article Reprint)



WELL-ORGANIZED RETURN-TO-WORK (RTW) programs can benefit employers with both reduced workers' compensation insurance premiums and improved employee morale. Managers of three programs in Texas agree, however, that return-

to-work success depends on employer communications with both employees and health care providers during the treatment and re-

covery of an injured employee.

During a presentation at the 15th Annual Texas Workers' Compensation Educational Conference in Austin this summer, the three program managers discussed their experience with RTW in three unique settings. The presenters were:

- Cindy Grant, PHR, Risk Manager for Airgas-Southwest in Corpus Christi
- James Huckaby, MS, ARM-P, Director of Risk Management for the Mesquite Independent School District
- Sam J. McMurry, MS, ARM, Workers' Compensation for Lockheed Martin Corporation in Fort Worth

The presenters were introduced by Virginia May, Director of RTW Services for the Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers' Compensation. May said RTW programs fit into a larger strategy for workplace disability management.

"Having a comprehensive, effective safety and health program in place is the number one defense against workers' compensation costs, in order to help prevent an injury in the first place," May said. "If an injury does occur, then there are a number of steps that can be taken to diminish or mitigate your losses. Among these steps, a critical element is a return-to-work program."

Small Employer

Grant said Airgas-Southwest, which transports industrial gas cylinders, employs about 600 workers in 60 different locations in Texas and New Mexico. Almost all of

the company's locations have 10 or fewer employees, she said, creating logistical problems for monitoring workplace safety and reporting worker injuries in a timely fashion.

Prompt treatment of workplace injuries is a part of Airgas-Southwest's "very aggressive" RTW policy, Grant said. Managers must accompany workers on their first visit to a doctor's office to explain the company's policies.

"We are agreeable that we will work with any restrictions ordered by a doctor, short of complete bed rest," she said. "If the restriction is to work only one hour a day and not lift more than 25 pounds, we will accommodate that."

Grant said injured workers are brought back to work to perform a variety of tasks as soon as they are able. These assignments can include everything from office filing to briefing a replacement driver on truck delivery routes. By providing these alternative work assignments, she said Airgas-Southwest has seen employees coming back to work faster and returning more rapidly to full health.

Grant said her company has seen a drop in workers' compensation insurance costs of about \$650,000 over the past three years since implementing safety training including a RTW program.

Medium Employer

The 4,900-employee Mesquite ISD also has recorded significant savings in workers' compensation costs over the last 13 years, Huckaby said. He attributes 55 percent of the \$18 million decline in costs during that period to RTW efforts.

"Return to work is the absolute cornerstone of a successful workers' compensation program," he said. "No other cost containment measurement will have a greater impact on savings."

Like many employers, Huckaby said the Mesquite ISD's old philosophy regarding getting injured workers back on the job

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was “full duty or off work.” To change that philosophy, he said supervisors and employees had to be retrained.

First, he said supervisors were trained to take responsibility for the safety and rehabilitation of workers on the job under their supervision.

“Every supervisor is a stakeholder in the success of our return-to-work program by managing accidents and injured employees that are in their operation,” Huckaby said.

Secondly, employees that may have objected to fellow workers earning full pay for “light duty” were educated that those workers were still helping to carry part of the workload as long as they were at work. This met Huckaby’s goal for the program to answer the question for management, supervisors and employees: “How does this program personally benefit me?” RTW has now become an employment benefit in the district.

“Employees now realize ‘If I’m hurt at work, I’ll get my full pay,’” Huckaby said.

Effective communication with treating doctors also has been a key to the success of the Mesquite ISD, which has its own physician Preferred Provider Organization for its employees. Huckaby concluded with information about how the savings for the district due to the RTW program over the past 13 years have been a savings for the taxpayers of the Mesquite ISD.

Large Employer

McMurry said employee supervisors at Lockheed Martin Corp. also discouraged injured employees from returning to work prior to the start of a RTW program about 14 years ago. The Fort Worth government contractor currently has about 16,000 employees.

He said the cost of workers’ compensation claims at Lockheed began to attract the scrutiny of government contract auditors before RTW began.

“The question was ‘why have a (RTW) program at all?’” he said. “The answer was cost and concern for the employees.”

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McMurry said “aggressive timing” for treating worker injuries and providing quality health care are two strong points of the Lockheed Martin program. The company has its own, onsite health care facilities and staff, making the involvement of the employer with treating doctors a convenient step.

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James Huckaby, MS, ARM-P
*Director of Risk Management,
Mesquite Independent School District*

“Even if you use a local clinic, don’t just send people to it,” McMurry said. “Become a partner with the employee. Go talk to the doctor and invite them to the workplace.”

“Make the doctors part of your team and make sure that they understand that you want your people back and that you’re going to work with them to do what’s necessary to bring them back.”

Offering modified or transitional duty assignments is essential, he said. In most cases, it is less expensive for the employer to bring an employee back to work at a diminished capacity than to continue to pay workers’ compensation benefits for them.

McMurry demonstrated this by providing examples of the total costs of having an employee out of the workplace rather than the employee returning to work in some meaningful work capacity. From a management standpoint, he illustrated an answer to the question: “How productive does an employee have to be to make it worthwhile to bring them back to work?”

(The presentation titled “Successful Workers’ Compensation Return to Work Programs” can be viewed online at the Division website at: www.tdi.state.tx.us/wc/wcindex.html under “Seminars and Education.”)