

## Early Intervention Strategies for Employers Webinar Summary

### Overview:

On May 21, 2019, RETAIN TA hosted a panel presentation via webinar entitled, *Early Intervention Strategies for Employers*. Early intervention helps injured or ill workers return to work as soon as medically possible during their recovery process. Effective early intervention strategies save employers money and improve health outcomes of the injured employee. Presenters shared evidence-based information on what employers need to know about early intervention strategies to keep their staff employed after illness or injury.

### Panelists included:

- *Heather Lore*, Senior Manager, Membership and Communications International Association of Industrial Accident Boards and Commissions (IAIABC)
- *Steve Wurzelbacher*, Director of the CWCS, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)
- *Brian Chin*, Occupational Health Services Fellow, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Center for Workers' Compensation Studies (CWCS)

### Key Takeaways:

Despite an understanding that early intervention strategies are effective and ultimately save employers money and improve health outcomes of an individual experiencing injury, implementing these strategies remains a challenge for employers. To overcome these challenges prevention of injuries before they occur and clear and open communication between employers, employees, and support professionals such as return-to-work coordinators, health care staff, and vocational rehabilitation counselors is needed. Below are a few key takeaways from the panel presentation.

#### *Challenges for Employers*

- Communication between injured worker, medical provider, and workers' compensation/health care systems
- Develop an appropriate RTW/SAW program for the injured worker
- Limited resources (e.g., company size, lack of hazard communication tools/no safety and health professional, adequate access to medical care, financial burden)

#### *Employer Roles*

- Prevent the injury if possible (e.g., provide training and continuing education about job risks and job hazards)
- Ensuring clear communication of the injury reporting process
- Develop a protocol for potential job modifications/job accommodations

#### *Effective Early Intervention Strategies*

- Prevention should always be the primary goal for the employer
- Immediate response to an injury
- Coordinate with the injured worker and medical provider to discuss RTW/SAW strategies if feasible, which may include light duty work, job restrictions, or other accommodations
- Open communication and thorough documentation

## Panel Discussion:

Panelists were asked to respond to seven questions related to the importance of early intervention in Stay-at-Work/Return-to-Work, challenges of employers, employer roles in early intervention, and effective early intervention strategies. Below is a recap of the responses to these questions.

- **Why is early intervention important to RTW/SAW models?**
  - Early intervention is key to reducing frequency and severity of injuries. Early symptom and injury reporting enable both interventions to improve the job, and also to treat the worker in timely manner and return the person to function and back to employment. A report of injury should trigger a review of processes to make improvements such as increasing ergonomic safety with the goal of reducing the future frequency of injuries for the particular job.
  - Early reporting of an injury leads to early treatment. Early conservative treatment for injuries, especially soft tissue injuries, can help to reduce the severity of injury and then the need for more complicated treatments that would put a worker at risk for leaving the workplace.
  - If an employee does have to leave the workplace after an injury, it is important that there are tools in place to facilitate communication between an injured worker, the employer, and health care providers to help an employee successfully return to work. Employers should document each step of the process of an employee returning to work with information about the cause of injury, communication between an employee, health care provider, and/or return-to-work coordinator, workplace accommodations, and plan for full return to work if necessary.
  
- **Describe the challenges employers face when an employee is injured.**
  - Some of the challenges that an employer faces are immediate decisions that must be made following an injury such as protocols for providing an employee medical care; transport to medical facilities, and communication with an employee's emergency contact.
  - Continued productivity is a challenge for employers. Employers must ask how do you fill the injured worker's position and is it temporary assistance from the untrained employee. Training an employee to fulfil an injured workers' responsibilities requires an investment in training time.
  - Employers also face the challenge of maintaining a positive workplace culture. If someone gets injured it can be a frightening experience for the person who gets injured, but also for their peers who might have seen the injury. Peers may also be concerned about their own safety. Employers need to address this potential concern to maintain workplace morale.
  - Small businesses may experience more challenges than larger businesses. For examples, small businesses may not have up-to-date and thorough job descriptions thus they are unable to create a modified light-duty job description. Small businesses often do not have additional employees to alleviate the loss of productivity when a peer is injured and unable to work.
  
- **What is the economic burden of an injured or ill worker for businesses?**
  - Injuries or illnesses that hinder an employees' efficiency can cause economic burdens because they may increase labor costs and disrupt business operations.
  - The impact a workers' compensation claim may increase future premium costs. It's true that a claim may, in some jurisdictions, increase insurance rates, but missteps by the employer or supervisor early on can mean lost opportunities to minimize the employer's financial loss well beyond the cost of indemnity/wage replacement benefits.

- **Why are some employers hesitant to help an employee return to work after injury?**
  - Some employers may believe that a worker cannot return to work until they are 100% recovered from their injury.
  - Employers may fear legal repercussions due to an injury at work.
  - Relatedly, employees may fail to communicate an injury to an employer for fear of being laid off or fired.
  
- **What type of role do employers have in the implementation of RTW/SAW programs?**
  - Develop a RTW/SAW procedure.
  - Gain an understanding of your region's resources and programs that can assist employers in implementing return-to-work program.
  - Develop proactive accident prevention plans
  - Have job descriptions and light-duty job descriptions available to present to a medical provider quickly after an injury. Be able to adjust the light-duty tasks in these descriptions to align with an injured employee's medical limitations.
  - Understand common job accommodations or modifications that may be necessary in your business
  - Develop communication protocols to stay current on an employee's injury after it occurs and ensure there is a continuing communication with all of their employees.
  
- **How does RTW/SAW benefit employers, and what strategies should states consider to support these benefits?**
  - Having formal return-to-work program can have a drastic impact on getting workers back to work sooner and increase productivity.
  - Proactive accident prevention plans can promote a culture of safety at a workplace.
  - Understand RTW/SAW programs that are currently in place. There are incentive programs: Oregon, Washington, and North Dakota have preferred worker program that provides support to employers for providing modified work, they also can assist with risk production. For example, Oregon has an employer and injury program that assists employers with worksite purchases and subsidies. Ohio has transitional work grants which help identify job tasks, develop new job procedures, and evaluate job descriptions. Washington has a state work program that provides incentive for a temporary light duty jobs, and also assists with training, purchases of tools, wages, and clothes. Texas, Florida, and Oregon have robust ombudsmen programs that can assist workers through the return-to-work process among many other things. These resources provide support for workers as well as employers and getting their workers back to work.
  
- **What are some steps or approaches employers can take to help an employee RTW/SAW?**
  - Build strong relationships between supervisors, human resources, and employees.
  - Have up-to-date, job-specific, regular and light-duty job descriptions ready to present to a medical provider quickly after an injury.
  - Communicate with the injured worker and the treating health care provider, if possible, immediately following the injury, letting the worker know he or she is wanted/needed back on the job.
  - Educate and train employees in workplace safety including recognizing and reporting the signs and symptoms of injuries and encouraging early reporting of an injury.
  - Document types of light duty work or work accommodations for specific injuries.

- Foster positive workplace culture and satisfaction. Job satisfaction is a key indicator of early return-to-work

**More information:**

An archive of the webinar is located on RETAIN TA's Virtual Online Community, [www.RETAINTA.org](http://www.RETAINTA.org).

**Selected Resources:**

- International Association of Industrial Accident Boards and Commissions (IAIABC) Disability Management and Return to Work Committee Paper: *Return to Work: A Foundational Approach to Return to Function*
- IAIABC Paper: *Return to Work: Why Should I Care?*
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): *Promote Worker Recovery through Health Care Management and Return-to-Work*