

## RETAIN Kentucky Peer Mentor Shares Life’s Possibilities After an Injury or Illness

August 2023 RETAIN Success Story

RETAIN Kentucky peer mentors help participants overcome employment challenges following an injury or illness. Through their shared experiences, mentors provide guidance and model that a rewarding life and career are possible after an injury or illness.

### BACKGROUND

RETAIN Kentucky helps participants successfully stay at work (SAW) or return to work (RTW) after an illness or injury. Together, RETAIN Kentucky RTW coordinators and participants develop SAW/RTW plans that address barriers that can affect a participant’s ability to SAW or RTW. These plans may include workplace accommodations and other supportive services and resources such as housing, transportation, and childcare.

### CHALLENGE

After an illness or injury, some participants struggle to adjust to changes in their work and personal lives, which can make a successful return to work difficult. They may have to find new ways to navigate their work responsibilities or adjust to changes in their roles at work and at home. RETAIN Kentucky Peer Mentoring Coordinator Jason Jones understands these challenges first-hand, having experienced a spinal cord injury thirty-three years ago. He found that the support and guidance he received from others with similar injuries helped him adjust to his post-injury life and work. “They showed me the way and helped me through things, answered questions about everything from insurance to, ‘Why does this hurt? What can I do with my life?’” Jason said. “The shared experience made a huge difference.”



### Challenge-Action-Results

**Challenge:** Some employees struggle to adjust to lifestyle changes after an injury or illness, making it difficult for them to stay at or return to work.



**Action:** RETAIN Kentucky offers a peer mentoring service to all participants. Participants are paired with mentors who have experienced a disability and offer weekly follow ups and guidance to help participants improve their post-injury work and life.

**Results:** RETAIN Kentucky’s peer mentors have provided customized support to 57 participants. Nearly 75 percent of peer-mentored participants who completed the RETAIN Kentucky program have returned to work.

## ACTIONS

Jason had started successful peer mentoring programs with other organizations. He helped RETAIN Kentucky start its own peer mentoring program in 2021. Peer mentoring is offered as an optional service to all participants. When working with participants, peer mentors draw from their own experience with a disability to help workers navigate work and life after an injury or illness.

***Offer consistent support.*** RTW coordinators refer participants to Jason, who pairs them with one of four RETAIN Kentucky peer mentors. The mentors' willingness to share their experiences is a cornerstone of the program. After an initial call, mentors follow up at least weekly until participants complete the RETAIN program or stop participating in mentoring or RETAIN. RETAIN Kentucky peer mentors have worked with participants who have varied illnesses, injuries, and disabilities, such as visual and hearing impairments, strokes or spinal cord injuries, cancer, arthritis, long COVID, and mental illness.

***Provide role models of resilience.*** Peer mentors help participants adjust to changes in work and life that result from their illness and injury. They listen, offer suggestions and support, share their experiences, and encourage participants to take steps to create a meaningful personal and work life. Jason helps participants explore how to manage stressful work situations, such as co-workers' reactions to their workplace accommodations, so they can regain their confidence at work.

Participants often raise personal challenges that affect their self-esteem and quality of life. One participant worried about his wife's increased responsibilities after his injury. He struggled with his changed role and the burden he felt this placed on her. His mentor coached him to discuss his concerns with his wife and explore other ways he could support her. Another participant missed swimming after her injury but was hesitant to try exercising again. Her peer mentor challenged her to try a gym class. She followed through and realized she could do it!

Successfully facing their worries and fears can help build confidence and motivation to navigate work challenges. As Jason noted, "When somebody gets a little bit out of their comfort zone and tries something that they thought they would not be able to do despite their disability, I just say, 'You can do this.' It's not as easy, especially if you've just been injured. But ultimately, it's about quality of life, and quality of life is not sitting in your living room watching TV all day."

***Explore possibilities after an injury or illness.*** Peer mentors regularly discuss topics such as work, health care, relationships, and day-to-day life. Mentors help participants assess what activities they can still do at work and home. An employee who experienced a stroke realized he could no longer do the job he had performed for many years. During peer mentor conversations, the participant explored the activities he could still accomplish. A musician who struggled with debilitating arthritis mourned the loss of performing. His peer mentor helped him set up a music streaming service, and they connected with each other around favorite albums and artists. Jason always asks, "What are you doing in spite of all this? Are you seeing your family and friends? Are you staying engaged in society? What have you done this week?"

**Offer a safe space for honest discussions.** Peer mentors offer a safe place to discuss the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual effects of an illness or injury. Participants may feel like they don't belong, worry they are not providing for their family, feel tensions with co-workers, and experience frustration when treatment is no longer working well. As Jason noted, "I think peer mentoring allows you to get into a space that otherwise would not be explored."

One participant shared her suicidal thoughts with her peer mentor. The peer mentor immediately connected with the RTW coordinator and other RETAIN staff to ensure the participant received behavioral health support. The RTW coordinator noted that, "Without such quick thinking on Jason's and Kristen's part and the participant's willingness to talk to RETAIN staff about these things, I'm not sure she would have the resources she needs to address these top priorities in her life. She was appreciative of our help and agreed to follow through with the suggestions." Jason shared that this participant is still working.

## RESULTS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

RETAIN Kentucky's peer mentoring is just one aspect of RETAIN Kentucky's RTW plans that are customized to meet each participant's needs. RETAIN Kentucky peer mentors, along with RTW coordinators and other health care and community supports, help participants regain their purpose in work and life.

- RETAIN Kentucky's peer mentors build supportive relationships with participants and demonstrate the possibilities of rewarding work and life after an illness or injury. Many participants discuss concerns with mentors that they have not shared with others about work challenges, evolving work and family roles, or emotional struggles. They develop new perspectives and strategies that have led to improved quality of life and work connections.
- As of May 2023, 57 RETAIN Kentucky participants have received peer mentoring. Nearly 70 percent of peer-mentored participants completed the RETAIN program. After completing the program, nearly 75 percent of peer-mentored participants have returned to work.



*Kentucky is participating in RETAIN (Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network) to build connections and improve coordination among employers, health care providers, and other key parties to help workers with new injuries and illnesses stay in the workforce. The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation leads Kentucky RETAIN, together with the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute and committed project partners, including the Council of State Governments. The U.S. Department of Labor, in collaboration with the Social Security Administration, sponsors RETAIN.*

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