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**Community of Practice – Notes**

**Topic: Case Management TIPS for Return-to-Work Coordinators**

**(Tools, Insights, Processes, and Strategies)**

**Subject Matter Expert (SME): Leslie Dawson, MA, CRC, NCC**

**Date: Thursday, April 2, 2020, 2:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. ET**

**Introductions and share one key area of interest to you regarding RTW Case Management processes, strategies, or tools?** *The following are some of the key areas of interests expressed by states regarding RTW Case Management processes, strategies, or tools:*

* One state shared that they are interested in everything as they are yet to have a referral.
* One state said they’d like to hear new ways to get referrals in with the virus going around and new ways that states are reaching out with individuals.
* One state is looking for how to keep folks engaged and learning how to help people find new work during a time when lots of places aren’t open.
* Another state is interested in learning more about how to help people during massive layoffs, especially when many are more medically fragile than they were prior to injury/illness.
* Another state shared that they are having trouble getting patients back to work, and work not allowing people back with restrictions, and people being laid off. Additionally, COVID-19 is closing down physical therapy and other ancillary services and is slowing down recovery.
* Another state shared that they are wondering with the fact that their research program is being put on hold as identified as a “non-essential” function and looking at alternative deployment, limits potential of job placements.
* The last state shared that they have many of the same questions around COVID-19 that other states brought up.

**Participants discussed Tools, Insights, Processes, and Strategies for RTW**

**Tools**

**Employee Questions**

* The SME, Leslie Dawson, shared that she would approach today’s training from a practitioner’s standpoint. She noted that with RETAIN, each state received Tools from the Department of Labor, such as the Operational Planning and Implementation Guidance Checklist, Functional and Non-functional Requirements for State RETAIN Data Systems, Definitions and Guidelines, RETAIN Data Collection for Grant Performance Management and Evaluation. Additionally, grantees were also given access to Technical Assistance and Subject Matter Experts to get your grant programs up and running. Without the proper tools, implementing and operating a RETAIN grant would be extremely difficult.
* A poll was conducted to see what tools and resources are currently being used, including the RTW coordinators, healthcare professionals, employers, workforce partners, data and electronic record keeping, and other. All tools in the poll were used frequently by the poll respondents.
* Ms. Dawson reviewed questions to ask the employee, including:
  + Employee awareness of situation
  + Employer awareness of situation
  + Employee desire to RTW/SAW
  + Attitudinal barriers present
  + Ms. Dawson homed in on what are the questions you need to ask to truly get at the true story, the real circumstances around an injured employee’s RTW/SAW situation. By asking certain questions of the employee, states will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the employee. There will be a Handout (Handout 1) with a full set of questions provided for states to use, including feedback from the participants in this CoP.
* Ms. Dawson stated that referrals may be challenging during COVID 19. She suggested that states engage their workforce partners identified as key resources in case management (poll question). It might be wise idea to go to work force partners and ask if they will add a question on their intake form that asks if they have a non- work related injury/illness and if they are looking for assistance in finding another job and refer them.
* States discussed what questions are useful in understanding the employees’ perspective of their situation.
  + One state shared that they ask their employee what their doctor has shared about work restrictions and probe further – i.e. 5 lb. lift restrictions vs. out buying an 8 lb. gallon of milk.
  + One state has started asking more questions about mental health, especially due to current COVID issues.
  + Ms. Dawson agreed with importance of addressing mental health during at this time and stated that it’s important for RTW coordinators ascertain how the employee views their injury or illness.

**Employer Questions**

* The SME, Leslie Dawson, shared questions to ask the employer, including:
  + Employee awareness of employer’s opinion
  + Employer awareness of employee’s situation
  + Attitudinal barriers present
* Ms. Dawson addresses the sidebar about the employee does not want the employer involved, then states need to ask the employee these questions for employer and ask them to consider as the employer. There is also a handout available for additional questions to ask employer. She reminds states that the employer ultimately has the decision-making power regarding SAW.
* States discussed issues regarding getting participants getting back to work.One state shared that they had a patient go back to work with restrictions, was accommodated for a week, and then because of COVID downsizing was let go. She wondered if it was because of restrictions.
* Ms. Dawson suggested encouraging person to stay in touch with employer. Let employer know they are willing to do something (work) at home; and to check to see when they can come back to work. Reach out to employer, if employee is still at work and offer options such as work from home or home office set up. This is a job retention issue and VR may help with equipment to accommodate RTW, depending on States Order of Selection status.
  + Ms. Dawson shared that some ADA-enforcement has been “lightened” as a result of COVID-19; it is hard as a RTW/SAW provider. She shared that the best thing is to encourage the employee to stay in touch with their employer and be proactive.
  + Another state shared that employers they have spoken with are reluctant to allow an employee with a non-occupational injury RTW until they're 100%, out of a fear of them becoming re-injured on the job and becoming a Work Comp case. Ms. Dawson notes there is a handout about this (i.e. light duty); transitional employment is a great incentive to offer employers.
  + One state would like to know how to initiate a conversation with a participant who lost their job because of COVID-19 to stay in touch with their employer, as participant maybe angry. Ms. Dawson says that it’s important to first find out if it’s permanent or a temporary lay-off. If it’s permanent, then it’s maybe time to look at other opportunities, including online training or working from home. As a team, still keep in mind any limitations that the individual might have and that the team can support them in. It might transition them from a SAW to a RTW case.
  + Ms. Dawson asked how are you helping them prepare for another job? Her agency is using online training and job developers are feeding online job opportunities to their participants such as from Lowes, Home Depot, Amazon. Use Zoom, Face Time, phone. Make sure accommodations are in line and let’s find you another job!
  + Transitional employment which provides incentive for employers is another option we use. Pay is supplemented by project and employer.

**Indicators of Problems on the Job**

* The SME, Leslie Dawson, shared about “other” indicators of problems on the job. This is when a state may feel when they’ve done everything, but there’s still roadblocks, or if what is being heard and what’s seen aren’t matching up. These may be some other issues that are going on. Therefore, some tools to get are:
  + Job Description (or job analysis)
  + Leave Records
  + Most recent performance appraisal
  + Disciplinary and corrective action plan (if applicable)
  + Work history and reasons for leaving previous positions
* One state noted that they do not mix performance issues with medical ability to work. The rationale is that they find that HR, employers, providers, etc. often conflate performance issues with medical factors that may influence work ability. On the clinical side, they encourage employers and providers to separate these two issues. They also look at whether medical issues may be presenting as performance issues but are actually medical issues. For example, symptoms of hyperthyroidism after a thyroid surgery can manifest as impatience, mania, irritability. It can be difficult and these overlaps making it even more important to assess and address them separately.

**Insights: Review of Previous Case Study: JACK**

* The team reviewed a case study of “Jack the Plumber” and asked participants to share whether this was a light or heavy touch case.
  + One participant noted that one thing that could make this light touch is his employers willingness to work for a solution. Jack has worked there a long time.
  + Another participant noted that the light touch factors are: He is well connected to his employer and motivated to RTW.
  + Another participant would like to know if he has been cleared though a doctor to return to work, if he has any upcoming therapy appointments, what if any accommodations he may need to return to work, and is he willing for us to reach out and work with his employer. Additionally, they would want to know what type of leave he is currently using and whether it was a work-related injury.
  + One state noted that they would not be able to assist Jack as the injury was greater than 12 weeks and their inclusion criteria of acute (less than 12 weeks since onset) would not be met, while another state would find him ineligible if he has been out of work for more than 12 weeks and has no projected work capacity.
  + A participant asked whether there another job that he can work with the same employer.
* The team continued to review the case study, as it complicates and becomes a bit more of a medium touch.
  + One participant suggests perhaps changing Jack’s role to a trainer given his extensive experience.
  + Another participant suggests if the treating provider cannot determine if he can safely do the essential functions of the job with or without accommodations, a reliable functional capacity evaluation could be helpful, and the state would suggest that to the provider.
  + Ms. Dawson notes that Jack would want to note whether LTD severs employment with the company, and other questions like that.
  + Another state shared that it would also be important to know if he is still healing after surgery or has plateaued. If plateaued, the state would want to know if this is chronic neuropathic pain or ongoing compression, which would have different treatment pathways. Both of them should be amenable to improvement. Work conditioning, work hardening, or functional restoration program could be helpful to recondition him. If treatment has been optimized and he has permanent restrictions, then he may need vocational retraining or new job.
  + Another participant noted that Jack' s excitement and desire is a starting point which will now lead to that state develop "creative solutions," finding alternate ways of implementing his plumbing knowledge and or where is plumbing is going in the future utilizing his vast knowledge base and utilizing adaptive tools or equipment.

**Processes**

* Ms. Dawson shared that processes and the related plans (Handout 4) can be helpful to see the moving pieces and helpful to see how everything is working together. It can also help you make sure you’re collecting all the information you need.
* Additionally, you need to be sure you are providing all the services to the employee. Note that there are more services than just accommodations and referral to employee services. There is counseling – but states don’t have to be a trained counselor. There is job coaching.
* Remember that everyone has a role and responsibility to play. Handout 6 shares the responsibilities of each role.
  + Ms. Dawson noted that as a result of COVID-19, a lot of people have been laid off. At first, only a few people might be brought back. It might be a completely new process of RTW. Just because a person is returning to a different job and with a different purview. They will still need the entire Team’s assistance including RTW coordinator, healthcare, workforce and all the partners.
  + Need to prepare for when COVID is on the down swing, what are the roles that we’re going to play in finding a different job for participants?
* Review of previous case study: Tina
  + Due to time this case study was not discussed in full though Ms. Dawson highlighted that working closely with an employer, they may recruit other participants from that employer.

**Strategies**

* Ms. Dawson upcoming CoP to address approaching employers, light duty v. transitional employment and accommodations v. modifications

**Key Takeaways -** Key takeaways were not discussed due to time, but Ms. Dawson requested participants and states consider implementation of the tips and strategies shared today.