

## **Physicians and return to work**

This is an outline of the presentation I will give to Physicians and medical care providers the week of November 4<sup>th</sup> in Canada.

**Title:** The workers' compensation treatment return to work connection.

**Time:** One and a half hours.

**Summary:** This presentation will

1. Present ways that physicians can utilize the new corporate trends in return to work programs and disability management as part of the treatment modality for injured workers.
2. Review the history and evolution of return to work programs offered by employers. It will track the evolution from simple light duty to the new theories of “work as therapy”.
3. Explore the role that transitional employment can play in assisting injured employees to recover sooner and more completely.
4. Address the issues of how physicians can work and communicate more effectively with employers in the return to work process. It will detail the process of “graduated return to work” and how to medically monitor employee who are participating in a transitional employment plan.
5. Address the role of the physician in patient preparation and communication for in a successful return to work environment.

### **Learning Objectives**

- Physicians will have a better understanding of how in-house disability management programs (return to work) can be used as a treatment strategy to enhance their patient’s recovery.

- Physicians will be better able to communicate with employers about the restrictions, abilities and recommended activities of their patients who may be candidates to participate in transitional employment.
- Physicians will have a better understanding of the attitudes and fears of both employers and their patients about early return to work.
- Physicians will be better able to monitor their patient's medical progress during participation in a transitional employment plan.
- Physicians will be better able to communicate with patients about the goals and expectations of their transition back into the workplace after and injury or work related illness.

## Return-To-Work Services by **Milt Wright & Associates, Inc.**

Milt Wright & Associates (MWA) designs integrated Disability Management programs for both private and public sector employers. We specialize in large companies with multiple locations. We often design, promote, tailor, and implement these programs jointly with labor and management. MWA has also worked with medical care providers, designing and implementing communication processes for Hospitals and Managed Care organizations.

### Experience Providing Disability Management Services to Employers

Milt Wright & Associates (MWA) has been developing and implementing Disability Management programs since 1991. As an introduction to the comprehensive services MWA provides, we have included a brief description of three large MWA Disability Management/Return-to-Work programs involving multi-site employers:

- 1) Laidlaw Transit, Inc.
  - 2) The State Government of Georgia
  - 3) The four-site pilot program completed for James River Corporation
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- 1) **Laidlaw Transit, Inc.**

Laidlaw is a diversified national corporation with over 80,000 employees (650 sites) for which we completed the design and implementation of a comprehensive Disability Management program for its Transportation Division. In 1996 we completed a Needs Assessment to evaluate the Laidlaw system. A pilot project was subsequently implemented at 10 sites around the country, including locations in the South, Northeast, Midwest, West, and Pacific Northwest. As a result of the successes of the pilots, MWA was brought back in to roll out this process nationally.

The results of the completed rollout were outstanding. Jeff Castle, Vice President Corporate Risk Manager for Laidlaw, recently told us that by implementing our program, along with a “charging system” (through which each location was charged a penalty for every day an employee was off work on time loss), workers’ compensation costs in one year dropped from \$37 million to approximately \$27 million. Some locations are also using this program to deal with non-occupational injury and illness, with anticipated similar results.

The Transportation Division of Laidlaw is widely diversified, and includes school bus, paratransit, and mass transit, with units located all over the country. Most Laidlaw locations were built through acquisition; therefore, a wide variety of corporate cultures exist within this single entity. For this highly diversified and

decentralized organization, Milt Wright & Associates utilized a process that provided individual locations with the opportunity to adopt a Corporate Disability Case Management model to their own local cultures and resources.

## **2) The State Government of Georgia**

The State of Georgia employs approximately 127,000 employees, stretched across one of the largest and most geographically, culturally, and racially diverse regions of the United States. The government itself is very large, encompassing more than 70 agencies, boards, and commissions, including the Board of Regents and its extensive system of universities and colleges. The agencies range from Corrections, Human Resources (including hospitals and related facilities), and Ports, to Transportation, Police, and Fire.

The State Government of Georgia brought in Milt Wright & Associates, Inc., initially to assess the status of workers' compensation and related benefits/expenses throughout the state.

A Needs Assessment was completed in 1996 and a highly successful, carefully-orchestrated occupational and non-occupational Disability Management Program was subsequently launched. The first task involved the creation of a master manual outlining the basic policies, procedures, and implementation process. The basic manual was subsequently enhanced through the development of specialized manuals for Supervisors.

Every bit as important was addressing the attitudinal changes required to make such a program successful. To help address these attitudinal issues, two high-quality videotapes were developed, exploring the proposed return-to-work process from a human perspective. The first of these videos took the perspective of the employees and their particular issues; the second version came from the supervisor perspective. In addition, after a highly structured train-the-trainer manual was developed, we presented RTW implementation training sessions throughout the state.

Initial results were outstanding. *Although the program was not mandatory for the agencies, a high percentage of the agencies bought into the process, with the majority also incorporating non occupational injuries and illnesses.* Total lost workdays for participating agencies dropped 56% from 1998 to 1999. They also experienced a 50.2% reduction in lost time expenses and a 25.9% reduction in medical expenses.

## **3) James River Corporation**

James River is a diversified paper products company with approximately 25,000 employees. In 1993, Corporate Workers' Compensation Director, John Pacqué, brought in Milt Wright & Associates to implement a comprehensive workers' compensation oriented return-to-work program. A Needs Assessment was

completed and was utilized to develop a comprehensive manual. Training was then provided at four large, distinctive sites around the country.

The benchmark goal for each of these locations was the reduction of lost time. The average overall reduction in lost time within the first six months after implementation was over 30 percent. (This program was not ultimately rolled out nationally because of an internal reorganization of the workers' compensation function and a comprehensive downsizing of the entire company.)

What is remarkable is that all four pilot programs, each very different from the other, were successful. Some programs were developed and implemented jointly by labor and management; others were strictly the result of management efforts. Some locations utilized fully functioning Transitional Employment Teams to design and monitor transitional employment. One location met infrequently and essentially ran their program through one individual. Some organizations provided the training themselves, while other organizations depended on MWA to provide almost all training. Regardless of these different implementation styles, all programs were successful.

It should be noted, however, that those locations which implemented the MWA approach most fully, involved both labor and management, and committed the largest amount of resources to the projects, were the most successful.

The James River project demonstrates MWA's ability to allow flexibility from site to site, *within the basic program structure*.

## **Summary**

MWA programs have been implemented all around the nation. We understand the unique problems of large unionized employers, and have an understanding, as well, of some of the challenges of working with a multi-site, multi-state system.

The success of our consultation and training services has also resulted in positive national publicity for our customers. For instance, the James River program was featured in the 1995 issue of Risk Management magazine.

Our program at Community Hospitals of Central California also received public acknowledgement. As a result of a successful program, its director, Richard Lord, received a prestigious award from Benefits News and Risk Management magazines. The Community Hospitals of Central California program was implemented in 1991. At that time, the workers' compensation expenses were in excess of \$3 million a year. By 1994, expenses had dropped to less than \$900,000 a year.

The State of Georgia was recently awarded the "Employer of the Year" award by the National Association of Rehabilitation Professionals in the Private Sector (NARPPS) on

the basis of our project. The Georgia Self-Insured Association also awarded the State of Georgia with the "Employer of the Year" award for 2000.