

Ontario's workers compensation system benefits from new Work Reintegration Model



The Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) of Ontario, Canada is undergoing a significant shift in its delivery of return to work and vocational rehabilitation services. Outsourced for the past 13 years, services have been moved in-house under a new Work Reintegration Program model designed to achieve greater control, quality and accountability.

Vice President Judy Geary's career has spanned more than 30 years at the WSIB where 18 months ago she took the helm of the newly created Work Reintegration Division. Now in the new position of Vice President, Work Reintegration she is undertaking a complete redesign of the structural changes needed to move the WSIB's innovative program forward to support injured workers.

"It's my responsibility to continue to provide strategic direction and entire end-to-end oversight for injured workers," she explains. "We set out working on a number of fronts creating a model of leading practices in reintegration."

One of the earliest steps taken in preparation for the new program was to create an in-house return to work (RTW) coordinator position. Previously, RTW coordination was not provided by WSIB; the function was outsourced to third party providers. Beginning November 1, 2010, injured workers who need retraining will have their plans developed and case managed by employees in a new WSIB role: work transition specialists.

"By eliminating the third party, the WSIB will increase the degree of coordination of retraining services for injured workers and will allow us to directly understand the programs they need," Geary advises.

Support for the changes goes all the way to the top with WSIB President and Chief Executive Officer David Marshall saying, "This new program is a wonderful service for injured workers and employers, and will stand as a leading practice model for years to come."

For the Work Reintegration Program, the WSIB is in the midst of hiring 220 new front-line staff, 20 managers and 35 work reintegration program experts, in addition to the 100 return to work specialists and 35 disability management experts already on staff.

The division is also creating a strategy for professionalizing Work Reintegration staff, with Geary confirming that one group is already on the path of achieving Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP) designations, which are offered under the auspices of the International Disability Management Standards Council (IDMSC). Another group is



slated to be certified under the Registered Vocational Professional (RVP) designation.

Geary says she would like to get many more employees “on the path to certification under the IDMSC.” For some staff in the areas of program development and quality management, holding the CDMP will be a hiring requirement.

Overall, Geary is the architect of an entirely different approach to work reintegration. “We’re going breathtakingly fast and keeping an eye on the end goals of what we are trying to achieve,” she emphasizes. “Outcomes will be carefully measured every step of the way.”

“There’s a strong emphasis on a multidimensional, robust, comprehensive program evaluation framework. We’ll be looking at all program factors including cost, timeliness, employment outcomes, and injured worker and employer satisfaction,” she notes.

So far, there has been positive stakeholder response to what she stresses is a balancing act with employers’ needs being one thing and injured workers’ another. A key step along the way has been to completely revamp, streamline, and transform in plain language all return to work and labour market reintegration policies, so that both workers and employers have a clear understanding of what they can expect from the program.

New policy features have given injured workers more choice and input on new vocations. Approaches have been changed as well on how injured workers obtain education and training services.

New strategic alliances have been created with Ontario’s 24 provincially funded community colleges, as well as with private colleges, giving injured workers greater access to and a wider choice of retraining programs. The strategic alliances have been modelled after the Government of Ontario’s “Second Career” program that relies heavily on the college system.

Geary calls this a strong emphasis on “mainstreaming” that will open new pathways for workers. As a result, she says there will be improved ability for workers to be retrained with their pre-injury employer. In addition, newly designed apprenticeship programs for injured workers will allow them to complete co-op assignments and practicums with an employer they can arrange at the end of their course, instead of up front.

The policies also provide enhanced opportunities for injured or ill young and low-wage workers, allowing them to retrain for higher salary jobs.

On the other end of the spectrum, other new policy features benefit older workers by permitting them to opt-out of retraining programs, giving them time to transition to a self-directed job search or to early retirement.

Another of the new division’s recent innovations is to contract with employment out-placement services to provide injured workers with up to 12 weeks of intensive, hands-on support and

access to contacts who are plugged into the local employer community. To control costs, a set fee system has been created for provider programs.

Geary advises that ensuring program quality includes “jurisdictional scanning of leading practices.” That includes an emphasis on the role of employers.

“Employer accountability needs to be upheld to enable injured workers to come back to work. Upping that and reinforcing employer obligations in the legislation will include penalties for not complying with the return to work process, starting December 1.”

On the other hand, employers will also receive more WSIB support. The WSIB’s disability management experts and return to work coordinators will be available to help them develop effective DM programs, and the new work transition specialists will work with both the employer and the worker to plan for a new occupation, preferably with the injury employer.

Geary notes there will also be changes to improve timelines. In the past, return to work processes had the potential to drag on. The WSIB’s intervention timelines will be tightened up to within 12 weeks of an initial RTW meeting, with vocational assessments held between six and nine months. “We’ll be moving intervention timelines up by about a year,” Geary concludes.

Next up in the division’s fast-paced agenda is to publish the revamped Work Reintegration policies in November to be used on an interim basis beginning in December. These will be taken out to stakeholders for consultation; feedback will be incorporated into final policies in the spring.

The massive hiring initiative for 275 new work transition specialists in various capacities is now well underway. The division’s program evaluation and quality management framework is up and running. Putting all the building blocks in place is essential to the success of the advanced new Work Reintegration Program.

“There is a lot of scrutiny on us. The stakeholders are watching. They expect improved outcomes to be showing early on,” stresses Geary.

This progressive shift would not be possible without support from the WSIB’s highest quarters. Geary credits President and CEO David Marshall, along with the WSIB executive team, for providing the high level of endorsement needed to develop a program of this quality.

“Their grasp of what’s important in return to work is unparalleled.”