**Return to Work Programs**

Current studies of workers’ compensation claims show that employers with an effective early return to work program in place have substantially reduced their insurance costs and overall operating expenses while contributing to productivity. Early return to work programs allows employers to exert positive influences in reducing the length of time injured workers are unproductive. Through the effective implementation of these programs worker morale and enhanced productivity often result.

The primary goal of an early return to work program is to accommodate injured workers, identifying or modifying jobs to meet their capabilities, and returning them to productive assets as quickly as possible. The main objectives of a return to work program include:

\* Accelerating an employee’s early return to work by addressing the physical, emotional, attitudinal, and environmental factors that otherwise inhibits a prompt return.

\* Facilitating temporary or permanent job reassignment or job restructuring.

\* Reducing the length of an employee’s disability.

\* Reducing the number of cases entering into the workers’ compensation litigation system.

\* Increasing productivity by returning workers to their jobs as quickly as possible.

\* Increasing worker morale and motivation at work.

\* Complying with applicable labor and employment laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.

\* Identifying alternative employment opportunities to accommodate unique needs of workers such as part-time, alternative work schedules, or work-at-home.

Successful return to work programs often incorporate a multi-disciplinary team approach involving the district’s management team, the medical provider, CRMA Risk Managers, and the insurance carrier’s claims adjuster. This team concept is critical to achieve the above stated objectives.

**Elements of an Early Return to Work Program**

**Management Commitment:**

Management must be committed to returning injured workers to modified duty. This commitment must be translated into specific responsibilities and accountabilities throughout the district. Management and employees throughout the district must be aware of the return to work program and trained in their responsibilities under the program. Performance measures should be established and used to track the effectiveness of the program. One measure may be the number of days lost due to accidents.

**Job Descriptions:**

A job description outlines the physical demands of a job to allow the medical provider to determine if a job matches the capabilities and limitations of an injured worker. A well-written description should define the job in terms of overall physical demands, motions required, environmental conditions, the number of times the job is performed per week and its duration. The district should develop a description for existing jobs considered suitable for early return to work. A form is available to help you develop descriptions of jobs within the district.

**Job Modification:**

In the event that there are no current jobs available that meet the needs of the injured worker, a systematic analysis should be performed for the purposes of modifying specific jobs to match worker capabilities. Job modifications should be performed through a team approach. The department supervisor and risk management should review existing jobs, identifying those that could be modified to meet the needs of the injured worker, allowing them to be productive without impacting their safety or the safety of others.

**Communication:**

The simplest method of assigning responsibility and accountability for the implementation of the return to work program is the appointment of a coordinator. The coordinator represents the district and assumes the responsibility of a liaison between the department supervisor, injured worker, the medical provider and claims adjuster. Active, regular communication with the supervisor and injured worker will help to monitor the course of medical treatment, identify return to work opportunities, and re-affirm the employee’s value to the district.

Continued communication with your medical provider and claims adjustor will help to expedite the processing of information involving an employee’s rehabilitation progress and continually confirm return to work opportunities. The presence of jobs that can accommodate injured workers should be communicated to your medical provider, claims adjuster, and injured worker.

Aggressive and continued communication with internal and external team members will aid in setting realistic targets for the worker’s return to work, and will provide a smooth and positive transition of the employee back to productive status.

**Summary**

Studies show that early return to work programs are an effective claim cost containment measure that contributes to production and worker morale. The CRMA Risk Managers are available to assist at every step.

Safety and Loss Prevention is a daily responsibility of district management. This bulletin is not a substitute for your own safety program. The information provided in this bulletin should not be considered as all-encompassing or suitable for all situations, conditions, or environments. The district is responsible for implementing their injury & illness prevention program and should consult with legal, medical, technical, or other advisors as to the suitability of using the information provided in this bulletin.