



By **JIM KREMER** • WORKERS TRANSITION NETWORK

PARTNERING WITH
NON-PROFITS TO
TRANSITION
DISABLED INJURED
WORKERS BACK INTO
THE WORKFORCE.

Workers compensation problems are making headlines across the country. Behind those headlines are real problems. Injured men and women with few opportunities for meaningful work. Employers and insurers struggling to be fair to employees and manage ever-escalating costs. And state governments, often with limited resources, called upon to solve the problem.

Crafting lasting solutions that meet the needs of all stakeholders will require a return to the core reason we as a society provide compensation to injured workers: As a bridge to help people make ends meet before they return to work. Getting people back to work in jobs and careers they want is the key to bringing workers comp costs under control.

One of the more interesting solutions gaining traction is partnering with non-profits to transition permanently disabled injured workers back into the workforce. . In this type of return to work program, the process begins as it usually would, with a

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treating physician specifying the applicable medical and physical restrictions for the injured employee.

But it takes an important step further. The employee is assigned a full time counselor who takes the individual's emotional and psychological state into account along with their physical state. This is immensely important, especially for injured employees who have been away from the workplace for extended periods. In addition to helping the injured worker regain confidence, the counselor assists with the full array of job search strategies and techniques. These include identifying new, appropriate occupations, resume writing, interview skills, networking and salary negotiation. For many vocational rehabilitation counselors, this focus on the whole person is the very reason they chose this line of work.

To put the counseling and skills to work in a real world context, the employer, counselor and injured employee jointly choose a non-profit at which the injured employee will work, typically for a period of six to nine months, while they conduct their self-directed job search. Non-profits at which individuals work include the YMCA, Goodwill and other charitable, cultural and historical institutions. While working at the non-profit, the worker receives a paycheck from his or her employer, or is paid through a temporary agency should the employer-employee relationship be severed. Their wages may be supplemented by workers comp benefits as defined by each state. The injured worker receives the benefits of recent work experience and a current reference for the job search process. This combination of intensive counseling and hands-on work to refresh skills and attitude results in a very high job placement rate. Some program par-

ticipants are even hired by the non-profits in which they "interned."

One of the larger benefits of offering this type of return-to-work program is that employ-



ers can more easily resolve outstanding workers comp claims. It's such a positive program for employees that judges rule in favor of employers who offer it. Knowing this, attorneys for injured workers who decline to cooperate with these reemployment efforts choose to settle claims, reducing litigation and its associated costs. Resolving claims frees up

reserves, which increases earnings for insurers and self-insured employers. This type of approach can also be applied to injured workers whose restrictions may only be temporary, but whose employers have trouble placing them in meaningful positions that are also within their physical limitations. Interim employment with non-profits keeps injured employees active during their recovery, maintaining and supporting their early return to their regular jobs. This creative approach is a four way win. It's a win for injured employees, as it helps them transition to a career of their choosing. It's a win for the non-profit, which gains a steady employee around which it can plan—especially important during this period of funding challenges. It's a win for the employer, both in terms of employee and community relations and managing workers comp costs. And it's a win for taxpayers, as workers comp claims are resolved without recourse to the courts.

Employers ought to consider offering a return to work program-- "outplacement service for injured workers"--as an employee benefit, perhaps as an addition to their employee assistance program (EAP). They'll help employees and communities. And they'll play a constructive role in reducing the costs of workers comp to their shareholders, taxpayers and the entire economy. □

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Workers Transition Network is working on a pilot project in New York and has plans to expand into the Northeast states by year-end.

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