

Improving vocational rehabilitation services for injured workers in Washington State



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ABSTRACT

Workers who incur permanent impairments or have ongoing medical restrictions due to injuries or illnesses sustained at work may require support from vocational rehabilitation programs in order to return to work. Vocational rehabilitation programs implemented within workers' compensation settings are costly, and effective service delivery has proven challenging. The Vocational Improvement Project, a 5.5-year pilot program beginning in 2008, introduced major changes to the Washington State workers' compensation-based vocational rehabilitation program. In the evaluation of this pilot program, set within a large complex system characterized by competing stakeholder interests, we assessed effects on system efficiency and employment outcomes for injured workers. While descriptive in nature, this evaluation provided evidence that several of the intended outcomes were attained, including: (1) fewer repeat referrals, (2) fewer delays, (3) increased choice for workers, and (4) establishment of statewide partnerships to improve worker outcomes. There remains substantial room for further improvement. Retraining plan completion rates remain under 60% and only half of workers earned any wages within two years of completing their retraining plan. Ongoing communication with stakeholders was critical to the successful conduct and policy impact of this evaluation, which culminated in a 3-year extension of the pilot program through June 2016.

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on an evaluation of the Vocational Improvement Project (VIP), a pilot program that introduced major changes to the Washington State workers' compensation-based vocational rehabilitation program. These changes were designed to increase accountability and efficiency and to improve employment outcomes for injured workers. We conducted a process and impact evaluation of the VIP in order to provide information to stakeholders regarding whether the VIP should be extended on a permanent basis. This multifaceted evaluation is illustrative of the difficulties inherent in implementing and evaluating quality improvement programs within a complex system characterized by competing stakeholder priorities.

1.1. Background

While a substantial majority of injured workers are able to return to work (RTW) fairly soon after injury, others incur permanent impairments or have ongoing medical restrictions that require longer-term and more intensive support via vocational rehabilitation programs (MacEachen, Kosny, Ferrier, & Chambers, 2010; Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, 2012a). While representing a small proportion of injured workers, these claims are generally the most complex and costly, with the highest potential to result in permanent disability (Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, 2012a). The purpose of workers' compensation-based vocational rehabilitation programs is to facilitate RTW for workers who have been unable to return to their previous job after an occupational injury. Most states authorize some vocational rehabilitation benefits for injured workers via workers' compensation programs, but eligibility and covered services vary widely (Tanabe, 2012).

Vocational rehabilitation programs implemented within workers' compensation settings are costly, and substantial service delivery problems have been identified (Barth, Grob, Harder, Hunt, & Silverstein, 2008; KPMG LLP, 2009; MacEachen et al., 2010, 2012, 2013; McPherson, 2007; Sears & Wickizer, 2012). Despite the

Abbreviations: VIP, Vocational Improvement Project; RTW, return to work; L&I, Washington State Department of Labor and Industries; EI, Early Intervention; AWA, Ability-to-Work Assessment; PD, plan development; PI, plan implementation; OJT, on-the-job training; ESD, Washington State Employment Security Department.

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importance of vocational rehabilitation programs and the costs involved, e.g., nearly \$50 million in Washington State in 2006 (Barth et al., 2008), there has been little workers' compensation-specific research regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation in returning injured workers to work. However, several studies suggest that, despite widespread quality improvement efforts, there remains a great deal of room for vocational rehabilitation system improvement internationally (MacEachen et al., 2010, 2012, 2013; McPherson, 2007).

1.2. Vocational rehabilitation services for injured workers in Washington State

The goals of the vocational rehabilitation program managed by the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) are to determine the worker's ability to RTW, develop a plan for retraining the worker if needed, and support the training effort once initiated (Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, 2012b). To accomplish these goals, L&I makes several types of referrals to private-sector vocational rehabilitation counselors. Early Intervention (EI) referrals, the most frequent type, are intended to assist an injured worker to RTW for the employer of injury or current employer. EI referrals include services such as discussing early RTW options with the employer, worker, and health care provider, identifying potential barriers to RTW, performing job analysis, and facilitating job modifications or accommodations if needed. Ability-to-Work Assessment (AWA) referrals provide L&I with information regarding a worker's

employability or eligibility for further vocational rehabilitation services, including vocational retraining. A worker may be eligible for retraining if found: (1) not employable due to the effects of the industrial injury or occupational disease, (2) physically able to participate in training, and (3) in need of training to become employable. About 2% of all injured workers or 6% of those entitled to time-loss compensation are found eligible for vocational retraining annually (Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, 2012a). L&I makes plan development (PD) referrals for workers found eligible for retraining, bringing the vocational rehabilitation counselor and the worker together to develop a retraining plan that is submitted to L&I for approval. The plan must address the worker's medical conditions and restrictions and other barriers to RTW, such as lack of education and experience, lack of skills, language difficulties, and availability of employment in the worker's labor market. After a retraining plan has been approved by L&I, a plan implementation (PI) referral is made to initiate retraining activities. Fig. 1 depicts how a claimant might progress through the vocational rehabilitation process and the expected order of the various referral types.

1.3. Description of the Vocational Improvement Project (VIP)

Like many workers' compensation-based vocational rehabilitation programs, the program managed by L&I has faced a number of challenges and has evolved over time. L&I has a long history of collaborative efforts with stakeholders to improve program performance (Barth et al., 2008; Sears & Wickizer, 2012). According

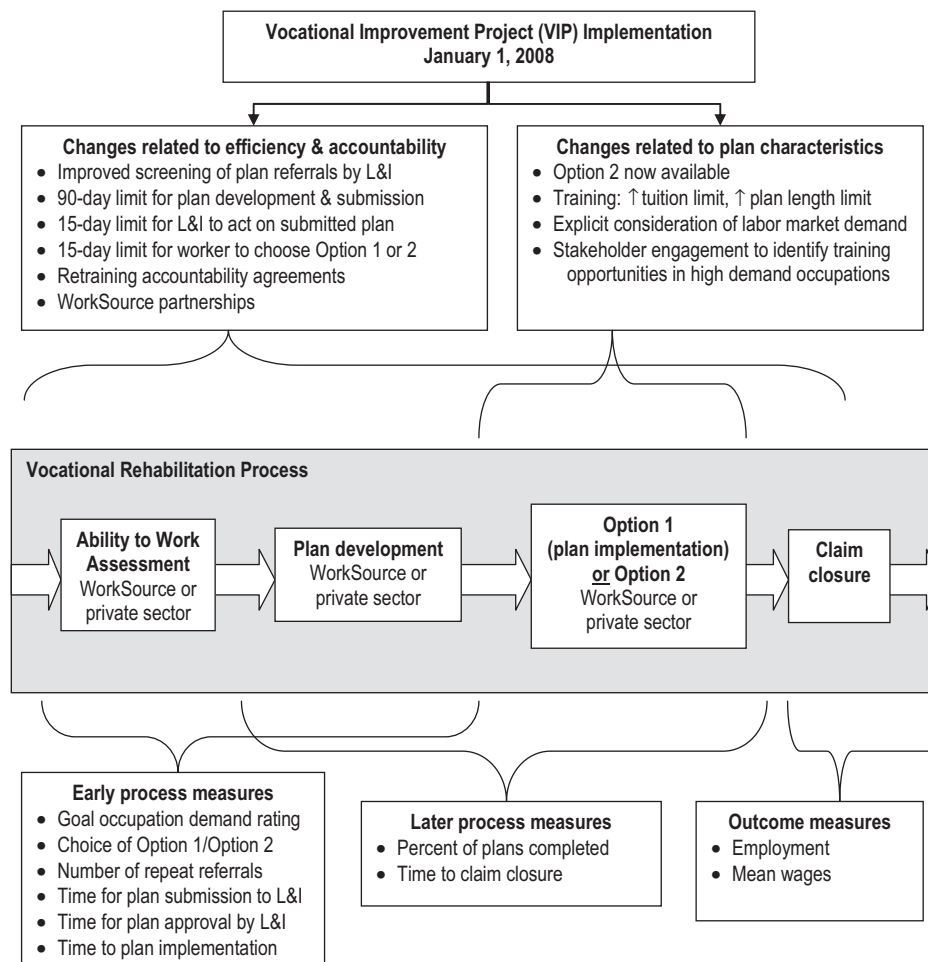


Fig. 1. Diagram of programmatic changes and evaluation measures. L&I, Washington State Department of Labor and Industries.

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