

PREFERRED WORKER Adviser

Summer 2008

Delmi Hernandez helps return-to-work process come together

By Stephanie Snyder



Delmi Hernandez

Ever since childhood, Delmi Hernandez has enjoyed putting puzzles together. She loves to look at all the pieces and put them together to make a beautiful picture. We have all seen the puzzles for toddlers with only a few pieces that fit into only one place. In addition, most of us have experienced puzzles that are more complex and the frustration that builds when a piece by all appearances should fit, but doesn't. For many of us, that's when the hammer or scissors come out, but not for Hernandez. With patience, intuition, and determination, she makes adjustments until the pieces effortlessly slide into place.

"Sometimes it takes a new perspective – taking a break or switching positions can open my eyes to new possibilities. I just love it when it all comes together!" Hernandez said.

Hernandez is in a new position within the Workers' Compensation Division that requires adjustments at multiple levels. Hernandez was hired in February 2005 as a vocational consultant and within months was promoted to lead worker. She was hired as the manager of the Rehabilitation Review Unit in November 2007. Six months later, the Rehabilitation Review Unit merged with the Reemployment Assistance Unit to become the Employment Services Team, and Hernandez is now the manager of the team. The intricacies of this puzzle continue with the streamline efforts of the Employment Services Team.

"Prior to the merge, we were two units operating three different programs – all with the same goal, but with different rules and under different management. Now we're looking at all these pieces and trying to figure out how we can work as one team to create a seamless return-to-work process," Hernandez said.

According to Hernandez, "Oregon is fortunate to have three well-established programs to encourage workers to stay at work or return to work as quickly as possible after an injury. The Employer-at-Injury Program, Preferred Worker Program, and Vocational Assistance Program

were developed to fill specific needs and they work pretty well for the majority of people. Because they were developed at different times to meet different needs, each has its own eligibility criteria, rules, procedures, and forms.

"As much as we have worked with our customers and stakeholders to make the programs easy to use, more could be done to ensure that the right services and benefits are available when needed with as few complications as possible. To better position ourselves to look at return-to-work issues and find solutions for the system as a whole, we have combined the efforts of two units into one."

All parts of the ongoing reconfiguration need to come together into one seamless process. Some people would look at this puzzle and get out the hammer and scissors. Hernandez, however, has a calm and confident approach.

"We need support from all parties, including our own staff, and that takes time. Change isn't always easy," Hernandez said, "but it sure can be exciting when it all comes together." ■

Helping preferred workers return to work

By Jane Fernandez

The Preferred Worker Program (PWP) partnership with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (OVRs) continues to result in successful placements. Senate Bill 119, passed in 2005, encourages increased access to the Preferred Worker Program by providing additional ways for preferred workers to get help finding employment. SB 119 became effective in 2006, and since that time two agencies, the Department of Business and Consumer Services (DCBS) and the Department of Human Services (DHS), have worked together to increase available resources to preferred workers.

Initially, the Preferred Worker Program and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services piloted a project to determine how many preferred workers would take advantage of the newly expanded services. Based on the findings from this pilot project, a new agreement for 2007-2009 restructured the OVRs payment schedule to recognize “milestones” emphasizing successful job placements achieved for preferred workers.

OVRs currently provides services to preferred workers in the Portland metropolitan area. Services begin with outreach to eligible workers. Professional vocational counselors then help workers who request assistance, identify transferable skills, research work opportunities, and match occupational experiences to appropriate jobs. Vocational counselors also follow up with workers 90 days after placement to ensure that employment is successful.

In addition to training OVRs staff, Preferred Worker Program employees continue to determine PWP eligibility, refer potential program participants to OVRs and collaborate with OVRs staff to provide preferred worker benefits when placements occur.

Many preferred workers return to work with their at-injury employer and never need these services, but this program offers additional help to those in the Portland area who are seeking suitable employment. Based on the success of the Portland pilot project, DHS and DCBS are now exploring options to expand the program to other parts of the state. ■



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Rocks crushed, not employment!

By Tony Guidone

A worker suffered a severe low back injury while working as a rock crusher operator and is now back to work with the employer-at-injury. The employer created an assistant dispatcher job in the dispatch/sales office for the injured worker. The employer rehired the injured worker because he is a good employee; this was great for the worker, because he enjoyed working there and wanted to stay with his employer. The employer requested assistance from the Preferred Worker Program (PWP), when it submitted a signed "Job Offer Letter" from the worker. Then, the worksite modification consultant arranged an on-site review of the job.

Premium exemption automatically started for the employer upon the rehire date of the worker, and the employer does not have to pay workers' compensation insurance premiums or premium assessments on the worker for three years. Also, claim cost reimbursement is available during the premium exemption period. This benefit protects the employer from workers' compensation claim liability for a new claim during the premium exemption period. In addition, the insurer cannot use the injury experience so the employer's workers' compensation insurance rates will not increase.

The PWP consultant determined the assistant dispatcher job involves working in an office environment and operating a computer to coordinate

the loading of rock or concrete mix into trucks. The job requires sitting in an office desk chair 80 percent of the time and operating a computer. It also involves operating another computer at a counter. For each truckload, the worker must open and close a horizontal-sliding window to provide the truck driver a load receipt. Currently, closing the window does not exceed the worker's pushing limitation, as it is the slow season. However, the worker's supervisor said this duty would increase during the busy season. Therefore, the company is considering a weigh scale redesign, which may eliminate the window open-and-close task, but PWP is still waiting to review the employer's weigh scale redesign plans.

Another improvement involved a local vendor that provided some trial chairs. The worker really likes the chairs and said they are much better for his back than what he was using. Consequently, the worksite modification solution consists of replacing a non-supportive desk chair with an ergonomic chair and providing an ergonomic stool-height chair for the counter-level work. If duties change or the weigh scale redesign does not happen, the employer has three years from the date of hire to request further worksite modification assistance to address the worker's needs. Once the consultant approves the worksite modification agreement, PWP pays for the items.

After the worksite modification is complete and the consultant verifies it, other benefits are available. The employer may receive 50 percent reimbursement for the workers' gross wages paid for a six-month period. This is requested by completing and submitting a wage subsidy agreement.

In addition, employment purchases are available for the worker to retain employment. This assistance may include: tuition; books and fees; required temporary lodging; meals; mileage; tools and equipment; clothing; one-time moving expenses; union initiation fees, back dues, and one month's current dues; occupational certification, licenses, and related testing costs; and worksite creation. To request this benefit, the employer must complete an employment purchases agreement form and submit it to PWP.

The employer-activated PWP is a win-win situation, because the employer receives assistance to rehire a valuable worker and the injured worker continues working with the same employer. ■





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- ◆ Are you using the PWP benefits to offer incentives to an employer to hire you?
- ◆ Are you using the PWP benefits to modify a job to allow you to work within the limitations caused by your on-the-job injury?
- ◆ Are you using PWP benefits to purchase employment items such as tools and clothes?
- ◆ Did you know the PWP benefits are easy to access?

**JUST CALL AND ASK:
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El Programa para el Trabajador Preferido (PWP) tiene beneficios para usted!

- ◆ ¿Está usted usando los beneficios que el PWP ofrece para incentivar a que un empleador le dé trabajo?
- ◆ ¿Está usted usando los beneficios del PWP para modificar su trabajo y así poder trabajar dentro de las limitaciones causadas por su lesión en el trabajo?
- ◆ ¿Está usted usando los beneficios del PWP para adquirir lo necesario para el trabajo como herramientas o ropa?
- ◆ ¿Sabía usted que es muy fácil usar los beneficios del programa?

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Программа преимущественных прав (PWP) имеет льготы для вас!

- ◆ Используете ли вы льготы программы преимущественных прав (PWP) для побуждения работодателя принять вас на работу?
- ◆ Используете ли вы льготы программы (PWP) для модификации рабочего места, чтобы облегчить ограничения, имеющиеся после травмы, полученной на производстве?
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