

Modified Duty -The Benefits of a Return to Work Program

When an injured employee has been given work restrictions, it is important for the employer to have a successful return-to-work program. There are huge benefits to the employee and the employer. By providing a short-term modification of a job, or an alternate job based on the employee's current abilities or limitations, the employee is more likely to return to full-duty sooner. By providing a job that is relevant and necessary, the county benefits from work productivity as well. Injured employees, even with physical limitations, are extremely valuable assets if properly utilized to accomplish specific tasks.

Costs and Manpower Benefits

The benefits to the employer are demonstrated in the reduction of lost time work hours and costs of workers' compensation benefit time as well as the possibility of the permanent loss of a worker. Statistics prove that an injured employee's chances of ever returning to work decrease significantly with each month the employee is out of work due to an injury. With a good modified work program, the employer and the employee maintain work place ties, avoiding the alienation that can occur on both sides with a prolonged absence from the workplace.

How to Begin

Providing modified duty begins with the county and its relationship with the designated providers for Workers' Compensation injuries. Be sure the providers know that the county does, whenever possible, provide temporary modified or alternate work duties. Be able to provide that physician with a physical description of the temporary job if the physician needs more information. It is extremely important that the temporary modified or alternate job does not exceed the restrictions provided by the doctor.

How it Works

The whole goal is to return the injured worker to a job performing medically appropriate tasks and earning wages as soon as the treating physician allows. Increase the physical demands of the job when the physician reduces the physical limitations so that the employee progresses toward regular job duties. This means following up with the physician to get the most recent work restrictions and, if necessary, obtain physician approval of the modified job duties.

Guidelines on providing modified or alternative tasks;

- Make sure the work unit or supervisor understands the transitional work approach and the specific modifications or assignment.
- Provide work that is valuable to the county and other employees.
- Accommodate the work restrictions with work that is meaningful to the injured worker.
- Avoid "busy work" or any tasks that would be perceived as "punitive".
- Be positive and supportive while focusing on what the employee can do, not what he or she cannot do.

What This Means for Counties

If you are having difficulty getting the physician to provide work restrictions or if the employee is reluctant to return to a temporary modified position, be sure to discuss this matter with your CTSI WC examiner. It may be necessary to take a more formal approach using the Rule IV instructions given by the Division of Labor. This may entail a written job description of the modified position as well as written approval from the physician. CTSI will provide you with guidance on the steps of this process if necessary.