SEED

State Exchange on Employment & Disability
Advancing Policy for a More Inclusive Workforce

STAY AT WORK/RETURN TO WORK

Millions of American workers leave the workforce each year after experiencing an injury or illness, and hundreds of thousands of these workers later receive state or federal disability benefits such as Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), often without realizing there are alternatives. Such programs—which pay cash benefits to people with disabilities who are not able to work—can become a default source of income for ill and injured individuals who believe these benefits to be their only option. However, many injured and ill workers could remain in their jobs (or the workforce) if they received timely, effective support and education.

A work disability is defined as an illness, injury or medical condition that has the potential to inhibit or prevent continued employment or labor force participation, including both on-the-job and off-the-job injuries and illnesses. It also assumes that the worker is an active member of the workforce at the time of injury or illness.

Though many work disabilities may be temporary, they can directly challenge an individual’s ability to work. Once a worker leaves the workforce and becomes dependent on state and federal benefits, it can be incredibly challenging for them to re-enter the workforce. Providing access to education and support, such as service coordination or information about reasonable accommodations, can dramatically increase positive outcomes when keeping workers actively engaged and, in some cases, may allow them to return to work more quickly.

What Populations are Targeted by SAW/RTW Efforts?

- Veterans [including National Guard & Reserve]
- Individuals Sustaining On-the-Job Injuries (Workers’ Compensation Claimants)
- Individuals with Off-the-Job Injuries (Not eligible for Workers’ Compensation)
- SSDI Candidates/Recipients
- Individuals with Mental Health Conditions or Substance Abuse Issues
- Individuals with Chronic Illnesses and/or Episodic Disabilities (e.g., cancer, HIV)
- Aging Population
- Victims of Trauma

What is Stay at Work/Return to Work?

Stay at Work/Return to Work (SAW/RTW) means keeping workers on the job and preventing unnecessary loss of employment and departure from the labor force.

Example in Action

The Centers of Occupational Health & Education (Washington State) have piloted a program with an emphasis on coordinated early intervention. This involves healthcare providers and employers working together as soon as a worker is medically viable, with employment viewed as part of the recovery process.

Key Features of the COHE Model

- Coordination of services, including enhanced stakeholder communication, RTW planning, and identification of potential delays and solutions to keep both plans and treatments on track.
- Physician training on occupational health best practices.
- Incentives for physicians to utilize the best practices for participating patients.
- A data management system allowing service coordinators real-time access to relevant information to support case management.
Benefits of SAW/RTW

Staying connected to the workforce has tangible benefits for individual and family health and well-being, quality of life, and standard of living. In contrast, when workers exit the labor force, these benefits are lost. In addition, federal and state tax revenues are lost, and public programs such as state workers’ compensation programs, SSDI, SSI, Medicare and Medicaid are often leveraged for income support and to fund health care services.

Role of State Legislators/Sample Policy Options

States play a critical role in helping workers who acquire disabilities to remain in the workforce. When exploring policy options in support of this effort, it is advisable to consider policy options that:

- Support employee retention.
- Help businesses navigate complexity of benefits.
- Supplement financial incentives.

The most successful policy ideas for increasing the retention of people with illness/injury in the workplace revolve around a key concept—disability is not static. State SAW/RTW policies can be designed to support workers experiencing disability and/or adjusting to changes in disability at any stage of life.

Where There is Potential for Improvement

- In 2011, states lost an estimated **$6.5 billion** in tax revenue due to unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities.
  

- **Four million** nonfatal work-related injuries and illnesses occur annually.


- Businesses spend **$170 billion** a year on associated costs.

  Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Office of Safety and Health Administration.

- Lost productivity from workplace injuries and illnesses costs companies **$60 billion** each year.

  Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Office of Safety and Health Administration.

- In 2014, off-the-job injuries resulted in about **270 million** days of lost production time.


- Off-the-job injuries to workers cost the U.S. economy at least **$339.4 million** in 2014.


- Work-limiting disabilities reduce the percentage of men and women in the labor force by about **4.8 million** total individuals in the American economy.


For More Information:

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) established the Stay at Work/Return to Work Policy Collaborative to support the development of policies, programs and practices that encourage continued employment of workers likely to leave the workforce due to injury, serious illness or disability. For additional information and resources, please visit: https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/SAW-RTW/research-publications.htm.