

A column from "[Bob's Cluttered Desk](#)"

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With Vocational Recovery Project, Washington L&I Returns to Return to Work. The Private Sector Should Pay Attention to Their Results

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It was one of the most inspirational presentations I've seen in years. They almost sounded surprised at the comments they were making. They were clearly enthusiastic and were describing outcomes of the experiment they were part of, yet they still sounded astonished at what they were conveying. This was clearly something new and unique for them.

And for the people speaking, it is only the beginning of a longer pilot project.

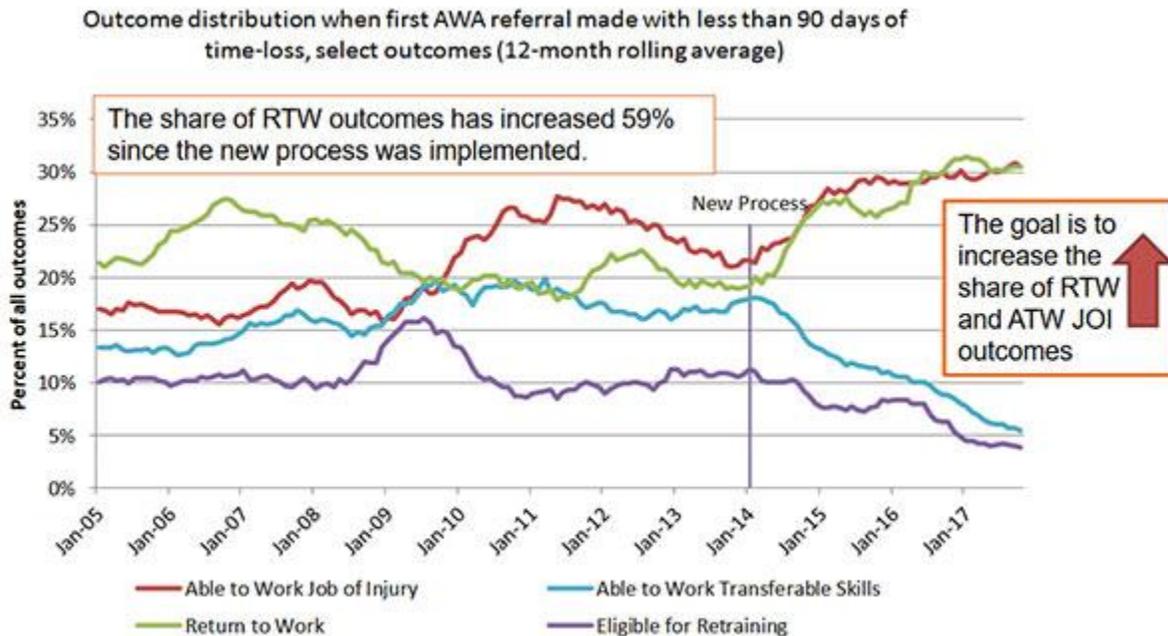
I was in Washington State last week, a guest of Washington Labor & Industry for their Vocational Counselor Conference. Assembled before the room of 300 attendees was a group of about 30 people; L&I Claims Managers and Vocational Counselors from the private sector. They were talking about the new "Vocational Recovery Project" pilot (VRP), and the wonderful things they saw coming out of it. From my experience and point of view, the Vocational Recovery Project is unlike any other in the country at this time.

But I will have to come back to that, as there is more to the beginning of this story.

Starting back in 2014, the department of L&I launched an effort to improve the return to work rate for their injured workers while lowering the amount of long term disability cases they were seeing. They launched an aggressive program designed to get injured workers into the hands of Vocational Counselors faster and to more effect. On the faster front, they took a VRC referral rate that was running over 350 days and reduced that time to an average of 68 days. They also made an intensive effort to partner with the VRC community, improving communications and encouraging them to "step beyond the box;" to look for and work on solutions using methods that were not directly addressed within their regulations. As part of this effort, they suspended a somewhat contentious audit process that caused angst within the VRC community. In short, L&I started making a concerted effort for their voc system to concentrate on positive outcomes instead of rote process.

The results since the inception of that effort have been impressive. The state has seen a 20% reduction in the number of long term disability cases – a number that equals about 800 workers every year. Director Joel Sacks, in a presentation to the group reported that the state is starting to see a reduction in "expected expenditures" of about two billion dollars.

That's "Billion" with a "B." And while that reduction in future liabilities may not be 100% attributable to early Voc intervention, it is the result of a culture shift that embraces creative solutions and ultimate recovery.



The Vocational Recovery Project is, in my view, the next logical step in this effort. Laying out 9 distinct goals for the program (6 of which have been enacted in the current pilot), it is designed to pair claims managers directly with vocational experts to collaborate on a recovery plan for their injured workers.

I must admit to the potential for a slight bias here. Ryan Guppy, L&I's Chief of RTW Partnerships, freely told the group that the name, Vocational Recovery Project, was drawn in part from my now 5 year old "**Workers' Recovery**" effort. So clearly, I thought it to be a brilliant idea from the outset. Freakin' brilliant, if I do say so myself.

And if anyone doubts L&I's commitment to RTW, I would venture to point out that they actually have a "Chief of RTW Partnerships."

The 30 or so people I mentioned earlier were part of a group of 65 professionals tasked under the VR Referral Project, a subset program of the VRP. Many of them spoke of how positive an experience they had working closely with their assigned counterparts. They described unique problems with injured workers, as well as the very original solutions they created in this collaborative effort. They spoke about teamwork and troubleshooting. They talked about the importance of recognizing psycho-social influences. They described creative solutions that would otherwise not have manifested themselves. It was interesting to see people outside their comfort zones recognize that this was actually a good place to be.

I am a bit reticent to actually write about this. I am, after all, an unabashed fan of the free enterprise capitalistic system. I have always been of the school where government - slow, inflexible and stodgy, is normally not the solution. That belongs to the realm of the nimble and motivated entrepreneur - the "for profit" world looking to build a better mousetrap.

But in this case, I would be wrong. (For God's sake, don't tell Paduda I said that. I'll never hear the end of it).

Washington Labor & Industries is a large government agency. While they have many functions in the state, they serve as the monopolistic (they prefer the word "exclusive") provider of workers' compensation insurance for their population. By all private sector standards, they should not be innovating anything. However, with Director Joel Sacks, Insurance Director Vickie Kennedy, RTW Partner Chief Ryan Guppy and many more dedicated professionals, L&I has the right people in the right place at the right time.

And they are doing the right thing; showing that lives can be restored, disability can be avoided, and money can be saved in the process. L&I is embracing the importance of addressing psychosocial issues. They are encouraging collaboration and original thought in problem solving. And they are getting results that are making a difference. They understand that avoiding disability at all cost will ultimately save money and restore lives. There is a lot to learn from what they are doing.

It is a lesson that the private sector should be paying attention to.

