



VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION MONTHLY

FACILITATING AN UNDERSTANDING OF ROLES WITHIN CLIENT-COUNSELOR RELATIONSHIPS AND ENCOURAGING THE SAFE EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION.

Recently, further attention was be given to the methods in which injured workers are informed about voluntary vocational rehabilitation services in the State of Michigan. The result was a well developed, professional disclosure form that now requires each state approved agency to implement for all new referrals. A good deal of time was spent in developing a concise, yet fully informative document that would facilitate the exchange of information and protect all interested parties. The new professional disclosure form has done just that, and indeed much more.

On occasion, vocational counselors are privy to an abundance of information regarding their “prospective” clients vocational, educational, and medical background before actually meeting with the individual. Without an understanding of how and why these materials are obtained, injured workers may associate the counselor as an agent of their employer of injury. How else would they obtain these documents? The new disclosure form helps to eliminate misunderstanding, informing the client that these documents are necessary to provide appropriate service and do not merely implicate the service provider as and agent of the employer or claims administrator.

Clients need always be reminded that their personal information is confidential and will not be shared with any unauthorized party. Confusion many times lies in communicating with medical professionals about a workers physical limitations, and/or prognosis. Standard procedures require that client’s complete and sign an authorized/limited release of information specifically for this purpose. Many plaintiff firms have well-founded concerns regarding a counselor having been granted “full access” to their clients physician(s). It is assumed that a counselor may be able to influence or successfully encourage a doctor to modify their clients work restrictions or treatments, which may or may not be in their client’s best interest.

In order to avoid this dilemma, the majority of plaintiff attorneys have requested that all contact with their clients treating physician(s) be made in writing or in the presence of the client, and resulting feedback be accessible to all parties involved. The new disclosure form informs the injured party that communication with their physician(s) is in their best interest and not merely an attempt to curtail or modify their existing work restrictions. Common uses for physician contact by vocational rehabilitation counselors is to obtain the most recent work restrictions, additional medical consultation, and job analysis’ review and approval.

Arguably, the most important outcome of the new disclosure agreement is its straightforwardness in defining the vocational counselors role as evaluative and facilitative in returning the injured party to work. Contested or previously contested workers’ compensation cases can produce difficult working environments for vocational counselors. Whenever an injured worker’s claim is contested, there is a insinuation of dishonesty by the worker. This “perception” may be brought into the counseling environment, adversely affecting client-counselor relationship. By gaining an initial understanding of the role the vocational counselor plays in this process, goal-oriented towards employment, helps to promote and foster a productive professional relationship.

Lastly, the form outlines specific rights the injured party will retain throughout the entire vocational rehabilitation process, and refers them to more detailed publications of their rights and responsibilities under the Michigan Workers’ Disability Compensation Act, and publications such as Vocational Rehabilitation for the Injured Worker.