

# Vocational Rehabilitation MONTHLY



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## **Independent Medical Examinations: What effects could it have on vocational rehabilitation, return to work outcomes, and injured worker motivation.**

There is certainly no shortage of medical opinions in disputed workers' compensation claims. Taking into account that each representing party is entitled to their own examination, this can create a noticeable disparity in recommended return-to-work restrictions. Since it is the vocational rehabilitation counselor's responsibility to assist the injured party return to viable and medically appropriate employment, many times they can become overwhelmed with a multitude of treaters, surgeons, and examiner medical opinions that can ultimately delay this process.



So what is the best position a counselor or job developer can take when presented with a number of medical opinions? Vocational Counselors should probably not become concerned with choosing among an array of work restrictions since they are not medical professionals. Working within the multitude of restrictions and identifying those employers who have positions within the range of restriction is an objective policy that is centered on providing the best service to the injured worker. Thus, the counselor and worker are able to review the variety of positions together, and the worker is then encouraged to explore those jobs that they believe are consistent with their physical or mental capabilities. In any case, counselors should document all job searching activities as they may come into question as medical and vocational opinions may change over the course of the dispute.

This is not to say that reaching some sort of consensus on medical opinion shouldn't be a priority next to vocational rehabilitation; however, in many cases this is not a realistic goal; especially noted in cases where one physician has determined a permanent and total disability. The most important objective should then be for interested parties to utilize independent medical examiners with credible reputations, who maintain their Medical Board Certifications and

have a proven record of unbiased and ethical findings. Not only does this add to the credibility of the vocational counselors' work, but it demonstrates a legitimate attempt to present the most accurate medical picture to all parties involved, most importantly, the claimant.

## **Improving an Injured Worker's Motivation in Returning to Work**

Although these examinations are nothing new to the industry, it may have significant effects on a worker's motivation to return to work. When dealing with workers involved in disputed workers' compensation claims, it should be first understood that the worker has been introduced to an adversarial process. This means attempting to provide objective rehabilitation service in a "win-lose" setting proves quite the challenge.



A good technique is continuously reminding the worker that the goal of a counselor is to facilitate their return to work in the most effective and efficient process possible. Continuing to work towards setting job development goals while maintaining frequent meetings are all vital components of good vocational rehabilitation service. Just as important is getting the injured workers in the development process, and have them set goals targeting re-employment. Vocational workers many times will need to be provided the tools and the means to reach these goals. This can be done by identifying local workshops and community resources, and by working collectively in developing a vocational rehabilitation plan. This process improves the relationship between the counselor and the worker, but most importantly shifts the responsibility to the worker in locating and retaining employment, thus achieving a personal sense of accomplishment and achievement that they can carry with them into their new place of employment.