

Vocational rehabilitation, Part 2



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My last column reviewed the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) vocational rehabilitation (VR) program. An injured worker may be found eligible for VR services if, due to an approved work-related injury, he/she is potentially permanently disabled for the job held at the time of injury. The VR program is not voluntary; once you have been notified that a VR determination has been made, you must comply or you will have your OWCP benefits suspended.

While OWCP administers the VR program, the actual work of assessing, coordinating and initiating job searches is done by private rehabilitation counselors (RCs) contracted on a case-by-case basis. Private rehabilitation counseling is a specialty within the larger field of vocational rehabilitation, with a focus on the re-employment of injured workers. OWCP ostensibly contracts with RCs to meet the needs of injured workers while also minimizing costs and complying with OWCP's return-to-work objective. Re-employment goals under the Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA) are guided primarily by the potential to return the injured worker to work in an efficient time frame with a salary that minimizes wage loss.

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That being the case, one might think that OWCP would focus matching injured letter carriers with non-postal jobs that provide wages and benefits commensurate with those earned in the Postal Service. As letter carriers belong to a unionized work force, RCs have an easier job matching physical demands than minimizing wage loss, which has negative ramifications for most injured letter carriers.

OWCP's *Vocational Rehabilitation Manual* states that:

Reemployment goals under the Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA) must be guided primarily by the potential to return the IW to work in an efficient time frame with a salary that minimizes wage loss. While the RC's counseling interventions must take into account the injured worker's interests as an important factor in the planning and decision making process, personal desire to pursue a particular training or occupation may not be outweighed by program requirements.

Letter carriers are diverse in their education and life experiences. Many have college degrees, are fluent in other languages,

or have skills learned in the military or other trades. The rules for finding suitable non-federal employment are such that RCs often overlook the education and life experience of injured workers by focusing on matching injured workers' physical restrictions with positions that have the same limitations.

That would appear to be contrary to OWCP's mission to “protect the interests of workers who are injured or become ill on the job, their families and their employers by making timely, appropriate and accurate decisions on claims, providing prompt payment of benefits and helping injured workers return to gainful employment as early as is feasible.”

However, OWCP is adamant that the claims process is a return-to-work program, and not a retirement program. VR is an increasingly utilized part of return-to work, and injured workers need to be mindful of this.

The VR process normally begins with a rehabilitation specialist (RS) from an OWCP district office sending an injured worker a letter informing them that they have been referred to an RC.

The RC will be provided the injured worker's physical restrictions as determined by an attending physician, second or referee opinion, or work capacity evaluation. In some instances, the RC is allowed to interview the injured worker in person or by phone.

The RC's initial step involves assessment of the injured worker's work-related skills and abilities and exploration of viable job goals. The assessment may include vocational evaluation, transferrable skills analysis, ergonomic evaluations and counseling to determine any adjustment issues pertaining to returning to work.

In determining suitable jobs for an injured worker, OWCP requires that RCs use the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT)* to match the injured worker's medical limitations with jobs whose physical requirements correspond to the worker's medical limitations. The *DOT* contains descriptions of more than 13,000 types of work, created by job analysts who observed and recorded the duties and physical demands of each job. The last government-published version of the *DOT* was published in March 1999.

The *DOT* assigns an occupational code number and occupational title, and it describes each job by elements of the duties for the job. Most importantly, the *DOT* assigns a definition trailer that lists the physical requirements for each position. RCs will use the *DOT* in conjunction with another government publication, the *Selected Characteristics of Occupations*, referred to as the *SCO*, when searching for suitable employment.

The *SCO* lists the physical demands and environmental conditions for every job in the *DOT*. In the VR process, RCs will look at the medical restrictions of an injured worker and match the physical demands of specific jobs found in the *DOT* and *SCO* to search for suitable jobs.

Next month's column will consider the VR evaluation and job-placement process.