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State: California
Return-to-Work Project Gets Boost in Calif.: Top [07/16/07]

At least 15 California employers and medical providers committed Friday to participating in a fledgling return-to-work movement that supporters hope will change the focus of workers' compensation systems throughout North America from treating workplace injuries to preventing work disabilities.

Dr. Melvin Belsky, medical director for Safeway Inc., said representatives from Kaiser Permanente, State Compensation Insurance Fund, Zenith Insurance Co. and other institutions attended a meeting at the World Institute on Disability in Oakland to follow up on the "60 Summits" project that was launched in California at a June 21 meeting in Pleasanton.

Belsky said participants at Friday's meeting promised to spread the word about 16 work disability prevention guidelines published by the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

"We want to basically help people institute policies, procedures, changes in administrative approaches and changes in the way departments work to, in fact, put in effect the kinds of actions that flow from these 16 recommendations," Belsky said.

So far, California, New Mexico and Oregon have held meetings, or "summits," on the ACOEM work disability prevention guidelines. Other summits are scheduled for Arizona, North Dakota and Minnesota and are planned for Florida and Ohio.

Dr. Jennifer Christian, who developed the guidelines along with 21 other ACOEM physicians, hopes to eventually hold a summit in each of the 50 states and in 10 Canadian provinces, hence the name of the project.

Christian said the guidelines shift the focus of workers' compensation programs from post-injury claims management to disability prevention. She said enlightened institutions will stay on top of workplace injuries from the first day to help injured workers negotiate the system and work toward a recovery that will get them back on the job.

"In the old paradigm, people watch and wait while the worker tries to

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manage the situation the best they can and nobody ever intervenes until the situation is off track," Christian said Friday. "In the work disability prevention guideline we start making sure that people get and stay on the right track right from the beginning. There is not this letting the person ricochet around the system."

Belsky said participants in the California summit have already created a Web site and plan to augment it with a blog and regular educational features in the near future. He said he has sent out questionnaires to participants in the June 21 California summit and will write an executive summary to sum up conclusions from the meeting.

Belsky said the group hopes to develop a speakers bureau, a newsletter and produce regular educational information.

"This committee can't do all of this work, so we are hoping a lot of people who were at the meeting can support these things, and to the extent that they are supported, they will be done," Belsky said.

The California Division of Workers' Compensation is keeping an eye on the group's effort and so far likes what it has seen, said spokeswoman Susan Gard.

"The summit project goals are aligned with the goals of workers' comp reform, which include providing prompt, effective medical treatment to injured workers and getting them back on the job quickly," Gard said in an e-mail. "This is a win-win for workers and employers. However, we need to figure out how to help small employers and especially those in high-hazard industries, who don't have extensive human resources services, return-to-work or comprehensive safety programs, become part of the win-win equation."

The 60 Summits group has already launched a Web site about the guidelines, although Belsky said it still is in rough form. The site can be found at:

<http://www.saw-rtw-californiasummit.com/>

--By Jim Sams, WorkCompCentral Senior Editor
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