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A new vision for disability leave

Whenever a healthcare employee is on illness or disability, the goal is to get them back to work safely as quickly as possible. Stakeholders from across the province met in Regina on Nov. 18th to discuss a new way of thinking when it comes to disability leave.

“The workplace is the best therapeutic environment,” believes Dr. Francis Bowen, who provided the group with a physician’s perspective on those requiring disability leave. He believes that an integrated approach that takes the whole person into account is an important part of any meaningful return to work strategy.

In addition to Dr. Bowen, presenters from 3sHealth, Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN), and AON Canada provided an overview of early intervention in the disability benefit process. Included in the discussion was a look at what other organizations were doing, what the current state in Saskatchewan was and the potential that early intervention has for improving both the client experience and the process.

An early intervention program for disability income clients is designed to provide employees with ongoing support and guidance during the period of disability prior to the time that Long Term Disability begins. The program takes a pro-active approach that provides assistance to employees and allows for return to work in a caring, safe and timely manner. Benefits for the employee can include:

- Access to adjudication, rehabilitation, support and transition services sooner;
- Early detection of medical issues allowing employees to access information and services sooner;
- Continued connection between the employee and his or her workplace;
- Faster turnaround for long-term disability decisions;
- Individualized support and resources
- Reduction or elimination of loss of income

Early intervention programs also offer several benefits to the employer including higher return to work rates, a reduction of expenses for recruiting and training new employees, improvements to the work environment and employee morale, and higher retention rates. Early intervention can also help identify non-medical reasons for employee absenteeism,

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allowing the employer to assist an employee with other life issues that may be affecting his or her work life.

Creating an integrated approach to early intervention strategy is important. Involving all the people who are connected with the person on leave can create success. These include the employee's direct supervisor, union, insurers, and health care providers. Taking an integrated approach will remove barriers for a successful return to work.



In addition to listening to presentations, those attending were able to participate in small groups discussions to provide feedback and ask questions. Those attending were asked to describe what they thought would be important to include in an early intervention program as well as what should be avoided. The following were identified as important features:

- Clear roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders
- Good communication and awareness throughout the process
- One single point of contact for clients
- Consistency of service
- Realistic expectations

“Our aim is to consider all the factors that could be affecting a client when looking at early intervention,” says Bud Anderson, Director, Employee Benefits for 3sHealth. “Instead of focusing on a physical disability, we want to look at the mental and psycho-social factors that could be affecting a person’s ability to return to work.”

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At the end of the session, 3sHealth was tasked to create a more formal project proposal to present to the group in the spring of 2016.

“A successful early intervention program for those on sick leave or receiving disability income can have significant positive outcomes,” says Kendell Arndt, Vice President Strategic Information and Corporate Services. “We can keep affected employees connected with their workplace and create a compassionate process that allows for a quicker return to work. In the end, taking care of health care providers benefits us all.”