

NAVY'S SOUTHWEST REGION EXCELS AT MANAGING WORKERS' COMPENSATION PROGRAM

Work-related injuries and illnesses occur even though the Navy has drastically reduced the number of its on-the-job injuries through its commitment to workplace safety and health. A Navy civilian employee who is injured on the job or experiences work-related illnesses may be eligible to receive workers' compensation benefits. The Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) Program ensures that injured employees are paid. FECA also provides for payment for medical treatment, medical



NRSW Human Resources Office is staffed by Workers' Compensation professionals

travel expenses, and vocational rehabilitation expenses. The Navy's Southwest Region Workers' Compensation Program provides prompt medical attention, facilitates employee recovery from injuries and illnesses, communicates with the employee throughout the recovery period, and helps the employee transition back to work.

Administering workers' compensation claims for those employees who will fully recover and those employees who are not able to return to the work force is a significant responsibility. Typically, the management

strategy of each Navy command's workers' compensation program has been one of many responsibilities assigned to various members at each command's Human Resources Department. Human Resources Departments seldom have the means to devote an employee full time to managing its workers' compensation cases. It's a real challenge to meet the needs of a command's injured employees, to coordinate their return to work, and to complete all of the workers' compensation recordkeeping requirements.

Navy Region Southwest (NRSW), which encompasses the Navy's activities in California and Nevada, has established a way to manage its workers' compensation cases efficiently and effectively. NRSW is the first Navy region to combine its individual Workers' Compensation Offices into one, central office. This consolidated Workers' Compensation Program has been very successful. Through the consolidated program, NRSW ensures that no occupationally injured or ill employee is shortchanged or forgotten; they get the assistance they need on a timely basis. The consolidated Workers' Compensation Program has also been successful at returning recovered employees to work.

The NRSW Human Resources Office's consolidated Workers' Compensation Program provides workers' compensation services to an employee population of approximately 35,000 current and former Navy employees. The Program manages a

combined workers' compensation caseload totaling \$30 million annually in workers' compensation costs, including disabled former employees who had been injured while working at Navy bases that have since been closed. The office also continues to assist disabled workers who have not been able to return to work.

The consolidated NRSW Workers' Compensation Program fields a team of seven trained human resources professionals who are devoted to managing the Program on a full time basis. The team interfaces with the full range of Navy Occupational Safety and Health (NAVOSH) professionals - occupational health nurses, physicians, and safety specialists - to take care of NRSW's occupationally injured and ill workers. For example, where needed, these human resources professionals ensure that workers receive workplace and personal ergonomic assessments. They also identify work assignments that would allow injured workers to transition back to work; verify the feasibility of job re-structuring to accommodate disabled workers without risking further injury; and schedule medical assessments to determine whether an injured worker is ready to return to work.



Human Resources professional assists Injured Worker to file Workers' Compensation Claim

Because Workers' Compensation Team members manage workers' compensation claims on a full time basis, they are able to track records of claims, one of the keys



Industrial hygienist calibrates equipment used to measure airborne concentrations of health hazardous substances

to effective workers' compensation management. The Team uses several tracking databases to ensure that each occupationally injured or ill employee receives the medical attention and administrative support assistance to which he or she is entitled. Current and former Navy employees who have not been able to return to their jobs continue to receive compensation benefits until they are rehabilitated, find other employment, or are medically retired. Access to the tracking databases also helps the staff resolve specific concerns about claims, ensuring prompt, personalized, and helpful

assistance. The staff also keeps up to date on claims so that workers' medical bills are paid promptly by the Department of Labor (DoL).

The NRSW Team uses database-linked services that include the DoD Computer Electronic Accommodations Program (CAP). CAP provides assistive technology such as special computers or telephones to disabled employees who need them.

Working together, the NRSW Workers' Compensation Team focuses on getting injured workers prompt medical treatment, paying their medical bills, and getting them back to work. The Team collaborates with each patient's health care team to ensure that workers are evaluated to determine when they are ready to return to their jobs. The Team maximizes the use of Navy hospitals and clinics, because the



Navy's medical department understands Navy work environments and can provide the best treatment and plan for the return to work of each individual worker while avoiding redundant or unnecessary expenses. The NRSW Team works through the DOL to obtain additional medical opinions, when necessary, in order to verify the patient's medical condition; referrals for vocational rehabilitation to train the worker for a new career; and rehabilitation equipment for recovering patients.

Workplace supervisors are trained on workers' compensation policies and procedures

In an effort to reduce workers' compensation cases and to contain costs, the Human Resources Office Workers' Compensation Team not only intervenes after workers are injured, they also focus on prevention. Without using any personal information that would violate patient privacy, they exchange ideas, information, and injury and illness data with NAVOSH personnel throughout the Southwest region - Navy safety offices, industrial hygiene departments, and occupational health clinics. Through information sharing, this partnership is preventing repeats of work-related mishaps at NRSW work sites.

The Workers' Compensation Team also trains workplace supervisors on improving safety in their work areas. The team has developed a *Procedures Manual* that provides specific guidance to supervisors on their roles and responsibilities when a worker is hurt on the job

The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), a research and development center that assists the Navy and Marine Corps in increasing their effectiveness and efficiency, recently reviewed workers' compensation programs Navy-wide. In its March 2001 report on managing workers' compensation costs, CNA stated that the Navy Region Southwest did a better job at managing workers' compensation expenses than any other Navy Region. It also stated that this Region should be a model for the rest of the Navy.

The CNA's cost analysis indicated that the Southwest Region is expected to spend approximately 30 percent less than the rest of the Department of the Navy on each new workers' compensation claim because of its consolidated, regional approach to ensuring that injured workers receive prompt, appropriate care.

By successfully regionalizing and consolidating workers' compensation management in one centralized Human Resources Office, NRSW is effectively delivering benefits to occupationally injured and ill workers, and is getting injured workers restored to health and back to work in an efficient manner. By partnering with the DOL and occupational health clinics, safety offices, and industrial hygiene departments, the NRSW Workers' Compensation Team is leading the way in helping injured and sick workers to get the services they need, improving workplace safety, and preventing future work-related injuries and illnesses. As the Navy advances toward its goal of zero workplace injuries, NRSW stands out as an example of how a few good people can make a big difference. They have successfully streamlined management of the workers' compensation program while benefiting the workers and the Navy. They have revised the phrase - "better, faster, cheaper" to *better, faster, cheaper and safer*.

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