

Enrolled
House Bill 2705

Sponsored by COMMITTEE ON BUSINESS AND LABOR

CHAPTER

AN ACT

Relating to vocational assistance for injured workers; amending ORS 656.340.

Be It Enacted by the People of the State of Oregon:

SECTION 1. ORS 656.340 is amended to read:

656.340. (1)(a) The insurer or self-insured employer shall cause vocational assistance to be provided to an injured worker who is eligible for assistance in returning to work.

(b) For this purpose the insurer or self-insured employer shall contact a worker with a claim for a disabling compensable injury or claim for aggravation for evaluation of the worker’s eligibility for vocational assistance within five days of:

(A) Having knowledge of the worker’s likely eligibility for vocational assistance, from a medical or investigation report, notification from the worker, or otherwise; or

(B) The time the worker is medically stationary, if the worker has not returned to **or been released for** the worker’s regular employment or **has not returned to** other suitable employment with the employer at the time of injury or aggravation and the worker is not receiving vocational assistance.

(c) Eligibility may be redetermined by the insurer or self-insured employer upon receipt of new information that would change the eligibility determination.

(2) Contact under subsection (1) of this section shall include informing the worker about reemployment rights, the responsibility of the worker to request reemployment, and wage subsidy and job site modification assistance and the provisions of the preferred worker program pursuant to rules adopted by the Director of the Department of Consumer and Business Services.

(3) Within five days after notification that the attending physician or nurse practitioner authorized to provide compensable medical services under ORS 656.245 has released a worker to return to work, the insurer or self-insured employer shall inform the worker about the opportunity to seek reemployment or reinstatement under ORS 659A.043 and 659A.046. The insurer shall inform the employer of the worker’s reemployment rights, wage subsidy and the job site modification assistance and the provisions of the preferred worker program.

(4) As soon as possible, and not more than 30 days after the contact required by subsection (1) of this section, the insurer or self-insured employer shall cause an individual certified by the director to provide vocational assistance to determine whether the worker is eligible for vocational assistance. The insurer or self-insured employer shall notify the worker of the decision regarding the worker’s eligibility for vocational assistance. If the insurer or self-insured employer decides that the worker is not eligible, the worker may apply to the director for review of the decision as provided in ORS 656.283 (2). A worker determined ineligible upon evaluation under subsection (1)(b)(B) of this section, or because the worker’s eligibility has fully and finally expired under standards prescribed

by the director, may not be found eligible thereafter unless that eligibility determination is rejected by the director under ORS 656.283 (2) or the worker's condition worsens so as to constitute an aggravation claim under ORS 656.273. A worker is not entitled to vocational assistance benefits when possible eligibility for such benefits arises from a worsening of the worker's condition that occurs after the expiration of the worker's aggravation rights under ORS 656.273.

(5) The objectives of vocational assistance are to return the worker to employment which is as close as possible to the worker's regular employment at a wage as close as possible to the weekly wage currently being paid for employment which was the worker's regular employment even though the wage available following employment may be less than the wage prescribed by subsection (6) of this section. As used in this subsection and subsection (6) of this section, "regular employment" means the employment the worker held at the time of the injury or the claim for aggravation under ORS 656.273, whichever gave rise to the potential eligibility for vocational assistance; or, for a worker not employed at the time of the aggravation, the employment the worker held on the last day of work prior to the aggravation.

(6)(a) A worker is eligible for vocational assistance if the worker will not be able to return to the previous employment or to any other available and suitable employment with the employer at the time of injury or aggravation, and the worker has a substantial handicap to employment.

(b) As used in this subsection:

(A) A "substantial handicap to employment" exists when the worker, because of the injury or aggravation, lacks the necessary physical capacities, knowledge, skills and abilities to be employed in suitable employment.

(B) "Suitable employment" means:

(i) Employment of the kind for which the worker has the necessary physical capacity, knowledge, skills and abilities;

(ii) Employment that is located where the worker customarily worked or is within reasonable commuting distance of the worker's residence; and

(iii) Employment that produces a weekly wage within 20 percent of that currently being paid for employment that was the worker's regular employment as defined in subsection (5) of this section. The director shall adopt rules providing methods of calculating the weekly wage currently being paid for the worker's regular employment for use in determining eligibility and for providing assistance to eligible workers. If the worker's regular employment was seasonal or temporary, the worker's wage shall be averaged based on a combination of the worker's earned income and any unemployment insurance payments. Only earned income evidenced by verifiable documentation such as federal or state tax returns shall be used in the calculation. Earned income does not include fringe benefits or reimbursement of the worker's employment expenses.

(7) Vocational evaluation, help in directly obtaining employment and training shall be available under conditions prescribed by the director. The director may establish other conditions for providing vocational assistance, including those relating to the worker's availability for assistance, participation in previous assistance programs connected with the same claim and the nature and extent of assistance that may be provided. Such conditions shall give preference to direct employment assistance over training.

(8) An insurer or self-insured employer may utilize its own staff or may engage any other individual certified by the director to perform the vocational evaluation required by subsection (4) of this section.

(9) The director shall adopt rules providing:

(a) Standards for and methods of certifying individuals and authorizing vocational assistance providers qualified by education, training, experience and plan of operation to provide vocational assistance to injured workers;

(b) Conditions and procedures under which the certification of an individual or the authorization of a vocational assistance provider to provide vocational assistance services may be suspended or revoked for failure to maintain compliance with the certification or authorization standards;

(c) Standards for the nature and extent of services a worker may receive, for plans for return to work and for determining when the worker has returned to work; and

(d) Procedures, schedules and conditions relating to the payment for services performed by a vocational assistance provider, which shall be based on payment for specific services performed and not fees for services performed on an hourly basis. Fee schedules shall reflect a reasonable rate for direct worker purchases and for all vocational assistance providers and shall be the same within suitable geographic areas.

(10) Insurers and self-insured employers shall maintain records and make reports to the director of vocational assistance actions at such times and in such manner as the director may prescribe. Such requirements shall be for the purpose of assisting the Department of Consumer and Business Services in monitoring compliance with this section to insure that workers receive timely and appropriate vocational assistance. The director shall minimize to the greatest extent possible the number, extent and kinds of reports required. The director shall compile a list of the organizations or agencies authorized to provide vocational assistance. A current list shall be distributed by the director to all insurers and self-insured employers. The insurer shall send the list to each worker with the notice of eligibility.

(11) When a worker is eligible to receive vocational assistance, the worker and the insurer or self-insured employer shall attempt to agree on the choice of a vocational assistance provider. If the worker agrees, the insurer or self-insured employer may utilize its own staff to provide vocational assistance. If they are unable to agree on a vocational assistance provider, the insurer or self-insured employer shall notify the director and the director shall select a provider. Any change in the choice of vocational assistance provider is subject to the approval of the director.

(12) Notwithstanding ORS 656.268, a worker actively engaged in training may receive temporary disability compensation for a maximum of 16 months, subject to extension to 21 months by order of the director for good cause shown. The costs related to vocational assistance training programs may be paid for periods longer than 21 months, but in no event may temporary disability benefits be paid for a period longer than 21 months.

(13) As used in this section, "vocational assistance provider" means a public or private organization or agency which provides vocational assistance to injured workers.

(14)(a) Determination of eligibility for vocational assistance does not entitle all workers to the same type or extent of assistance.

(b) Training shall not be provided to an eligible worker solely because the worker cannot obtain employment, otherwise suitable, that will produce the wage prescribed in subsection (6) of this section unless such training will enable the worker to find employment which will produce a wage significantly closer to that prescribed in subsection (6) of this section.

(c) Nothing in this section shall be interpreted to expand the availability of training under this section.

(15) A physical capacities evaluation shall be performed in conjunction with vocational assistance or determination of eligibility for such assistance at the request of the insurer or self-insured employer or worker. Such request shall be made to the attending physician or nurse practitioner authorized to provide compensable medical services under ORS 656.245. The attending physician or nurse practitioner, within 20 days of the request, shall perform a physical capacities evaluation or refer the worker for such evaluation or advise the insurer or self-insured employer and the worker in writing that the injured worker is incapable of participating in a physical capacities evaluation.

Passed by House May 6, 2009

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Chief Clerk of House

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Speaker of House

Passed by Senate May 28, 2009

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President of Senate

Received by Governor:

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Approved:

.....M,....., 2009

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Governor

Filed in Office of Secretary of State:

.....M,....., 2009

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Secretary of State