

Message from the Director

Fiscal Year 2000 was distinguished by important developments in the areas of early intervention, educational outreach, and assessment equity that promise to improve service to injured workers, curb litigation, and reduce costs for Florida employers.

In May, the Employee Assistance Office (EAO), Early Intervention Pilot project, was honored to receive the Sterling Quality Achievement Award at the Governor's Sterling Conference in Orlando. This prestigious award recognized EAO's innovative strategies in actively involving employers, carriers, and third-party administrators throughout the state in its new Early Intervention Program (EIP). Initiated as a pilot in 1998, the EIP takes a proactive approach toward preventing and resolving disputes and fosters timely provision of information and benefits by contacting workers as soon as possible after workplace injury. The program has evolved over the last year to include industry partners who facilitate early intervention by faxing the First Report of Injury or Illness (DWC-1) to EAO promptly after injury. During June 2000, the division received 3,493 faxed DWC-1s from EIP partners. This cooperative effort has been instrumental in reducing filings of Requests for Assistance (RFAs) and Petitions for Benefits (PFBs), halting the progression of disputes to adjudication, and assisting injured workers just two and one-half weeks, on average, after injury. As of July 2000, 47 partners had joined the EIP, and we are excited about sharing the positive outcomes with potential partners around the state in the months ahead.



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Encouraged by the success of the EIP, we are extending the early intervention philosophy to other functions of the division. The Bureau of Rehabilitation and Medical Services (BRMS) piloted a re-employment model that shortens the multi-staged process, centering on quicker, more effective efforts to get injured workers back to work; the model will be extended to the entire state in the next year. Plans are being made to cultivate supportive relationships between specialists in the Bureau of Monitoring and Audit and carriers to better enable carriers to focus their improvement efforts on critical areas of performance. A cross-bureau strategy for intervening with rehabilitation services for injured workers prior to assessing penalties on large employers who fail to rehire injured workers is in the early discussion phase between BRMS and the Bureau of Compliance.

At the forefront of the division's educational outreach strategy is a new media packet comprised of professional television and radio public service announcements (PSAs) for immediate use by employers, carriers, and other groups in promoting the self-executing features of the law in their advertising campaigns. The kit also contains up-to-date information sheets covering the services provided by bureaus within the division and updates on current projects. Since its introduction in May, representatives from 22 companies have requested the packet. Recognizing that partnerships with health care providers are a vital resource for educating newly injured workers, a pilot was conducted in April to distribute

an informational brochure to workers entering a medical center after workplace injury. Survey responses from 66 of 162 newly injured workers receiving a brochure have been compiled, and a second follow-up survey of the respondents is scheduled for November. Other activities aimed at reaching workers prior to or soon after injury include joining local Chambers of Commerce around the state to participate in their market processes; conducting workshops for employers, employees, and Diversified Career Technology (DCT) students in high school; and setting up an EAO information line on the division's toll-free hotline. Working together with partners and stakeholders, we can make great strides toward improving the system and creating a positive image of the workers' compensation industry throughout the state. We encourage your suggestions as we seek new avenues for informing the public of the wide range of services available from the division.

The passage of SB 2532 on the last day of the 2000 legislative session achieved important equity goals relative to assessments for the Workers' Compensation Administration Trust Fund (WCATF) and the Special Disability Trust Fund (SDTF). By clarifying the definition of "net premium," the bill removed long-standing confusion surrounding that term and helped to ensure greater uniformity throughout the industry of the premium base used to figure assessments for both trust funds. Closing the large deductible policy loophole for the WCATF beginning July 1, 2001, helped to further standardize assessable premium by eliminating special deductions that favored certain large employers. The expanded premium base resulting from the greater equity of assessments will allow a reduction in assessment rates across the board, benefiting the vast majority of Florida employers who purchase workers' compensation insurance. SB 2532 inscribes the anticipated savings into law with the statutory assessment cap on the WCATF lowered from 4% to 2.75%.

Another provision of SB 2532 may also portend changes for Florida's workers' compensation

system: The bill establishes a seven-member task force appointed by the Governor, President of the Senate and Speaker of the House to review the Division of Workers' Compensation and its processes. We look forward to reviewing their report due in January 2001.

The division continues to follow the Sterling criteria as a blueprint for organizational development as we strive to excel in pursuit of the Governor's Sterling Award. Following a full assessment by Sterling examiners this year, we focused on defining measurements and strategies related to customer priorities. As we look ahead to next year, three philosophical tenets guide our efforts: preventive activities, creating a positive perception of workers' compensation throughout the industry, and modeling consistency in all areas of service delivery, education, and public contact.

Despite changes in structure, legislation, and technology from year to year, our purpose at the Division of Workers' Compensation has not wavered since the enactment of Florida's original workers' compensation statute in 1935. By overseeing the provision of timely benefits and quality services to injured workers in the most cost-effective manner for employers, we serve as facilitators of recovery from workplace injury and return to work. The annual report is a key vehicle for disseminating meaningful information that enables an objective assessment of how well the Florida system is working in achieving a critical balance between protection of employees and fairness to employers. We depend upon your continued feedback to make this document an increasingly valuable resource.